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DID STEINBECK KNOW WHEELER ROBINSON OR HIS THEORY OF CORPORATE PERSONALITY?

ALEC GILMORE

PROBABLY NOT! But *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates a clear grasp of the story of the Exodus, if not the Exile, and *East of Eden* shows that he was well aware of Jewish rabbis and Jewish thinking and not averse to digging deep to find out what he wanted to know, like the meaning of *timshel*. That he knew the British scholar Wheeler Robinson, however, or indeed that Wheeler Robinson knew him, is highly unlikely—yet there is evidence that they were addressing similar issues and tensions, one in Oxford in the 1920s and 1930s and the other in California. The purpose of this paper is to examine their responses to see if either can speak positively (or indeed negatively) to the other.

BACKGROUND

H. Wheeler Robinson (1872–1945) was an Oxford academic who spent his working life as Principal of Regent's Park College, studying the Old Testament and training Baptist ministers (1920–42). In the 1930s, just about the time Steinbeck was wrestling with the problem of community in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and with the role of the individual in that community in *In Dubious Battle* (1936), Robinson was developing his theory of “corporate personality” in the Old Testament (“Hebrew Conception” 51).

Robinson's prime concern was an understanding of Israelite community, and there are three principal issues he considered. First, the distinction between the individual and the community (sometimes referred to as between “the one and the many”), covering mainly individual rights and com-

munity responsibilities. Second, the fluidity of thought between them, where words slide effortlessly between individual and community interpretations so that either it is not clear which is being referred to or the person speaking or writing seems to feel no need, or has no conscious desire, to make the distinction. Third, the force, passion, or effectiveness of the community (group, mob, or phalanx) as distinct from, and as a different order from, the sum of its parts.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

When Robinson and his colleagues read the Old Testament, they observed that references to the Israelite community never referred only to those who were present at the time, nor indeed only to people. Theirs was a world in which "community" extended backward to embrace ancestors and forward to include generations yet unborn. It also included possessions and land, and the land could be both "earth" and the particular geographical territory which Yahweh had given them when they arrived in Canaan. Altogether it offered a picture of an Israelite as a "psychical whole," with an extension of personality through family, property, the tribe and tribal possessions, or the nation and national inheritance (Johnson, *Sacral Kingship* 2, 116; *One and the Many* 2-11).

"Community" was not "an abstract unity" created out of a "mass of individuals." Community was the real entity, where unity was prior to diversity and the community prior to the individual; individuals had their origin in it, belonged to it and derived their identity from it (North 106), and to Robinson the idea of community appeared to have a group consciousness unparalleled in contemporary understanding.

For the Israelites, such an understanding was probably never part of the legal structure (Porter 361-80), but does seem to have been a matter of holiness and kinship solidarity (Clements 113-26). The Achan story in Joshua 7, for example, demonstrates how individual offenses against God involved the whole community in guilt, how sins carried out even in secret could have strong public consequences, and how a whole community was liable to bear the burden of that guilt and suffer divine anger until an individual offender was singled out. The community was thus involved with the offender in his of-

fense, and until wrong was put right, everyone was implicated in his misdemeanor; on the other hand, if an individual did something good or special, like winning a battle against the enemy or acting on behalf of the community as priest or king in the cult, the whole community then benefited.

An obvious similarity between Robinson's ideas on community and Steinbeck's is the attachment to the land and the wider community. What matters most in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not that the land is impoverished and dying but that the community is breaking under the strain. Like the ancient Israelites, the Okies were always more than the people, dispossessed and making their way along Highway 66. Their ancestors and progeny, the basics of birth, marriage and death, their customs and mores—including their rituals and patriarchal structure—were all part of what they understood by community. As Peter Lisca notes, the land represents family history; and farm tools, horses, and wagons cannot be measured in money (129). The land they farmed, far from being simply somewhere to live, was what united this community with all previous communities who had lived there and with all those who would live there in the future (Lisca 127–33). That is why Muley, who is so closely related to his territory that he cannot leave it, stays behind, and Grampa, who at first refuses to leave, dies soon afterward.

Furthermore, both Robinson and Steinbeck stressed the importance of kinship solidarity over legality. When a community is broken up and dispossessed, as were the Okies, legality counts for little. Legally, the community ceases to exist. All that remains is a collection of families and individuals on the road of life—slaves in a wilderness! Yet the sense of responsibility and community care, far from dying, actually grows through the experience. A new group consciousness is created. Constructive care in roadside camps gives rise to new rules regarding freedom, privacy, sanitation, and male/female relationships. Damage wrought by a few threatens the rest and must be dealt with. But at the same time, isolated families become part of the whole. From the beginning of the novel Ma Joad acknowledges that love and care extend beyond the immediate family group; and Tom and Casy verbalize the importance of group consciousness when they talk together of a new community where individuals see themselves as part of a

greater whole. Although the Joad family sets out with a fairly clear view of themselves as “different” (and separate), they all come to appreciate what it means to be part of a greater whole—the beginnings of a move from I to we.

A more problematical link between Steinbeck and Robinson is the respective value placed on the one and the many, the individual and the community. Which is prior, individual or community? In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, were Steinbeck’s sympathies primarily with the tenant farmer when a squatting farmer declares that “it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up....That’s what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That’s what makes ownership” (33), presumably raising doubts about collectivism in the form of banks or business interests. Or was Steinbeck committed to some form of collectivism, even with its tractors and machinery, banks and institutions, provided it is not “my land” but “our land”? Thomas Kiernan acknowledges this ambivalence when he suggests that human’s primary struggle for Steinbeck was between individual and group consciousness (represented in *In Dubious Battle* by the California farmers and the Union leaders), with humans doomed to sacrifice individuality to the pressures of the group (140). Another view is that humans could have no individuality apart from the group in which they function, only violating individual integrity when forfeiting individuality (Astro 61).

The debate will no doubt continue, but perhaps the best summing up of Steinbeck’s approach to the one and the many is to be found in his 1955 magazine article, “Some Thoughts on Juvenile Delinquency,” where he says, “I believe that man is a double thing—a group animal and at the same time an individual...and he cannot successfully be the second until he has fulfilled the first” (22).

THE FLUIDITY OF THOUGHT

The second thing Robinson noticed was the way in which the biblical text slides effortlessly from individual to community and back again, thus enabling individual lives to be merged into a group and a whole group to be merged in one individual as its representative. At one point Robinson seems to have seen this as a reflection of the indefinable unity between Yah-

weh and the prophet—the virtual identification of the human with the divine—not to be confused with a mystical union between man and God, because the divine and the human remain distinct, though it may often be difficult to know which is speaking (*Inspiration* 166–70).

A better illustration, however, can be found in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah—Isaiah 43: 1–4, 49: 1–6, 50: 4–9, and 52: 13–53: 12—for it is here that the concept is most severely tested and refined and where the fluidity of thought between the individual and the community is most apparent, particularly in the fourth Song. Scholars have long agreed that these Songs can be isolated from the remainder of the text and then put together to form a whole, but there has never been agreement as to whom the prophet was referring nor even whether he was thinking of an individual or of Israel,¹ though countless suggestions have been made.² Such a rich variety of possibilities may well lead the layman to the view that there is certainly some fluidity of thought here and that Robinson's idea of corporate personality may be the best explanation. H.H. Rowley, for example, finds four different emphases in the four Songs (50–51). In the first, we have the personification of Israel, a community. In the second, we have a purified Israel with a mission to Israel as well as *through* Israel, still a community but not the whole community. The third refers to the suffering and the shame that the Servant will have to undergo to fulfill his mission; but it is unclear now whether we are thinking of a collective Servant or an individual leader. In the fourth, the suffering is not incidental to the mission but the organ through which the mission is accomplished, almost certainly an individual!

Space prevents us from exploring this idea of fluidity in the New Testament, but although one critic³ expresses surprise that the idea should ever have been taken up by New Testament scholars, there are those who find traces of it in phrases like “the Son of Man.” T.W. Manson, for example, has shown that “Son of Man” may refer to an individual (“the man”) and also to a community (“the people of the Saints of the Most High” in Daniel 7: 13) (*Teaching of Jesus* 212). It may also mean “the Messiah” (an individual) and is the final form in a series of Old Testament con-

Robinson and Steinbeck stressed the importance of kinship solidarity over legality.

cepts, including the Remnant, the Servant in Isaiah and the “I” of the Psalms, all of which, as we have seen, oscillate between individual and community.⁴

Both Robinson’s concept of corporate personality and Steinbeck’s attitude toward “the one and the many” may lack sharpness and clarity, but at several points they seem at least to be ploughing the same furrow. Both, for example, reflect a sense of holism, Robinson finding unity in the interdependence of life and the environment, and in a God of all the earth who is as active in the whole of creation as he is in the welfare of his people, and Steinbeck making similar assumptions in his own society.

All forms of life and their environment for Steinbeck are interdependent (Cook 11–23). Just as the individual cannot be isolated from the tribe, no more can humanity be isolated from the rest of nature, including the trees, the hills, and the animals; human beings are not only part of the whole but indistinguishable from it. So we have Joseph Wayne identifying closely with a tree, several of Steinbeck’s characters described in animal terms, and the ecological whole finding sharp expression, though not without a further fluidity of thought, when Casy says, “There was the hills, an’ there was me, an’ we wasn’t separate no more. We was one thing. An’ that one thing was holy” (81).

But then just as Steinbeck could appreciate the wavy line between individual and community without necessarily negat-

ing a person’s individuality, so too he could recognize the fluidity between human beings and animals whilst at the same time appreciating that human beings were distinct in that they were rational, moral, and capable of suffering and dying for a concept. What they held in common and what binds them together is their involvement in and commitment to life.

Perhaps Steinbeck’s most extreme presentation of this fluidity occurs in *Burning Bright*, where the impotent Joe Saul says of the child (born to his wife by another man) “every man is father to all children and every



Cotton Strike, 1933.

child must have all men as father" (93). For Joe (and possibly for Steinbeck), the lines of demarcation are not as clear as we have often imagined. The marriage of Joseph Wayne to Elizabeth is a further illustration of the tension (or fluidity) between the one and the many as they have to go through the pass on their wedding night. Elizabeth (and indeed the horses) seems to find it difficult until Joseph explains that what she fears is not the physical mountain pass but the loss of her individuality required to create a community of two. She concedes, but not until she has pointed out that the individual is still there, and from time to time that individual will always stand apart to look at the new being she has become. Joseph's explanation and Elizabeth's response are in fact an ideal statement of the married state and the tensions and fluidity that go with it. It is a reflection of much that can be found in Steinbeck and hugely to his credit that he could identify it and portray it so precisely.

We find it again on a broader canvas in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and in *In Dubious Battle*. In both stories we have a group of highly motivated individuals coming to terms with being a community—on the one hand as capitalist landowners and farmers, and on the other as homeless migrants and Union organizers (many of them Communists). Each community seeks to organize groups of people to the point where they can behave "as one." In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the migrant community is broken up into a collection of individuals who then gradually create a new community. In *In Dubious Battle*, the workers become aware of themselves as part of a group, from which at some point each one, like Dakin, will have to detach him or herself to become an individual again. The result is that in *The Grapes of Wrath* the individual becomes increasingly aware of him or herself as a "we" while in *In Dubious Battle*, characters become aware of the power of "the group" behaving "as one."

Just where and when that change from "I" to "we" takes place, however, is no clearer in Steinbeck's work than it is in the Servant songs. Sylvia Cook may point to a significant direction when she identifies the shift as somewhere beyond the biological, the political, and the moral in "the mystical and the transcendental" (25).



Casy. Drawing by
Thomas Hart
Benton.
Courtesy of
Limited Editions Club.



Cotton Strike, 1933.

THE PHALANX

Alongside the fluidity of thought in Robinson's understanding of corporate personality went the idea that the whole group was considered as a "person," the isolated individual having no standing apart from the larger body (Oesterley and Robinson 263). This idea found favor in studies of the "I" of the Psalms where the first person singular sometimes seems to be an individual and at other times a whole community. In Psalm 30, for example, is an individual or a whole community giving thanks for deliverance, using the first person singular because they see themselves as one person? Is the cry in Psalm 130 that of an individual or a whole community?

Scandinavian scholarship developed this further using the "royal psalms," thought to be in honor of the king, whom they saw as representative of the deity (often to the point of deification), and whose blessing was seen as a channel for the divine blessing (Childs 515–16). In this way, it was argued, the nation found its focus in the royal house through the reigning monarch (Johnson, *Sacral Kinship* 2–3). Psalm 89: 19–29, for example,

refers not simply to David as an individual but to David and his line (23–24), and in Psalms 24 and 68, as the procession approaches the gates of the temple, the focus of interest is no longer on the Ark as the representative of Yahweh but on his earthly Representative, the king in the midst of his people, thus affirming that it is not only the king who has been brought through suffering to deliverance but rather the chosen people who with him form “a psychical whole” (Johnson 116).⁵

Like Robinson, Steinbeck is aware of a bond uniting society, blurring the distinction between individual and community, and seeing all the individuals and community as a “psychical whole.” Without relating the individual to the king or to the deity, obviously, he nonetheless sees the individual representing and participating in a larger whole. Both Doc and Mac in *In Dubious Battle* are part of the community. But at the same time, as leaders, they are outside the community, evaluating and commenting on it one moment, and then very much a part of it, thrusting forward with it in action. When Mac moves they all move; when they all act, it is Mac who is on the move. One moment they gather within themselves the whole, as they assume responsibility for the whole, make decisions and issue orders; the next they are part of the whole, sinking with it or sharing in the victory. The very language reflects fluidity, and Doc is obviously aware of it when he suggests that Mac might be “an expression of group man” (131). Indeed, early in the novel, when Jim probes Mac as to how he organizes men so efficiently, Mac says, “Men always like to work together. There’s a hunger in men to work together. Do you know that ten men can lift nearly twelve times as big a load as one man can? It only takes a spark to get them going” (54).

In 1933, Steinbeck developed his notions about the phalanx in letters to his friends Carlton Sheffield and George Albee: “There have been mysterious things which could not be explained if man is the final unit. He also arranges himself into larger units, which I have called the phalanx. The phalanx has its own memory—memory of the great tides when the moon was close, memory of starvations when the food of the world was exhausted. Memory of methods when numbers of his units had to be destroyed for the good of the whole, memory of the history of itself” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 74–77; 79–82). He notes that man is more than the sum of his cells, the whole is more than the sum of its parts, but as each cell has its individuality so each human

being must retain his individuality even while becoming aware of himself as a member of a group. Once “in,” however, a person becomes capable of feats of endurance, thought, or emotion not possible for an individual, but may also suffer a wildness and loss of control that is frightening in the extreme—as in the short story, “The Vigilante.”



Early morning call to
cotton picking,
Nov. 1936.
Photo by
Dorothea Lange.
Courtesy of Library of Congress.

In view of his penchant for describing human beings in animal terms it is hardly surprising that the phalanx sometimes emerges more animal than person, its emotions “foreign and incomprehensible to unit man.” But then he also believed that unit-man had a keying device which bridged the gap between the strength of the phalanx and the free, creative individual and which expressed itself as a human group realizing its individual goals through collective action, as in his presentation of

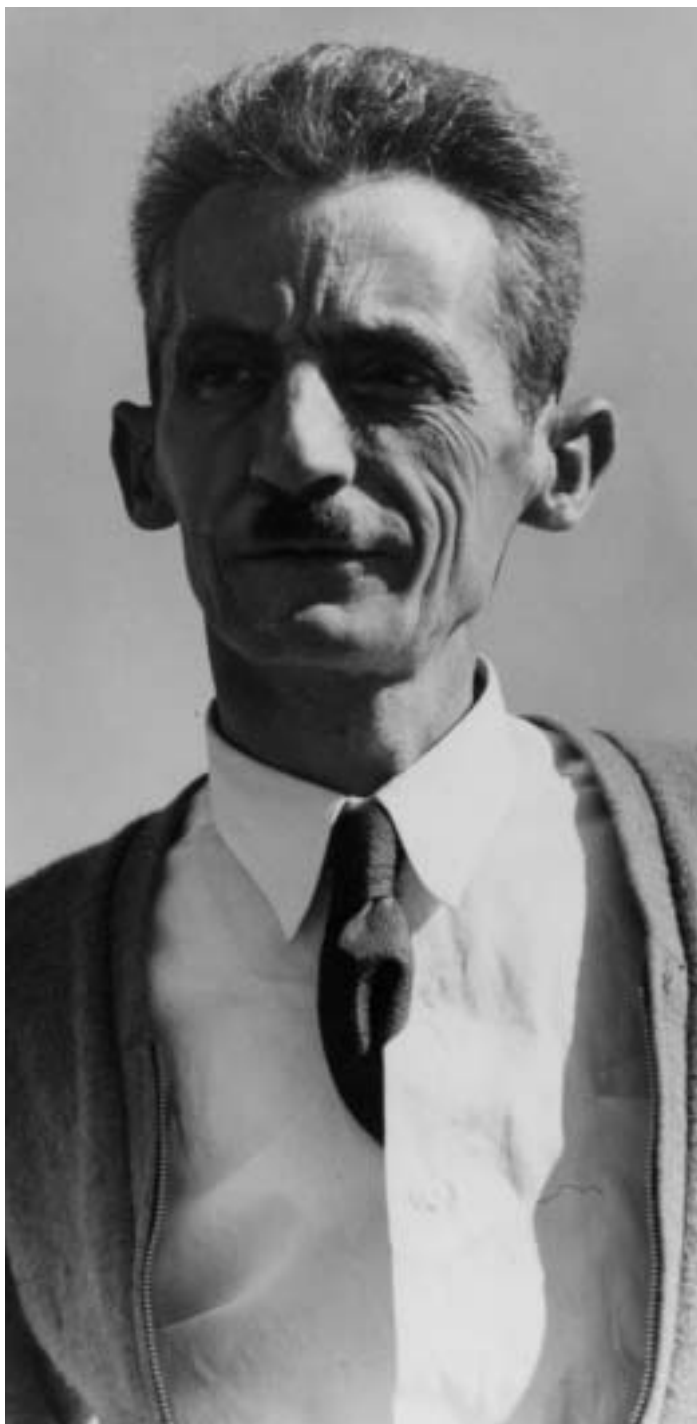
“westering” in *The Red Pony*. “Westering” is an old man’s word for the experience he had leading a wagon train across the plains, fighting with the Indians and pressing on to the coast. It was his dream, and its fulfillment was his life. When he got to the coast it was all over. All he has been able to do since is tell the story. But westering is not so much his story, nor is it the story of Indians or adventures; it is the story of how all the people who were with him were possessed by one desire to move west. That is westering. The animal language is retained to give force to the notion—westering was “a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast”—but the uniquely human is retained as people find personal meaning and direction through joint participation, summed up in the phrase, “Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering” (*The Long Valley* 224–25). Westering, says Richard Astro, has its roots in the human spirit, in the dream that makes everything possible (68).

“Religion is a phalanx emotion,” writes Steinbeck, “and this was so clearly understood by the church fathers that they said the holy ghost would come when *two or three were gathered together*” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 80). An indefinable, often mystical “something” takes over and achieves through the community something denied individuals but which could never happen without them. There we find true fluidity, and there also is the mystic and the mystery.

CONCLUSION

Had John Steinbeck and Wheeler Robinson met, I believe Steinbeck would have warmed to Robinson’s study of similar group dynamics in the Israelite community, and Robinson, who saw this period in Israel’s development as one that was asserting the rights of the individual over and against the community, would have warmed to Steinbeck’s emphasis on the individual as something always worth fighting for. Indeed, their views on the role of individual responsibility may also have been closely aligned.

In the 1930s Robinson and his colleagues saw the history of Israel as a linear development from a sense of community to a sense of personal and individual responsibility, beginning with the eighth-century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah 40–66), formalized in the Deuteronomic Law (Deut 24: 16), developed by Jeremiah (31: 33–4) and Ezekiel (18: 2), and culminating in the personal God of the New Testament. “Corporate personality” belonged to the transition. Certainly Steinbeck always saw man as “a double thing”—a group animal and an individual—unable to achieve the second until he had fulfilled the first (“Some Thoughts” 22), but by the late 1940s his emphasis shifted to the importance of individual responsibility. His phalanx theory, like Wheeler’s “corporate personality” as a transitional stage in Israelites history, was something to move beyond—not to reject but to deemphasize. Today, biblical scholars question whether Israel was ever going in a straight line from the community to the individual, and Robinson indeed was careful to point out that even with the individualism of the new covenant (Jer. 31: 31–34), it was still a covenant with the House of Israel (*Inspiration and Revelation* 70–71). So, if they had met, Steinbeck might well have embraced Robinson’s perceived growing emphasis on individualism in the latter half of the Old Testament.



Tom Collins at Arvin,
CA, 1936. To whom
John Steinbeck
dedicated
The Grapes of Wrath.

Photo by
Dorothea Lange
Courtesy of the
Library of Congress

NOTES

- ¹ The difficulty with making Israel the Servant is that at some points the Servant seems to have a mission to Israel, and this has led to the further suggestion that the Servant is not the whole of Israel but either an “Israel within Israel” or an ideal Israel in the mind of the prophet and so a prophecy of Christ.
- ² These include Moses, Jeremiah, Cyrus, Jehoiachin, an unknown contemporary of the prophet or even the prophet himself, though it is difficult to see how he could describe his own death in the fourth Song which has led some scholars to argue that perhaps the final one was written by a disciple.
- ³ Cyril Rodd considers it “plain nonsense” that Paul who came from a Hellenistic city in the Roman Empire many centuries later could have been in any way influenced by a way of thought allegedly belonging to primitive peoples (12).
- ⁴ John A.T. Robinson, for example offers a similar interpretation of “the Body of Christ” as a collective term while pointing to an individual. He begins by asking how “the Body of Christ” can consist of a number of persons—how can the many be one—and for an answer turns to the Old Testament where the few can represent the many, even if “the few” are eventually reduced to one (58–66).
- ⁵ Not all scholars accept the details of the argument but, like Robinson, Sigmund Mowinckel argues that for Israel the basic unit is not the individual but the community. Furthermore, the tribe is not a collection of people—rather each individual is an expression of the tribe (Mowinckel 42–6). Mowinckel also develops other points observed in Robinson. These include the notion that the tribe cannot be separated from its ancestor nor the ancestor from the tribe; that the tribe is a living corporate personality, an “I” in itself, to be distinguished from personification (which is something different) because “the whole was a greater ‘I’” (Eissfeldt 261–68); that in all important situations the chief (king or deity) represents the whole and could not be replaced by anybody else; and that for individuals to exist in isolation would have been regarded as arrogance—they existed as part of the tribe. This, according to Mowinckel, shows that these ancient people had an understanding of a “corporate personality—a representative person in the cult speaking on behalf of the congregation, whilst at the same time he *is* the congregation and the congregation is *he* himself.” Taken altogether this is “the mystic bond” that unites society (Johnson *Sacral Kinship* 2).

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Thomas Hart Benton.
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