John Steinbeck and East European Critics and Publishers

Danica Čerče
University of Ljubljana,
Slovenia
Danica.Cerce@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract
Because of his uncompromising exposure of social ills in his Depression-era novels, John Steinbeck, American Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1962, had a wide critical appeal in the communist part of divided post-war Europe. His works were manipulated by the communist propaganda and inadvertently served as political tools. This article examines the writer’s fortunes in Eastern Europe and shows how ideological forces fuelled literary discourses and affected the critical reception and circulation of his works.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, communist ideology, tendentious reading of literature, translations

Introduction
As I discuss in Reading Steinbeck in Eastern Europe (2011), in communist post-war Europe, literature was considered “one of the paths to social progress, ultimately guiding social and political actions” (Guran 2003, p. 109). Literary works that accorded with communist rhetoric were manipulated by communist propagandists and performed an important political function. Critical judgment, too, was affected by sociopolitical and cultural circumstances, and evinced a powerful propagandistic tone. Because of their potentially dangerous implications, books had to undergo a radical ideological revision before they could be published. Clearly, the value of a literary work depended on its political complicity, rather than on artistic merit. When instead of taking both potentialities of literary works into account, “literary criticism [is] assigned the status of a practical and militant philosophy, of a technique of ordering cultural energies” (Nemoianu 1978, p. 185), as it was in Eastern Europe, the result is the disappearance of important works from academic curricula, as Harold Bloom points out (2000, p. 225). This is well seen in the reception of Steinbeck’s works in Eastern Europe – they were either praised or scrutinised or wholly ignored on the grounds of the writer’s political views rather than their artistic merit. Approaching the works with preconceived notions regarding Steinbeck’s philosophy in them, critics paid scant regard to the writer’s intentions in these works before judging their success or failure. Of course, the politicisation of interpretation and the rejection of an aesthetic reading of literature could hardly offer valuable insights into literary texts. This is perhaps most evident in the fortunes of Steinbeck’s first novel from the Great Depression, In Dubious Battle (1936), which was one among many other books consigned to oblivion because of its potential to foster independent thinking and subvert the oppressive regime.

The Ideological Reading of Steinbeck’s Works
Given that the concept of literary greatness was related to external criteria such as the work’s sociopolitical function and the author’s political views rather than to the book’s aesthetic value, it is not surprising that Steinbeck’s unrelenting critique of the American socio-political scene and his exposure of the deficiencies of capitalism in his Depression-era novels appealed to the
John Steinbeck and East European Critics and Publishers

Literary tastes of state-controlled critics and publishers. These works inadvertently served political regimes, whereas several others, particularly those that had no agenda of social solutions and thus failed to meet the demands of prevailing literary fashion, were unjustifiably marginalised. Only recently, following the change in the political system, have Steinbeck’s works begun to be approached from the various angles of contemporary critical engagement. This is manifested in the recent publication of works that, if not neglected altogether because of their lack of social relevance and commitment or because of their potentially dangerous political implications, had formerly been received with scepticism, prejudice and misunderstanding. The critical fortunes of In Dubious Battle are a good example.

In the entire area in focus, In Dubious Battle has until very recently been relegated to dusty shelves and may perhaps have been purchased only in second-hand bookshops. In the Czech Republic, for example, the novel was translated in 1945 and 1959, in Slovenia and Croatia in 1952 and 1953, respectively, whereas the only Hungarian publication dates from 1960. Only in Bulgaria and Romania, was In Dubious Battle brought out in a new edition in 2001 and 2012, respectively, after its first publication in 1947 and 1958. The first and at the same time the only Russian translation of this novel was published in 1989, whereas in Poland, it was not translated until 2014. The translation of the title itself deserves some attention. While the Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian, and Slovene titles are word-for-word translations of the English title, in Czech, although accompanied with guidelines for “correct” reading, the novel was entitled Bitva, meaning battle. The source book’s title was also reduced to battle in the first Romanian translation, entitled Patălia, whereas the second Romanian-language edition from 2012, Nehotării sori ai bătăliii, retained the collocation from the English title. True to Petr Kopecký’s observation, the adjective dubious was probably omitted, because it may have raised ideological doubts and problematised the endeavours of the working class in their struggle for social change (2011, p. 209). The Hungarian title Késik a szüret, meaning ‘the vintage is late,’ evinces more literary finesse than other titles, but also suggests the same editorial policy as outlined above.

Of course, it is hardly surprising that in most communist countries the novel’s reputation had declined since the 1950s, although it was initially exploited for propaganda purposes (Čerče 2011). A glance at what Gerard Genette refers to as “paratexts,” i.e. those textual elements of translated works that are not part of direct translations of the source texts, but shaped independently by the publishers, translators, and editors (1997), such as the eye-catching front cover illustrations of some translations of an angry worker with threatening clenched fists, the symbol of the power of the labour force, suffices to prove this claim. The blurb highlighting Steinbeck’s political correctness due to his “progressive social thought” (Bordon and Furlan 1952, p. 245) functions in the same way. Several accompanying studies loaded with inflated claims and rhetorical flourishes are further evidence that literature was part of the communists’ struggle for power and control. In the study accompanying the first Slovene translation, for example, Bordon and Furlan write that the novel depicts the “misery of homeless agricultural workers struggling for survival […] after capitalism had thoroughly changed what was once such an idyllic country” (1952, p. 245), whereas Rapa Šukljie claims that the novel “announces a bright future with justice, equality and humanity” and makes you believe that “such a future cannot be far ahead” (1954, p. 173–174). Clearly, on the basis of the reputation Steinbeck established with The Grapes of Wrath (1939) as a writer who denounced economic injustice, early Slovene critics saw In Dubious Battle as an attack on the corrupt capitalist system. There was hardly any mention of the book once they had gleaned its full meaning.

In fact, In Dubious Battle is solidly anti-communist, and several communist critics from all parts of the region objected to Steinbeck’s emphasis on the organisers’ calculated manipulation of the strikers, as well as his depiction of communist ideology. Perhaps the sharpest indictment
of the novel came from Czech critics, who claimed that Steinbeck naturalistically and negatively distorted the characters of the communist organisers (Jindra 1987) and accused him for not drawing conclusions from the disturbing situation he had witnessed Vendys (1960). In Poland, “they interpreted the book as hostile and banned it,” writes Cliff Lewis (1995, p. 30), whereas in some other countries, it was tactfully expunged from the literary record. It is also relevant to mention that critical studies were rarely written by qualified literary critics, but by book reviewers and journalists, who only occasionally managed to go beyond a cursory description of the fables. In most cases, they did not perceive the ironic undertones in Steinbeck’s wording, let alone unravel the complexity of mythical and literary allusions that add several shades of meaning to his seemingly one-dimensional and readable stories. No less important is the fact that the ‘ideological ballast’ with which the critical texts were loaded was more or less a necessity or a “deliberate concession to the censors” to get the book published (Kopecký 2011, p. 209).

The tendency to assign a special role to discourses that empowered the idealistic prejudices of popular Marxism and Leninism, which led critics to pursue the social aspects and progressive elements in literary works, is also reflected in the reception of Of Mice and Men (1937). Except in Hungary, which boasts three consecutive publications in the 1940s and two in the 1950s, in other countries, the novel was far less often on the desks of translators and publishers. One of the main reasons for the absence or rather limited circulation of Of Mice and Men may have been the same as in Slovenia, where reviewers perceived the protagonists’ repeatedly articulated longing for a plot of their own land as “striving for private property” (Celjski tedenik of 26 March 1948, p. 6). Given a marked contrast between private property and the communal ownership of all resources and means of production as the main tenet of communism, the novel must have constituted a menace to the all-permeating ideology. In Slovenia, it was placed on the 1948 list of works that were forbidden to be translated or published (Gabrič 2008, p. 67, cf. Trupej 2015, p. 125). When the novel was finally allowed to be translated following the decrease in tension between Yugoslavia and the United States, the reviewer Ivan Skušek did not forget to mention that the main protagonists’ tragedy reveals the cruel side of American reality and must be viewed as exemplary of the masses of migrant workers searching in vain for a better life in the insensitive capitalist system (1952, p. 7). Clearly, Skušek’s study demonstrates his preoccupation with promoting the precepts of social realism.

Steinbeck was introduced to and first acclaimed by East European readers when The Grapes of Wrath (1939) was published. The translation of this novel as early as 1941 in the Czech Republic, Russia, Hungary and Bulgaria, 1943 in Slovenia, 1947 in Slovakia, 1948 in Poland, and two years later in Croatia, was part of the great international upsurge of interest in Steinbeck following the novel’s publication by Viking Press. Given that the book uncompromisingly exposes and attacks the unconscionable dynamics of corporate farming in the United States, which—according to the prevailing socialist opinion in Eastern Europe—symbolised all the evils of a corrupt social order, it not only conformed to, but also strengthened, the “bleak picture” of the United States systematically presented by the “state-controlled media” (Kopecký 2011, p. 205).

On the basis of this novel, and because he was meeting the criteria of political correctness by expressing his objection to institutional and historical processes which had maintained the political and economic exploitation of farm workers, Steinbeck was received as a politically progressive writer. More than that: because of his fierce critique of social and economic conditions, Steinbeck “ceased to be regarded as an individual and became a political tool” (Čerče 2006, p. 65), an “expedient object employed in the ideological campaign on the literary front” (Kopecký 2011, p. 204). Both his work and personality served higher purposes, namely the “legitimisation of the workers’ struggle against their capitalist exploiters” (Kopecký 2011,
In the ensuing years, East European countries constituted an eager market for Steinbeck’s works. The writer was particularly popular in the 1960s, with nineteen translations of his books in the former Czechoslovakian market, eighteen in the former Yugoslavia, and twelve in Poland.

All of these countries also witnessed a dramatic change in the domain of critical appraisal of Steinbeck’s works: the initial enthusiasm was replaced by critical antipathy and even antagonism when, after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the writer abandoned his socially engaged attitude and began to explore new subjective topics, such as the dimensions of individual choice, romantic and domestic relationships and ethical consciousness. Several critics shared the opinion of the above-mentioned Russian critic that Steinbeck had betrayed the working-class by “ignoring the analysis of social conditions” (Starcev 1947, p. 133). In reviewing *Cannery Row* (1945), the Czech critic Jaroslav Bouček, for example, describes Steinbeck as “corrupted by the ruling taste” (1952, p. 84), while the Croatian critic Stjepan Kresić condemned *East of Eden* with the claim that Steinbeck was merely exposing social problems “without showing any plausible solutions” (1956, p. 668). Marija Cvetko, among other Slovene critics, underrated *Travels with Charley* (1962), pointing to the “lack of intensity of the writer’s critical insight” (1964, p. 7). However, it was not until after Steinbeck overtly showed his support for the U.S.A.’s involvement in Vietnam due to the alleged communist threat that his popularity faded. “You betrayed your principles and everything you had ever fought for,” accused him the Bulgarian writer Blaga Dimitrova (1967, p. 92), one of many unforgiving if not antagonistic voices in the late 1960s. In the same year, Arnošt Lustig, a prominent Czech writer and journalist, wrote: “But what must be in the air that it changes the spirit and opinions of a man who has, until now, represented the best in America?” (Kopecký 2011, p. 212). This keen sense of disappointment resulted in a lack of interest in Steinbeck’s work.

New Steinbeck editions were especially rare in the 1980s, with hardly any Steinbeck publications. At present, and although he is still poorly represented in literary history and criticism, there seems to be a level of acceptance of the writer. His works are considerably widely translated in most of the countries of the area under consideration. In the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, a new wave of Steinbeck translation began soon after the end of the communist era (1948-1989). In the 1990s, twenty-eight Steinbeck translations were published in Poland and Hungary alone. This number is even more impressive, given that there was only one Steinbeck publication in the former Yugoslavia in the same decade. This veritable explosion of Steinbeck publications and works by other American and West European writers in most of post-communist Europe must have been associated with a cultural need in these countries to learn about the outside world. Since the year 2000, the Czech Republic has boasted the most translations, with twenty-seven publications to date. During the whole period of Steinbeck’s presence in the Czech cultural arena, there have been seventy-three Czech editions, beginning with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1941. Poland, too, has developed a cultural environment conducive to translations of Steinbeck works: twenty-four of them (out of a total of seventy-one since 1948) have been published in the last ten years. In Hungary, the statistics for this millennium have improved due to increased publishing activity in the last few years. The figures have also improved in Slovenia and Serbia, with seven translations in the former and six in the latter. The upsurge of interest in Steinbeck's work is particularly evident in post-communist Romania. As if the country were seeking to make up for its cultural belatedness, it has seen a string of translations of Steinbeck books since 2002, with ten publications in 2010 and 2012 alone, and a range that includes works from virtually all the creative venues the writer entered. Of a total of thirty-two publications since 2000, only a few novels have been published more than once.
An account of Steinbeck’s popularity in the countries that were politically grouped into the communist bloc would be incomplete without some other relevant information. While in the past, particularly in the immediate post-war years, publishers liked to choose Steinbeck’s Depression-era novels, with the writer’s social concern and critical attitude to the American social and economic system, today they opt for works with a different set of stylistic, thematic and philosophical bearings from the earlier books that stirred up great contention. In most cases, these are the same texts once marginalised by critics who evaluated literary works according to their sociopolitical functions. Clearly, as a consequence of long-lasting censorship, there has been a great demand for literary works that transcend the “confinement of an ideological source and explanation” (Hoffman 1968, p. 193). Even A Russian Journal, an eyewitness account of the depressing reality of early Cold War Soviet life, which was not in favour with the ruling communist regimes, saw its first translation in some of East European countries including Russia (in 1989, 2002 and 2005). The most recent publication of the book dates from 2015, when it was first published in Romania.

Considering the contours of the political milieu in pre-revolutionary Eastern Europe, it is not surprising that The Grapes of Wrath has been published at least ninety-two times so far. What is intriguing is the fact that there have also been at least sixty-three publications of East of Eden (1952), a novel that clearly testifies to the writer’s departure from proletarian themes to the exploration of issues of human nature, freedom, individual choice, and relationships. East of Eden has been popular in all the countries under consideration, but nowhere more than in Slovenia. Speculating on the reasons for the novel’s popular appeal among Slovenes, it is relevant to note that, despite the poor critical response to the novel, literary criticism with its pragmatic concepts regarding the creative potential of fictional worlds nevertheless significantly contributed to the book’s success. However, the popular appeal in Slovenia may also be partly because of the book itself. Advocating issues of individual choice and freedom rather than ideological clichés and being informed by personal vision rather than group psychology and social consciousness, it seems to have attracted those readers who resist the temptation to use all the information provided by critics or editors and prefer to “consume” the story simply for its “narrative pleasure” (Srikanth 2010, p. 148). In doing so, they are similar to Western readers; since its first publication, and unlike the critics, these have also been challenged by the book itself and found it pleasurable to read, either because of the familiar Biblical framework of the story, which offers a wide array of references and readings or because of the novel’s open, reflective form.

Conclusion

Even on this narrow scale of comparison, as it is offered here, and despite some differences which should more appropriately be regarded as a result of intellectual choice rather than of a shared intellectual project, it is not hard to see how similar socio-political circumstances in these countries accounted for the similar status of Steinbeck’s works, both in the field of criticism and publishing activity. With Katherine Arens, “specific texts or authors are given privileged or canonical status as prototypes for their speech genres within literary history and in the community of cultural producers” (2005, p. 139). Clearly, within an East European’s horizon of expectations about literature, Steinbeck has been regarded until very recently primarily as a social realist writer, and the credit for his popular acclaim has gone to his initial role as an objective social chronicler of the Great Depression. Because of his uncompromising exposure of social ills and liberal beliefs, his works not only served as a credible source of information about the American sociopolitical and economic scene, but also inadvertently assisted the communist regimes in their struggle against the social order of capitalism.

It is true that, read simplistically and tendentiously, almost any text can serve political interests (Guran 2003, p. 96), because “we always eventually find, at the edge of the text, the
language of ideology, momentarily hidden, but eloquent by its very absence” (Spivak 1988, p. 122); however, it is a gross simplification to regard Steinbeck as merely a chronicler of 20th century America and marginalise or even ignore the literary merit of his works. The mere fact that, today, according to Letitia Guran (2003), a number of East European scholars show a clear preference for an aesthetic reading of literature against a politically committed reading does not guarantee that Steinbeck’s works will finally be assessed with the same aesthetic criteria that are applied to the best literary works. It is the recent renaissance of interest in the whole of Steinbeck’s oeuvre, which is the best assurance. Although, in David Richter’s words, “evading the politics of literature is only another political way of reading it” (2000, p. 247), let us hope that the study of the ideological potential of literary works will never again have a preeminent status in reading and evaluating them. As several critics have noted, Steinbeck’s works contain the seeds for many new areas of investigation, and this is the most compelling rationale for their distribution and circulation, not the presence or lack of ideological structures in them.

References