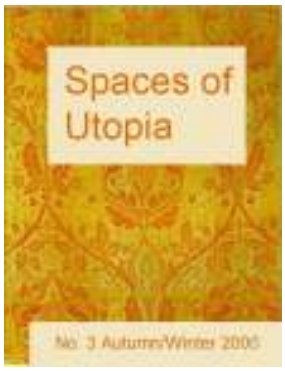
"There's a Better World a-Coming":
The Urban Collectivism-Rural Individualism of Woody Guthrie

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Woody Guthrie is today known as America's pioneering modern folk singer, popularising a genre of music in the 1930s and 1940s which had previously been limited in range to the Appalachian Mountains, and to pockets of traditional musicians, usually families or work-mates, in the American south, the former frontier and the old fishing communities of the north-east. By performing traditional songs as well as those of his own composition on radio stations in Los Angeles and New York (including nation-wide broadcasts for CBS ["The Life of Woody Guthrie"]), and at political rallies, union meetings and the urban night-club scene, Guthrie is also responsible for transforming American folk music into an urban phenomenon, and one immediately taken up by middle-class musicians such as Pete Seeger and by later folk revivalists such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs.[1] As well as being a prolific songwriter, however, Guthrie also contributed articles to the local and national press, wrote several books, and wrote copious quantities of letters, diaries and notebooks directed at others in the music industry, his wives and his children. Through a reading of Guthrie's lyrics and prose, it is possible to identify two social visions: a conservative one espousing the virtues of independent small-hold farming and the traditional family, in which traditional gender roles remain unchallenged; and a radical one espousing politicised labour unions, large-scale government projects, anti-racism, women's rights and internationalism.

Guthrie presented himself as "of the people", an authentic "Okie"[2] who had travelled to virtually ever state in the Union and mingled with the poor

(hobos, farm labourers, sharecroppers, unskilled urban labourers and unemployed artisans) as well as with those workers fighting for better pay and conditions in the many union halls at which he performed. John Steinbeck said of him, "[h]e sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people" (Steinbeck 2002: 4), a sentiment echoed by Craig Werner, who wrote, "[i]n Woody's voice, you can hear echoes of everything he ever heard; his songs reach easily across lines of race and class and region" (Werner 1999: 70). As part of this experience, which dates roughly between his migration from Pampa, Texas, to Los Angeles in 1937 and his hospitalisation with Huntington's Disease in 1953, Guthrie became involved with the American Communist Party, writing for the *Light*[3] and the *People's World* in California,[4] and the *Daily Worker* in New York, joining the Communist-supporting Almanac Singers and the musicians' collective known as Peoples' Songs and performing for party rallies and party-controlled labour unions across the country.

Although Guthrie's sympathies with the working class were constant throughout his adulthood, his contact with different segments of that class resulted in the development of a different ideal for the urban and rural workers whose plight he supported on equal terms. In what follows I will present Guthrie's two visions, focusing on his three main influences: the mass migration from the Dust Bowl to California during the mid- to late-1930s, his federal employment with the Bonneville Power Administration in 1941 and his labour union activism during the 1940s. In the conclusion, I will attempt to reconcile Guthrie's seemingly divergent visions for the urban and rural working class.

Dust Bowl Balladeer

Although the Guthrie family fell apart in 1926, with Woody's mother Nora committed to an Oklahoma asylum, his father Charley, physically and commercially broke, living as a motel keeper in Texas, and his siblings either faring for themselves or living with other relatives, there is no evidence that Woody was radicalised by his childhood traumas. At the age of thirteen he was a full-time scavenger in his home town of Okemah, Oklahoma, living in a tree house or in the open air or occasionally with his older brother, Roy, for a few nights at a time. By the early 1930s, Woody had joined his father in Texas,

helping keep the motel and doing occasional sign painting for a living. Although Guthrie had already done a fair amount of hitchhiking and boxcar-riding during his travels between and within Oklahoma and Texas, his eyes were only really opened to the plight of the rural poor when, on 14 April 1935 at the age of twenty-one, he witnessed the Great Dust Storm and the resulting mass-migrations from the south of impoverished farm workers ("Timeline of Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)"). Between 1935 and 1937 hundreds of thousands of labourers and small-holders lost their land either through it being literally blown away or through it being repossessed by the banks due to the poverty caused by successive crop failures. It was during this period that Guthrie began writing his famous *Dust Bowl Ballads* (recorded in May 1940 [Garton, 1999, CD1]), a feat finally accomplished with his 1937 journey from Pampa to Los Angeles and his close mingling with dispossessed farmers, sharecroppers and other former workers in the rural economy, both black and white.

Something which marks Guthrie out as a distinctive witness of the Dust Bowl experience is the optimistic vein which runs through his music. As David R. Shumway has noted, "[w]hile Guthrie's songs often deal with workers" defeats, they are not defeatist in any sense. Many go beyond descriptions of oppressive class relations to support organized opposition to them" (Shumway 1999: 132). Indeed, for all the hardship and pain he observed, Guthrie's songs contain both defiance and hope in the face of seeming catastrophe. No song better reflects that sense of defiance than "Blowin' Down the Road":

> I'm looking for a job at honest pay,
> I'm looking for a job at honest pay,
> I'm looking for a job at honest pay, Lord, Lord, and I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.
>
> My children need three square meals a day,
> Now my children need three square meals a day,
> My children need three square meals a day, Lord, and I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.
>
> It takes a $10 shoe to fit my feet,
> It takes a $10 shoe to fit my feet,
> It takes a $10 shoe to fit my feet, Lord, Lord, and I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.
>
> Your $2 shoe hurts my feet,
> Your $2 shoe hurts me feet,
> Yes, your $2 shoe hurts my feet, Lord, Lord, and I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way. (Guthrie 2002c: 2.5)[5]

Although Guthrie wrote little about the fate of the deserted lands of the south, his songs were full of hope for the migrants themselves, to whom he would later declare in his most famous song, "This land is your land, / This land is my land. / (….) This land was made for you and me".[6] In "Oregon Trail" Guthrie sings, "Where the good rain falls a-plenty and the crops and orchards grow; / I'm gonna hit that Oregon trail this comin' fall" (*idem*, 1.7),[7] and in "Song of the Coulee Dam", he writes "I'll settle this land boys and I'll work like a man, / and I'll water my crops from that Grand Coulee Dam" (Guthrie 2000: 3).[8] Sentiments such as these almost suggest Guthrie as a Moses-figure, leading his people to a Promised Land. Indeed, in the first part of his interpretation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, entitled "Tom Joad Blues – Part 1", this role is virtually self-declared: "They stood on a mountain and they looked to the west and it looked like the Promised Land. / That bright green valley with a river running through, there was work for every single hand, they thought, / There was work for every single hand" (Guthrie 2002c: 2.1).[9] The promise of these lines is partially countered by an earlier defiance which states: "Now the twelve of the Joads made a mighty heavy load but grandpa Joad did cry; / He picked up a handful of land in his hand, said 'I'm staying with the farm till I die, / Yes I'm staying with the farm 'til I die'" (*ibidem*). Before assuming that grandpa's defiance shows a generational division in Guthrie's thought, however, it should be pointed out that while grandpa is buried with his eroded farm, grandma makes it to California.

Although these and other examples in Guthrie's lyrics demonstrate his refusal to accept the status quo of rural mass unemployment and socio-political apathy, his ideal vision for America's rural communities is far from radical. Indeed, although Guthrie had little direct experience of farm life or even of conventional family life, he frequently refers back to a rural "golden age" in his songs, usually dating to the mid- to late-1920s, during which farm production was profitable and rural life (including family life) was stable. Thus, in his "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" he writes, "[b]ack in 1927 I had a little farm and I called that heaven. / Well the price was up and the rain come down and I hauled my crops all into town, got the money, / Bought clothes and groceries, fed the kids and raised a family" (*idem*, 2.4).[10] In his "Washington Talkin' Blues",

the same scenario is re-enacted thus: “Along about 1929, I owned a little farm, was doing just fine. / Raised a little row crop, raised some wheat, sold it over at the county seat. / Drawed the money, raised a family” (Guthrie 1992: 7).[11]

Although it is unremarkable to find Guthrie recalling pre-Depression rural life in such glowing terms, it is perhaps surprising to note that his vision of future rural settlements is almost identical. In his song about the closure of the California borders to rural migrants, “Do-Re-Mi”, he suggests that the newcomers simply “want to buy (…) a home or farm” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.24),[12] and in his “Washington Talkin’ Blues” the travellers journey all the way to Washington State simply to find themselves in the same situation they had left behind in the Dust Bowl:

> Hot old rocks and the desert sand made the mind run back to the dust bowl land.
> But the hopes was high as we rolled along to the Columbia River up in Washington.
> Lots of good rain, little piece of land, a feller might grow something.
>
> We settled down on some cut-over land and I pulled up the brush and the stumps by hand.
> Sun burnt up my first crop of wheat, and the river down the canyon just five-hundred feet.
> Might as well have been fifty miles. Couldn’t get no water. (Guthrie 1992: 7)

Perhaps the most striking example of Guthrie’s conservative vision for rural dwellers occurs in his “New Found Land”, recorded as late as 1947.

> Well, I just got up to ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land.
> I just got up to ma’ new found land, I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning.
>
> I built me a house of a new cut tree, a new cut tree, a new cut tree,
> I built me a house of a new cut tree, I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning.
>
> Well, I built my house on a new cut stone, a new cut stone, a new cut stone.
> I built my house on a new cut stone, and I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning, livin’ in the light of the morning.
>
> I lit my lamp with the new found light, new found light, new found light.
> Lit my lamp with the new found light, and I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning.
>
> Plant ma’ seed in the new dug ground, the new dug ground, the new dug ground.
> I plant ma’ seed in the new dug ground, and I’m livin’ in the light of the morning, livin’ in the light of the morning.
>
> I brought my child from ma’ new found wife, ma’ new found wife, ma’ new found wife.
> I brought the child from a new found wife, a-livin’ in the light of the morning, livin’ in the light of the morning.
>
> Well, I just got up to ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land.

> I just got up to ma' new found land, I'm a-living in the light of the morning, living in the light of the morning. (Guthrie 2002a: 24)[13]

In addition to promoting the image of the traditional hardworking smallholder, building his house from scratch like the frontiersman of old and planting his seed in the "new dug ground", this song also strongly presents the image of the dominant husband who "brought my child from ma' new found wife". In his songs of rural life, as was seen earlier in "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and "Washington Talkin' Blues", Guthrie's picture is rarely complete without the male protagonist having a wife and raising a family, or otherwise lamenting the fact that he cannot achieve this, as in "Ramblin' Round" where the protagonist declares, "I wish that I could marry, / I wish'd I could settle down; / But I can't save a penny boys as I go ramblin' round" (Guthrie 2002c: 1.19).[14] In Guthrie's songs of rural life the family, and especially the wife, is both a symbol of stability and something to be protected,[15] and wives are expected to appreciate their positions, as in "Wreck of the Old '97", when it is said, "[w]ell, ladies you must all take warning from this time now and on / Never speak harsh words to your true love and husband, he might leave you and never come home" (*idem*, 1.3).[16] Wives are even used by Guthrie to help transform outlaws into folk heroes, as when Charles Arthur Floyd, in the song "Pretty Boy Floyd", kills a deputy sheriff who had "approached him in a manner rather rude, / Using vulgar words of language and his wife she overheard" (*idem*, 1.14),[17] or when, in "Two Good Men", Nicola Sacco is presented as a respectable person because "Sacco's wife, three children had; Sacco was a family man" (Guthrie 2002a: 20).[18]

With the Bonneville Power Administration

Although Guthrie's vision for the future rural population remained culturally conservative he did not expect farm production to be re-established through economic or political laissez-faire. With his recruitment by the Bonneville Power Administration (or BPA) in Portland, Oregon, in 1941, Guthrie's eyes were opened to the potential of state intervention in rural communities which could preserve the traditional smallholding run by a farmer with a traditional family, while seemingly ensuring long-term stability and prosperity for the rural community.

The BPA is a federal agency within the US Department of Energy. It was created in 1937 by the Franklin Roosevelt Administration to administer the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams, completed in 1938 and 1941, respectively, as well as a number of subsidiary dams along the Columbia River and its tributaries. The BPA provides hydro-electric power to four north-western US states and irrigates vast tracts of land in Washington and Oregon. As part of the great debate over whether consumers and businesses should receive federal or private electricity, Guthrie was hired by the BPA to promote federal power and demonstrate its benefits through song. Writing twenty-six songs during his thirty-day contract, Guthrie's creativity blossomed as he celebrated both the feat of engineering and the provision of resources to both the rural and urban populations.

The song which links the BPA most directly to Guthrie's conservative rural vision is "Washington Talkin' Blues". There Guthrie declares, "[n]ow what we need is a great big dam to throw a lot of water out across that land. / People could work and stuff would grow and you could wave good by to the old skid row. / Find you a job, work hard, raise all kinds of stuff. Kids too" (Guthrie 1992: 7). As supportive as he was of the BPA, Guthrie feared any limitation to the project's scope. He expressed his fears in "End of the Line", where he wrote:

> We gotta hold of a piece of land fifteen miles from the Coulee Dam.
> Fifteen miles from the Coulee Dam, fifteen miles from the Coulee Dam.
>
> Now the Coulee Dam's a delight to see, makes us-a e-lectric-l-ty, makes us e-lectric-l-ty, makes-a e-lectric-l-ty.
>
> Well Oregon State is mighty fine if your hooked on to the power line,
> But there ain't no country extry fine if you're just a mile from the end of the line.
> (Guthrie 2002c: 1.22)[19]

The only solution to such a predicament was suggested in "Song of the Coulee Dam", where Guthrie enthuses, "Grand Coulee Dam, boys, Grand Coulee Dam. / I wish we had a lot more Grand Coulee Dams" (Guthrie 2000: 3). Bill Murlin of the BPA has said of Guthrie's enthusiasm, "I don't know that he was so interested in glorifying dams in the words that he was writing; but he certainly was interested in what the dams were going to do for the people who were here and the people who were moving here" (*apud Roll on Columbia*, 2001). Looking at Guthrie's BPA work within the wider biographical context, Joe

Klein has suggested that "The idea that the *government* was building all these massive dams was especially thrilling. It was what socialism would be like when it came to the USA" (Klein 1999: 202).

If the BPA's provision of irrigation and electricity to north-western farmers was a statist facilitator of traditional rural life in Guthrie's mind, its impact on the urban economy was the complete opposite. From 1937 onwards Guthrie had lived an urban existence, working on radio and as a newspaper columnist in Los Angeles and New York and travelling from town to town across America performing concerts for political rallies, labour unions and benefit shows for the unemployed. In songs such as "Ramblin' Round" (Guthrie 2002c: 1.19) and "New York City" (Guthrie 2000: 2.9)[20] he voiced the frustrations of people willing and able to work but who could find no jobs. With his introduction to the BPA, Guthrie quickly came to realise that federal schemes such as this could be the catalyst for job creation, and could also offer a government challenge to private business, the latter frequently being demonised by Guthrie in such songs as "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" (Guthrie 2002c: 2.16),[21] "Tom Joad Blues" (*idem*, 1-2.2)[22] and "Vigilante Man" (*idem*, 1.5)[23] for throwing people off their land and out of work, and then pursuing them for debts which they had no means of paying. In "Grand Coulee Dam", Guthrie couples his admiration for the government's harnessing of the Columbia River with a celebration of the industrial achievements produced thereby:

> Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of '33 for the farmer and the factory and all of you and me.
> He said "Roll along Columbia, you can ramble to the sea, but river while you're rambling you can do some work for me".
> Now in Washington and Oregon you hear the factories hum, making chrome and making manganese and light aluminum,
> And there roars a Flying Fortress now to fight for Uncle Sam spawned upon the king Columbia by the big Grand Coulee Dam. (Guthrie 2000: 1.11)[24]

The same points are made in "Talking Columbia", though the pace of the song gives it rather more power, and in its prophecy of consumerism (with references to electricity, plastic and atomic energy) it has the ring of a self-contained utopia about it:

> You just watch this river though, pretty soon
> Everybody's gonna be changing their tune.
> The big Grand Coulee and the Bonneville Dam

> Will run a thousand factories for Uncle Sam, and everybody else in the world.
> Turn out everything from fertilizers to sowing machines and atomic bedrooms and plastic – everything's gonna be plastic.
>
> Uncle Sam needs houses and stuff to eat,
> And Uncle Sam needs wool, Uncle Sam needs wheat,
> Uncle Sam needs water and power dams,
> And Uncle Sam needs people and the people need land.
>
> 'Course I don't like dictators none myself
> But then I think the whole country, it ought to be run by e-lectricity.
> (Guthrie 2002c: 1.8)[25]

The result of the BPA for urban populations was not simply job creation but specifically the creation of employment that required a concentration of labour; namely factory work. Whereas Guthrie promoted small-scale, family-centred units of employment in the rural economy, on the urban landscape he rejoiced in a future of factory work, providing thousands of jobs and mass-producing commodities of consumption from the imperative (in 1941) "Flying Fortress" and the fantastic "atomic bedrooms" to the more mundane sowing machines. Guthrie's experiences with the Dust Bowl migrants had already made him an admirer of human solidarity,[26] and the thought of the large-scale industrial enterprises which the BPA made possible clearly impressed him. Guthrie's bitterness, mentioned above, against heavy-handed or ruthless employers and creditors prepared him intellectually for the union movement which he discovered in New York in 1940. The types of industry the BPA made possible, therefore, encouraged Guthrie in his hopes for an organised workforce of the future.

The Labour Union Activist

Although Guthrie began performing benefit concerts in the late 1930s in California, these targeted the Dust Bowl migrants or the Communist-inspired agencies which assisted the migrants and publicised their plight. Indeed, even with his move to New York in 1940 Guthrie remained active in fundraising for the "Okies" and "Arkies", performing, for instance, at the "Grapes of Wrath Evening", an event organised by the Communist actor Will Geer to raise funds for the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers. Once in New York, however, Guthrie's concerns shifted from the Dust Bowl migrants (many of whom were finding work in the new war industries and on the land in the north-

west) to the industrial workforce and, later, to those serving their country abroad. As war approached, and many people became aware of just how scarce freedom and liberty were around the world, Guthrie came to realise that the USA itself was far from perfect in these realms. As he wrote in 1942,

> You dont have to go to Europe to find plenty to do to beat Hitler. Unions here working with Unions there will dig his grave, but your job is close to you, closer than your hands and feet… stick up for what's right, freedom of speech, press, radio, meetings, collective bargaining, the right to get together for decent pay, hours, rent, prices. (Guthrie 1990: 83)

From 1941 and America's entry into the Second World War, Guthrie expressed a deep anti-fascism alongside a radical patriotism that both promoted the export of American values abroad and sought their full implementation in the USA itself. In order to achieve American freedom and liberty, Guthrie campaigned for the newly-formed Communist-inspired Congress of Industrial Organisations (or CIO), which aimed to organise the non-unionised industrial sectors and to radicalise those sectors which were under the influence of the more moderate American Federation of Labor.

Guthrie's most concise statement of his commitment to organised labour and to the American war effort occurs in his "Talking Sailor", recorded in 1944 when he was a merchant seaman and a member of the National Maritime Union (or NMU): "I'm just one of the merchant crew, I belong to the union called the NMU. / I'm a union man from head to toe, I'm USA and CIO. / Fighting out here on the waters to win some freedom on the land" (Guthrie 1999: 3.20).[27] Guthrie's biographer, Joe Klein, tells a story of Guthrie's return from Europe with the merchant marine in 1944 in which his call for a better America took a practical turn amongst his fellow shipmates:

> Woody [organised] a letter-writing contest among the bored, tired men, getting them to petition Congress for unemployment insurance for seamen, a GI Bill of Rights for seamen, and citizenship for alien seamen – all of which were current NMU demands. More than a thousand letters were allegedly written, and he claimed to have polished off 112 himself, telling each congressman: "I'm a voter from your home town. Not only that but right in your own neighborhood. I'm facing buzz bombs, magneto mines, torpedos, stukas and hauling nitroglycerine to save your neck; surely you can pass three bills to save mine". (Klein 1999: 291)

In "Better World A-Comin", a similar sentiment is expressed, though Guthrie makes it clear that victory in the war was to benefit not just the USA in

such lines as “We will beat ’em on the land, on the sea and in the sky, / There’s a better world is a-comin’, I’ll tell you why”, and “When we’ll all be union and we’ll all be free / There’s a better world is a-comin’, don’t you see”, and finally “I’m a union man in a union war, it’s a union world I’m fighting for / There’s a better world is a-coming don’t you know” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.6).[28] Guthrie’s fight for freedom and labour unionism is complemented in his direct attacks on fascism in such songs as “The Biggest Thing Man Has Ever Done” (Guthrie 2000: 2.11)[29] and “Jarama Valley”, the latter being a tribute song to the Lincoln Brigade of American volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. In the song Guthrie declares “[a]ll this world is like this valley called Jarama, / So green and so bright and so fair. / No fascists can dwell in our valley / Nor breath in our new freedom’s air” (Guthrie 2002a: 12).[30]

Guthrie’s support for union activism extended beyond the war, and when he wrote an album of songs in memory of Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchists who were executed on a dubious murder charge in 1927, Vanzetti’s labour unionism received prominence. In “Two Good Men” Guthrie wrote, “Vanzetti spoke both day and night, told the workers how to fight (…) / Told the workers ‘Organise’ and on the ’lectric chaired he died. / All you people ought to be like me and work like Sacco and Vanzetti. / And everyday find ways to fight on the union side for the workers rights” (*idem*, 20).

Conclusion

Guthrie’s populism encompassed both the rural and the urban workforce. His experience of the Dust Bowl and the labour movement inspired him to sing about and generally campaign for measures to improve the lot of working people. Although he was actively involved with the Communist Party and employed communist rhetoric in some of his writings, his vision for the American worker was far from communistic. In fact, Guthrie clearly supported the liberal democratic state that America epitomised to the rest of the world, though with some differences.

In the rural realm, Guthrie did not wish to see collectivised farming or an end to the private smallholder but sought state support for the smallholder in such projects as the BPA and through social housing provision and regulations

to ensure a minimum quality of housing and to assist the unemployed labourer to find work. Guthrie gives the clearest vision of his rural utopia in the liner notes to his 1940 album, *Dust Bowl Ballads*:

> They need a piece of land. You need a good house on it, with a coat or two of good paint, and three or four cows, and some chickens, and lots of stuff like that, farm tools, and stuff to eat, and some spendin' money in your pocket for a little good time once in a while, and a long time to pay your place out, about 40 years… and you need US Government Camps for the Workin' Folks, with nice clean place to live and cook and do your washin' and ironin' and cookin', and good beds to rest on, and so nobody couldn't herd you around like whiteface cattle, and deputies beat you up, and run you out of town, and stuff like that.
>
> You could pay a dime a day for your place to live, and you could do work around the Camp to pay your bill, and you could have a nice buildin' with a good dance floor in it, and you could have church there, too, and go to Sunday School, and Church, and have all kinds of meetings and talk about crops and weather and wages, and no cops would make you scatter out.
>
> You could meet there and have Singings and Pie Suppers, and Raffles, and Banquets, and Eats and Dks., (abbreviated), and have your own Peace Officers to keep down fist fights, and your own women to keep care of the kids, and they could have games and baths and good toilets and clean showers and – the governor of the state could find out where the jobs was, and keep you hired out all of the time, building Oklahoma, and the whole Dust Bowl over again. (Guthrie 1990: 44-45)

In this rambling piece of prose one finds all the ingredients of Guthrie's rural idyll: the smallholder with a house on a piece of land, keeping cows and chickens, and social housing for those aspiring to landholding or content to work as labourers. The simple but happy way of life is portrayed, with pie suppers, raffles, banquets and dances, and as the foundation of the rural community, the wife and mother "to keep care of the kids". In many ways, Guthrie's rural idyll is a return to the 1920s, though shored up by federal provision of housing and regulations to ensure "baths and good toilets and clean showers" and a kind of rural employment exchange to find work for the unemployed labourer.

In the urban realm, Guthrie sought something rather different. Through his support of labour unionism, he clearly did not wish to see an end to capitalism or to class division, but he did desire the reconstruction of class relations between the employer and the employed, and to achieve this he looked both to worker solidarity and to government intervention. As has been demonstrated, worker solidarity primarily meant the CIO and its affiliated unions to Guthrie, but there was much more to solidarity than this.

An issue of importance to Guthrie, though one too large to mention in detail here, was that of "race" solidarity. Guthrie's biography is full of instances

of his rejection of racial prejudice and discrimination.[31] Klein tells the story of a performance given by Guthrie and two black colleagues, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, at a fraternal organisation in Baltimore in December 1942 following which Terry and McGhee were led off to a "Negroes Only" table and Guthrie was told he could not eat with them. In rage, Guthrie overturned the buffet tables and the three musicians left for the train station (Klein 1999: 258-259). On another occasion, in December 1947, Guthrie was hired to perform for striking tobacco workers in North Carolina. When it became known that one of his songs contained integrationist lyrics,[32] the white members of the segregated union boycotted the event and Guthrie ended up performing for the black strikers only. In the communist *Daily Worker* he wrote, "It cut me to my bones to have to play and sing for those negroes with no other colors mixing in" (*apud* Klein 1999: 360-361). In a 1942 article Guthrie asserted that,

> Jim Crow still makes the Negro people slaves to all kinds of things, mean and low treatment, hard work and starvation wages, and mistreated by all kinds of narrow minded bosses everywhere… so any talk about American songs, ballads or music has got to first shake hands with the Negroes, and find out why their music and singing is the best, longest lasting, and by far the plainest that has sprouted in our midst. (Guthrie 1990: 78)

Guthrie's anti-racism was reasserted in 1956, just before his illness robbed him of the ability to write. In a letter to Marjorie Mazia dated 4 October, he wrote "Eisenhower can't be my big chiefy bossyman till he makes alla my United States alla my races all equal. (…) I vote for my communist candidates anyhow that'll be the only ones ta ever even partways tryta give birth ta my racey equality" (*apud* Klein 1999: 436).

Another area of solidarity which can only be mentioned briefly is that of gender solidarity, at least within the urban community. In a letter to his future wife, Marjorie Mazia, on the occasion of the birth of their daughter Cathy Ann in 1943, he wrote, "[m]en have enjoyed an artificial superiority over women for several centuries. I have got to work and fight and do all I can to break the old slavery idea of the woman being chained to her house which, in many cases, certainly isn't a home" (*apud* Klein 1999: 264). This was followed by his advocacy of neighbourhood nurseries, equal pay and, indeed, complete equality for men and women.

Given the disparity between Guthrie's vision for the rural and the urban communities of America, to where can one look for a unifying trope? It seems to me that this clearly lies in the notion of cooperation, though given the different cultural experiences of town and country, Guthrie's was a pragmatic cooperation which respected the different traditions of rural and urban America. In the rural community, where the family was hailed as the social foundation, cooperation between the farmer and the state manifested itself in the supply of irrigation and electricity by the state in return for surplus production by the farmer. In the urban community, where affairs were complicated by the powerful interests of big business, cooperation manifested itself through labour unions bringing workers of varying ethnicity together and federal welfare schemes enabling women employment opportunities and / or assistance in child-rearing. In addition, federal regulations were advocated to improve housing, education and other conditions.[33]

Guthrie's ideology, far from being communistic, appears a simple humanism, where all look out for each and none make excessive demands. Interestingly, this ideal of cooperation is most clearly expressed in Guthrie's songs for children, and in particular his brilliant "Ship in the Sky":

A curly-headed kid with a sun-shiny smile heard the roar of a plane as it sailed through the sky.
To her playmates she cried with a bright twinkling eye, "My daddy rides that ship in the sky.
My daddy rides that ship in the sky,
My daddy rides that ship in the sky,
Mamma's not afraid so neither am I. My daddy rides that ship in the sky."

A pug-nosed kid, as he kicked up his heel, said "My daddy works in the iron and the steel.
My daddy makes planes so they fly through the sky, that's what keeps your daddy up there so high.
That's what keeps your daddy up there so high,
That's what keeps your daddy up there so high.
If you ain't afraid well neither am I, 'cos my daddy keeps your daddy up there so high."

Then a shy little girl pitched her toe in the sand, said "My daddy works in the place where they land.
So you tell your mamma don't be afraid, cause my dad'll bring your daddy back home again.
My dad'll bring your daddy back home again,
My dad'll bring your daddy back home again.
Don't be afraid if it gets dark and rains, my dad'll bring your daddy back home again.

My dad'll bring your daddy back home again,
My dad'll bring your daddy back home again.

> Don't be afraid if it gets dark and rains, my dad'll bring your daddy back home again." (Guthrie 2002c: 2.15)[34]

In this simple story of an aircraft pilot's safe flight, we see cooperation benefiting the workers, consumers and the family; just exactly the message one receives through the whole corpus of Guthrie's work.

Guthrie was not offering his listeners or readers a revolutionary agenda but stating in his own way the New Deal philosophy presented by President Franklin Roosevelt.[35] Perhaps it is for this reason that Guthrie so flourished during his time with the BPA, a project that was Roosevelt's own personal initiative.[36] Guthrie's restatement of core American humanism is perhaps the reason why he never suffered as severely under the McCarthyite witchhunts of the 1950s as some of his folk-singing colleagues such as Pete Seeger and has maintained solid admiration in popular American culture, even having his signature tune, "This Land is Your Land" (Guthrie 2002c: 1.7), considered for a new national anthem in the 1970s (Klein 1999: 494).

Notes

[1] According to Charles F. McGovern, "While Guthrie could not be involved with these postwar movements due to his illness, his own lifework had already shown the connections between folk movements and the mass society that the United States had become by the 1960s" (McGovern 1999: 120).

[2] Guthrie was, in fact, not an authentic "Okie". Robert Noakes has estimated that at the time of his birth his father, Charley Guthrie, an Okemah land speculator, was worth around $35,000-$40,000. By the time Guthrie was a teenager, however, the family was in penury and had broken up, and he lived as a scavenger for some years before joining his father in Pampa, Texas, working as a motel manager (Noakes [c. 1980s]).

[3] In the summer of 1938 Guthrie was appointed by the *Light* to investigate the living and working conditions of migrant workers in California ("Timeline of Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)").

[4] Guthrie's column, called "Woody Sez", appeared from 1939 to 1941 (Garton 1999: CD1).

[5] First recorded in 1940.

[6] "This Land is Your Land" (Guthrie 2002c: 1.1). The song was first written in 1944.

[7] First recorded in 1941.

[8] First recorded in 1941.

[9] First recorded in 1940.

[10] First recorded in 1940.

[11] First recorded in 1941.

[12] First recorded in 1940.

[13] First recorded in 1947.

[14] First recorded in 1944.

[15] A notable exception to this rule occurs in the song "Ranger's Command", first recorded in 1944, in which the narrator asks a "fair maiden" if she will go with him to the cattle "round up". Their herd is attacked by rustlers and it is the "fair maiden" who "rose from her warm bed a battle to fight. / She rose from her warm bed with a gun in each hand / Said "Come all of you cowboys and fight for your land. / Come all of you cowboys and don't ever run / As long as there's bullets in both of your guns" (Guthrie 2002c: 2: 22).

[16] First recorded c. 1944.

[17] First recorded in 1940.

[18] First recorded c. 1946-47.

[19] First recorded c. 1944.

[20] First recorded in 1944.

[21] First recorded in 1940.

[22] First recorded in 1940.

[23] First recorded in 1940.

[24] First recorded in 1941.

[25] First recorded in 1941.

[26] For examples of rural solidarity, see especially "Tom Joad Blues – Part 2": "The Joads rode away to the jungle camp, there they cooked a stew. / And the hungry little kids of the jungle camp said 'we'd like to have some too'; / said 'we'd like to have some too'," and, in Preacher Casey's words, "'us working folks must all get together 'cause we ain't got a chance anymore; / we ain't got a chance anymore'," and in Tom Joad's closing remarks to his mother, "'Everybody

might be just-a one big soul, well it looks that-a-way to me. / Everywhere that you look in the day or night, that's where I'm a-gonna be, ma; that's where I'm a-gonna be. / Wherever little children are hungry and cry, wherever people ain't free, / wherever men are fighting for their rights, that's where I'm a-gonna be, ma; that's where I'm a-gonna be'" (Guthrie 2002c: 2.2).

[27] First recorded in 1944.

[28] First recorded in 1944. In "Keep That Oil A-Rollin", recorded in 1942, Guthrie had used the similar lyric "I'm a union man in a union war, it's a union land I'm a-fightin' for", though by 1944 it had been internationalised with "land" being replaced by "world" (Almanac Singers 2004: 14).

[29] First recorded in 1941.

[30] First recorded in 1942.

[31] Although evidence of racism is scant in Guthrie's biography, Klein documents a few instances from his early months in California (1937). Klein maintains that Guthrie was unaware of the offence his drawings of "jungle blacks" and his parody of "black English" caused to black people. When he was criticised in a letter from a black listener for singing "Nigger Blues" on his radio show, however, Guthrie went on air with an apology, reading the letter aloud, promising never to use the word nigger again and tearing all of his "nigger songs" out of his songbook. This incident is the last known case of racism in Guthrie's writings (Klein 1999: 95-97).

[32] "All colors of hands gonna work together; / All colors of eyes gonna laugh and shine; / All colors of feet gonna dance together; / When I bring my CIO to Caroline, Caroline" (*apud* Klein 1999: 360-61).

[33] There is one instance in song where Guthrie celebrates the solidarity of a united urban-rural working class lobbying the US government, "Farmer-Labor Train", first recorded in 1942 (Guthrie 2002b 2.15). While the song is about labour unionism in both town and country, however, it does not call for any blanket reforms, so my argument that Guthrie had different visions for urban and rural America is unaffected.

[34] First recorded in 1944.

[35] That Roosevelt's New Deal philosophy incorporated a sense of cooperation at its very heart is demonstrated by the text of the Bonneville Project Act which established the BPA in 1937, which reads in part, "[i]n order to ensure that the facilities for the generation of electric energy at the Bonneville project shall be operated for the benefit of the general public, and particularly of domestic and rural consumers, the administrator shall at all times, in disposing of electric energy generated at the said project, give preference and priority to public bodies and cooperatives". According to the Public Power Council, a lobby group representing the Pacific-Northwest's consumer-owned utilities, "[t]his Act created *preference*, a concept which ensured that public utilities received the power they needed at a cost-based rate" (Public Power Council 2005; emphasis in the original).

[36] In a presidential campaign speech in 1932 Roosevelt announced that "[t]he next great hydro-electric development to be undertaken by the federal government must be that on the Columbia River". Within a year work began on the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams (BPA 2000, 2).

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