Dust Bowl Migrants In The American Imagination

Charles J Shindo

Igler, The Human Tradition in California, p. 144: “Charles Schindo, in Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination (1997), contended that Steinbeck and his fellow 1930s liberals were elitists who misinterpreted the Okie experience and then imposed that leftist misinterpretation on the American consciousness.”

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Nor was ‘Dust Bowl’ the appropriate phrase. For people in Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma the drought and economic depression of the mid-Thirties were real enough, but the legendary dust storms afflicted mainly Kansas and Colorado: they brushed past Oklahoma and Texas and missed Arkansas by four hundred miles. Farm labourers’ wages in California were then the highest in the world, and demand for native-born farm workers increased as the Depression turned local feeling and legislation against Mexican immigrants. Shindo examines the images of Dust Bowl migrants in photography, fiction, film, and song and marks off the various distances between these representations and the realities of migrant lives. He shows how photographer Dorothea Lange, novelist John Steinbeck, Hollywood filmmaker John Ford, and folksinger Woody Guthrie, as well as folklorists and government reformers, sympathized with the migrants’ plight but also appropriated that experience to further their own aesthetic and ideological agendas. Shindo’s study shows us how art can dominate history in the popular mind and illuminates the ways in which artists blend aesthetics and politics to make a personal statement about the human condition.
Stories about Oklahomans and the Dust Bowl migration. Shindo, Charles J. Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997. Shindo shows how artists and reformers have dominated the public memory of the Dust Bowl migration. An important visual contrast in the photographs of Lange and Lee that document California life during the Great Depression. Gregory, James N. American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Shindo examines the images of Dust Bowl migrants in photography, fiction, film, and song and marks off the various distances between these representations and the realities of migrant lives. He shows how photographer Dorothea Lange, novelist John Steinbeck, Hollywood filmmaker John Ford, and folksinger Woody Guthrie, as well as folklorists and government reformers, sympathized with the migrants’ plight but also appropriated that experience to further their own aesthetic and ideological agendas. Shindo's study shows us how art can dominate history in the popular mind and illuminates the ways in which artists blend aesthetics and politics to make a personal statement about the human condition.