
AMERICA THEN AND NOW: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STEINBECK'S ERA AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Amit Sunilkumar Jaiswal

Crossref DOI - <https://doi.org/10.63665/rh.v7i2.26>

Abstract :

*This paper is a comparative study of the American society during the great depression, as represented in the works of John Steinbeck and the contemporary America. The novels of Steinbeck and especially *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Pearl*, are an expression of the grim truth of economic depression, unemployment, deprivation, social injustice, and the collapse of the American Dream in the 1930s. By being very realistic in his depiction of migrant workers, dispossessed farmers and the sidelined people, Steinbeck revealed the reality of structural disparities in capitalist systems and how the vulnerable groups are frequently blamed or displaced during times of crisis. This paper looks at how these same trends of economic inequality, labour exploitation, housing instability and social instability persist in defining modern day America. Although the economic situation during the Great Depression was characterized by high unemployment rates and lack of agricultural production, contemporary America experiences the growth of income inequality, corporate monopoly, student debts, homelessness, and more unstable work markets. Moreover, the research factor in the case of international students and foreign workers who have been vital in enhancing the intellectual, technological, and economic growth of the United States is also taken into account. Although these groups share the knowledge, skills, and innovation in other areas like research, science, technology, and higher education, they are sometimes politically attacked, or their immigration policies limited, or even characterized as economic competitors when the economy is uncertain. Through comparison of these two eras, the paper asserts that despite the changes in material conditions, world structures and technological setting, the underlying tensions between the rich and the poor, power and powerlessness, inclusion and exclusion are quite remarkably comparable. In a similar way that migrant workers of Steinbeck time were made the scapegoat and marginalized, the modern immigrant populations and foreign donors may feel susceptible to the social suspicion and the instability of the institutions. The social critique expressed by Steinbeck is, therefore, still applicable to explaining the current economic fears and tension on grounds of identity. The paper concludes by stating that the vision expressed by Steinbeck is not merely a historical commentary, but it is also a critical prism through which modern America, its economic disparities, labor politics, and even the question of belonging can be carefully analyzed.*

Keywords : *Economic Depression, Unemployment, Social Injustice , Labour Exploitation American Dream*

The America depicted in the works of John Steinbeck during the time of the Great



Depression is a country torn apart by economic collapse, unemployment, displacement, and intense structural injustice. Through novels like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Pearl*, Steinbeck chronicled not only the suffering of migrant workers and dispossessed farmers but also the systemic inequalities built into American capitalism. His fiction was an exercise in social criticism, which showed how economic crises heightened discrimination, widened class divisions and encouraged suspicion of the vulnerable. Nearly 100 years later, America in 2026, despite the progress of technology and world standing, still struggles with very similar patterns of economic inequality, racial discrimination, labor insecurity, housing instability, and hostility towards perceived outsiders. A comparative study of Steinbeck's time and our current era shows that although times have changed, the basic tensions between wealth and poverty, power and marginalization, and the in and outs still have striking similarities.

During the Great Depression, unemployment was high, banks foreclosed on farms and millions of Americans migrated in search of jobs. In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck described the mechanized and impersonal forces of capitalism in the metaphor of the bank as a "monster." He wrote " The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it." It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it." This statement shows how economic systems operate outside the bounds of individual morality, with the ability to destroy livelihoods with no accountability. Steinbeck was a critic of a system that put profit above human dignity. Contemporary critics have similar concerns. Economist Joseph Stiglitz makes the case in *The Price of Inequality* that extreme inequality is not a result of natural forces, but rather political choices in favor of the rich. Wealth concentration in modern America is as high as it was in the 1920s, and corporate concentration is as much like monopoly control as Steinbeck railed against.

Steinbeck's works also highlight the fragility of the American dream. In *Of Mice And Men*, George and Lennie repeat their dream of owning land "We'll have a little house and a couple of acres." This dream is a symbol of independence and security but eventually fails in the face of economic reality. Similarly, in 2026, many Americans are struggling with rising housing costs, student debt in excess of 1.7 trillion and unstable employment in the gig economy. Homeownership, which used to be central to middle-class identity, is now out of reach for younger generations. Like Steinbeck's migrants, modern workers often have insecurity despite hard work.

Racial discrimination was a predominant reality in Steinbeck's time. In *Of Mice and Men*, the Black stable hand Crooks lives isolated from white workers. This quote from Steinbeck, "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody," captures both racial segregation and emotional deprivation. The 1930s were a time of Jim Crow laws, lynchings and the exclusion of Black workers from many of the benefits of the New Deal. Historian Ira Katznelson argues in *When Affirmative Action Was White* that federal policies disadvantaged black laborers while providing special favoritism to white Americans. Thus, even relief programs perpetuated inequality.

Despite the progress made in civil rights, racial discrimination remains a reality in



modern day America. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 represented racial injustice in policing. Former President Barack Obama said “This shouldn’t be ‘normal’ in 2020 America. It can’t be ‘normal.’” His statement reflected national frustration at systemic bias. Even in 2026, studies from the US Department of Justice still indicate disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration for blacks. Scholar Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow* that “We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.” Her critique is similar to Steinbeck's awareness of the perpetuating mechanism of inequality in the form of structural systems.

Employment discrimination provides another example of continuity from one era to the next. During the Depression, the migrant workers were taken advantage of for low wages. Today, research by economists Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan shows that resumes with traditionally African American names receive far fewer callbacks than do the identical resumes with white-sounding names. Such evidence shows that implicit bias in hiring continues. Civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr said “It is cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps,” in reference to the fact that there are structural barriers that work against meritocracy.

Housing inequality also continues. Although the Fair Housing Act made redlining illegal, black homeownership rates are still significantly lower than those of white Americans. Investigations into discriminatory lending practices continue on to 2026. Sociologist Richard Rothstein believes that segregation was not accidental, but rather policy-driven and reinforces generational wealth gaps. Steinbeck's dispossessed farmers are reflected in our masses of homeless and evicted families struggling with unaffordable rents.

Beyond Black Americans, there are other American minorities who are discriminated against. Asian Americans have documented a rise of hate crimes over the past few years, and Latino Americans frequently face discrimination at work and are subjected to profiling. Muslim Americans remain suspicious in some security situations. These realities demonstrate that racial and ethnic bias is still entrenched in social structures.

Steinbeck also portrayed animosity towards internal migrants who were called "Okies." He noticed, “The migrants are needed, and they are hated.” This is a paradox of modern treatment of foreign students and skilled immigrant workers. International students help the U.S. economy billions of dollars every year, and contribute to science and technology research. Yet immigration debates often make them out to be economic threats. Visa restrictions, policy uncertainties and increased scrutiny remain in 2026, even in the absence of pandemic-related emergency measures. Universities like Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology previously challenged the federal visa policies that would have required international students to leave the country during changes in the regulations. Although those specific policies were reversed, visa delays and background checks remain a source of insecurity.

Foreign workers who are on H-1B visas are similarly vulnerable. Their legal status is often dependent on the sponsoring of the employer which creates power imbalances that lead to exploitation. Critics say that immigration programs are politicized in times of economic



downturn. Economist Giovanni Peri shows that high-skilled immigrants boost innovation and productivity, but that they have sometimes been viewed by politicians as job competitors. Entrepreneurial research indicates immigrants start a large percentage of U.S. technology startups, but suspicion exists in times of economic uncertainty.

Even without the impact of Covid-19, immigrant communities are impacted by discrimination and unstable policymaking in 2026. National security investigations sometimes target researchers from particular countries more than others. Advocacy organizations oppose profiling on the basis of national origin. The conflict between inclusion and exclusion is analogous to Steinbeck's time, when migrants were scapegoated for structural economic failures.

Literary critics of Steinbeck's era were aware of his social critique. Edmund Wilson called *The Grapes of Wrath* a great political document, despite the novel being banned for its attack on agribusiness. Similarly, modern writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates argue that systemic racism still remains foundational in American institutions, writing in *Between the World and Me*, "Race is the child of racism, not the father." His argument is consistent with Steinbeck's belief that injustice is built by systems of power rather than differences.

In a comparison of the two eras, however, it is clear that material conditions are different - modern America has technological prosperity and legal civil rights protections that were not available in the 1930s. However, structural inequality still exists. Automation and gig labor are reminiscent of mechanization that replaced farmers. Corporate monopolies are parallel to the powerful landowners Steinbeck railed against. Housing crises and wage stagnation are similar to Depression era insecurity. Racial and ethnic minorities still face discrimination and the foreign students and workers face political vulnerability despite their contribution to national development.

Ultimately, Steinbeck's social vision is beyond its time. His depiction of suffering was not just a documentation of the 1930s, but a warning of the consequences of unchecked inequality and dehumanization. Contemporary America in 2026 is still struggling with the same questions of morality: Who belongs? Who is benefited by economic growth? But who suffers the burden of crisis? Discrimination against black Americans, other minorities, foreign students and immigrant workers shows that the struggle between inclusion and exclusion is not over. Steinbeck's critique thus becomes a sort of critical prism through which modern America can examine its economic disparities, labor politics and continuing struggle to live the true American dream.

Conclusion :

In conclusion, the comparison between the America of the Great Depression as portrayed in the works of John Steinbeck and contemporary America reveals striking similarities despite the passage of time. Steinbeck exposed economic inequality, labor exploitation, racial discrimination, and the collapse of the American Dream in the 1930s. Although modern America has advanced technologically and institutionally, issues such as income inequality, housing instability, racial injustice, and discrimination against immigrants



and foreign students continue to persist. The marginalization of migrant workers in Steinbeck's era finds parallels in the social and political challenges faced by vulnerable groups today. Therefore, Steinbeck's social critique remains highly relevant, serving not only as a reflection of historical suffering but also as a powerful lens through which the economic disparities, labor politics, and questions of belonging in contemporary America can be critically examined.

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