

INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION AND SUBVERSIVE PATRIOTISM IN PEARL S. BUCK'S WARTIME WRITINGS

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When the USA entered World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Buck was undoubtedly one of the most influential intellectuals in the United States. As she started to use her celebrity status to address racial and gender stereotypes in the USA, the impact of her public interventions was enormous. During the war Buck published two widely read collections of essays: "Of Men and Women", "American Unity and Asia", and "What America Means to Me", but until now little attention has been paid to the connections between her theoretical stance and recent scholarship on American imperialism. In this paper I argue that in her attempt to remap world geography from an anticolonial viewpoint, Buck challenged the traditional meaning of words like "democracy" and "patriotism". A natural born deconstructionist, she highlighted the aporias at the heart of American democracy and exposed the transnational reach of fascist ideology.

World War II was raging when Pearl S. Buck – who was then the latest American recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature and a best-selling novelist – published three widely popular collections of speeches and writings. In these works Buck persistently attacked the denial of imperialism that innervated the discourse of American exceptionalism, and demanded that race and gender relations be understood within the context of Western colonization. *Of Men and Women* (1941) was the title of the first volume, a long treatise devoted to the analysis of the role played by gender stereotypes in the endorsement of violence which permeated American popular culture in the early 1940s. The book was soon followed by *American Unity and Asia*, a selection of speeches and articles on the events surrounding the American reaction to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; it came out in the United States in 1942, and a few months later a slightly revised version of the book was published in the United Kingdom under the title *Asia and Democracy*. In 1943 Buck completed a third collection of essays, called *What America Means to Me*. This prolific output of writings, which dealt mainly with the effect of American race and gender relations in the international context, contributed to Buck's growing prominence as a cultural mediator and political commentator during the 1940s.

Until now little attention has been paid to the connections between Buck's theoretical stance and recent scholarship on American orientalism. I will argue that in her attempt to remap global geography from the viewpoint of an emerging anticolonial gaze, Buck challenged the traditional meaning of words like "democracy" and "patriotism"; she pointed out that the manipulation of language, discernible in political propaganda, had a tendency to mirror forms of oppression inscribed in a world map defined by Western colonial powers. A natural born deconstructionist, Buck highlighted the aporias at the heart of American democracy and exposed the transnational reach of fascist ideology. She compared fascism to a virus of the mind spread indiscriminately across national borders: a virus that found its germ-carriers in profit-minded businessmen of any political and religious creed.



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Buck's emphasis on the need to adopt a point of view transcending the limits of American self-interest has often been linked to her unusual biography. A few facts can help us identify the uniqueness of her intellectual background. Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, born in West Virginia in 1892, was taken by her missionary parents to China when she was only three months old, and she remained there for most of her next forty years. Chinese was her first language, the one in which - she claimed - she mentally composed sentences before putting them to paper in English. She was still living in China when she wrote her most popular novel, *The Good Earth* (1931), but she relocated to the United States in 1932, the year she received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel and divorced her first husband, John Lossing Buck, whose surname she decided to retain for her long writing career. In 1938 she became the first American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her commercial success was also extraordinary. *The Good Earth* was the best-selling novel of both 1931 and 1932. After a Broadway adaptation, it was made into an acclaimed Hollywood film which, in 1937, attracted an estimated 42 million viewers to movie theatres around the world. In 1941 her novel *Dragon Seed* followed a similar path: it enjoyed positive critical reception, sold hundreds of thousands of copies and then became a blockbuster, featuring Katherine Hepburn playing a rather uncommon (and, according to Buck, unconvincing) Chinese farmer.

While in her novels of the 1930s Buck had tried to reorient Americans toward a more positive assessment of China, it was mainly in her non-fiction that she forcefully countered the complementary discourses of American nationalism and orientalism. Her writings display a deep awareness of the way in which the feminization of Asian Otherness provided a fundamental means to articulate the tension between idealism and imperialism exhibited by American ideology. Even though the political impact of her sympathetic representation of Chinese people in her early novels should not be underestimated, it was clearly their ethnographic interest that attracted the attention of her American readers:

[*The Good Earth*] transformed the blurred subhumans into particular human beings for whom a great and moving sympathy was evoked by a momentary sharing in the universal experiences of mating, parenthood, suffering, devotion, weakness, aspiration (Isaacs 1980: 156).

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After 1945, though, Buck's political activism became unbearable by American standards and with the beginning of the Cold War, critical approval for her work waned significantly. Ever since - despite a thorough revision of the canon brought about by almost four decades of feminist criticism - literary scholars of both sexes have neglected her work.

Intriguingly, the most extensive study devoted to Pearl Buck in the second half of the 20th century is the FBI dossier concerning her supposedly "un-American" activities. Buck's FBI file amounts to almost three hundred pages: a strong reminder for us today of her unrelenting commitment to anti-imperialist activism. The FBI discovered that during World War II Buck was involved in an astonishing array of human rights struggles; she supported organizations ranging from The India League of America to the Japanese Committee for Democracy, the National Committee for the Independence of Puerto Rico, the Council on African Affairs, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Pearl Buck was also the director of the American Council on Race Relations and she

sponsored fund-raising events in favor of the Spanish Republicans opposing Francisco Franco's Nationalist Army. Last but not least, the FBI monitored her work with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (an association founded by Jane Addams in 1915 to continue the work of the then disbanding American Anti-Imperialist League, of which Mark Twain had been vice-president from 1901 until his death in 1910).

The dossier thus offers first-hand evidence of the central role she played in American culture before being pushed aside of its literary and political history. As I went through it, I could not help noticing that the agents of the so-called FBI Book Section were exceptionally careful readers, well versed in a coherent, albeit rather unusual form, of "close-reading". It is therefore through their point of view that I set out to discuss the very peculiar features of Buck's patriotism.

1. What Un-American Meant to Them: Close-reading for the FBI

During the war, Buck's writings against racial discrimination brought about unofficial allegations of un-American activities. The FBI papers are filled with annotations which explicitly equate demands for civil rights with anti-patriotic subversion.

In 1942, together with her husband, John Walsh, Pearl Buck founded the East-West Association (EWA) with the aim to promote transnational networks supporting human rights and cultural relations. The FBI kept a watchful eye on its activities: in an unsigned report somebody in the Bureau correctly observed that the EWA had for its purpose "the (...) featuring of understanding between peoples of the world". The same FBI reader added, with revealing critical insight: "it is definitely the type of material the Communist party would capitalize on and use if possible" (FBI 2008). Herbert Mitgang – the author of *Dangerous Dossiers*, a groundbreaking account of the espionage campaign that the FBI and the CIA waged against American authors throughout the 20th century – observed that "(...) racial equality and civil liberties remained dirty and suspicious words in the FBI lexicon" (Mitgang 1988: 54). The handwritten remarks available in Buck's declassified FBI files confirm the correctness of Mitgang's conclusion. One of Buck's pamphlets, entitled *Freedom for All* (1942), found its way into her FBI report because of her warning on the international consequences of race prejudice. The booklet comprises two articles that had already been published in the collection *American Unity and Asia*, under the titles "Tinder for Tomorrow" and "Letter to the Times" (here renamed "Democracy and the Negro").

An anonymous FBI reader wrote "Sabotage" and "Lies" over a section, entitled "End of Empire", where Buck claimed that to many Asians in the United States and Britain appeared to be fighting more in order to save imperialism than to protect the freedom of all people. She was especially enraged by Winston Churchill, who had concluded his first speech in Washington, on December 26 1941, saying that "The British and American people will for their own safety and the good of all walk together in majesty, justice and peace". Much to the indignation of the FBI reader, Buck commented:

An England, a United States "walking together in majesty" can only mean to the colored peoples a formidable white imperialism more dangerous to them than anything even a victorious Japan can threaten (*Freedom*: 7).

After Churchill declared that the Atlantic Charter did not apply to the British colonial possessions, Buck frequently compared his race attitudes to Hitler's, remarking that "this war is the primary conflict between the concept of national supremacy, and this includes racial supremacy, and the concept of the equality of peoples in a

free world" (*What America*: 102). Although she was not alone in her refusal of British imperial rule, most Americans decided to wait until the end of the war to voice their qualms. Some never got to that point. In 1946, as the history of the period was already being reinterpreted, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's son, Elliot Roosevelt, published a short book entitled *As He Saw It*. In a sharp tone, using first-hand accounts, Elliot described his father's disagreements with Churchill and implied that Roosevelt saw Great Britain and its imperial system as a prospective ideological adversary to the United States. Three years earlier though, while American troops were gathering in the UK preparing for the invasion of France, Buck was one of the few American intellectuals who decried the antidemocratic premises of British colonial policy. In her articles she condemned imperialism in a clear-eyed prose that sometimes revealed an undercurrent of melancholy, a mixture of outrage and desperation for the betrayal of "real" American values that she witnessed in the wartime politics of the United States.

Buck's critique did not pass unnoticed. The groove traced under her sentences by the pen of the FBI agent gets deeper and deeper, giving away a growing annoyance. Finally in an outburst of irritation s/he writes SABOTAGE in capital letters on top of the following paragraph:

The discriminations of the American army and navy and the air forces against colored soldiers and sailors, the exclusion of colored labor in our defense industries and trade unions, all our social discriminations, are of the greatest aid today to our enemy in Asia, Japan. "Look at America," Japan is saying to millions of listening ears. "Will white Americans give you equality?" (*Freedom*: 12)

The answer was, obviously, "No", and in thunder. Indeed Buck added: "If we plan to persist as we are, then we are fighting on the wrong side in this war. We belong with Hitler. For the white man can no longer rule in this world unless he rules by totalitarian military force" (12). According to Buck the way of empire was necessarily a fascist way, no matter who practiced it. "Lies" and "sabotage" are, again, the FBI comments written all over the second part of the pamphlet: "Democracy and the Negro". In this essay Buck offers a powerful indictment of the manipulative American use of the word "democracy":

Everybody knows where nazism stands and what to expect of it. Cruel as it is, and dangerous as it is to civilization, it is less cruel, and may even be less dangerous in the end, than the sort of democracy which is not real enough or strong enough to practice what it preaches. (*Freedom*: 17)

No wonder the FBI-agent-as-critic felt the need to underline and to add question marks. The things Buck said and wrote in those years were indeed very far from the widespread rhetoric of American exceptionalism, which cast imperialism as a distinctly European phenomenon and supported the United States' emerging role as a worldwide moral and political force. On the contrary, Buck scorned American "shallow-rooted democracy" (*American Unity*: 68) urging her fellow citizens to study the history of China and to bear in mind that "there are many patterns of democracy and ours is only one, made especially to suit our needs" (69). She described the American mind as entrenched in "ignorant arrogance" (68), fixed in a pattern "which considers anything not American to be inferior – unless it be English" (68). "We (Americans) – she added – must cease to be ignorant and local-minded. The world has forced itself upon us. We are only one of his peoples, only one of the democracies" (72). As a consequence, it was the history of the Chinese way of democracy that she told her American readers in many of her writings, exposing and rejecting the implicit set of

assumptions that we now call "American Orientalism", a version of the Manifest Destiny rhetoric that perpetuated the stereotypes set by European orientalists, and shaped them in a form meant to uphold the new international power of the United States.

2. What America Meant to Her: The Fascist Way of Empire

In *American Unity and Asia* (1942), Buck reacts to the accusations of anti-Americanism, countering the widespread notion that expressions of dissent towards government policy must be read as an instance of unpatriotic behavior. Her words bear striking resemblance to contemporary debates:

[But] in wartime our scheme of government seems not to function so well – or so we are being told. We are told by many persons impatient for action in war that the form of government which safeguards us in peace is a danger in war. It is too cumbersome, we are told. It is necessary in times of war, we are told, to have one person who is responsible for a given task and in absolute command of all the materials and forces necessary to accomplish that task. Checks and counterchecks are to be removed, we are told, if we are to win a war (131).

"We are told", Buck ironically remarks. But of course we should not believe what we are told, because the idea of unity the US government is embracing is a "fascist" one. Far from being an example of weakness, the right to criticize the government becomes, in Buck's reversal, democracy's real strength. If the United States strive to achieve the sort of monolithic consensus that characterizes fascism, then they "must first become fascists and then there is no use in fighting the war. The fascists will have won it anyway. Here is the horrible subtlety of this war." (126). That horrible subtlety was the fact that the "state of exception" was on the verge of becoming a well established principle of democratic government. Clinton Rossiter's important book on *Constitutional Dictatorship* (1948) at the end of the war confirmed Buck's theory, although it contradicted its implications, claiming that dictatorship could be constitutional. In his much quoted final paragraph Rossiter wrote:

[The government of the United States] is going to be more powerful or we are going to be obliterated. Our problem is to make that power reflective and responsible, to make any future dictatorship a constitutional one. No sacrifice is too great for our democracy, least of all the temporary sacrifice of democracy itself. (Rossiter 1948: 314)

Rossiter's words today sound sadly and thoroughly grotesque – as Giorgio Agamben has remarked in his recent book on the pervasiveness of the state of exception in contemporary democracies. Yet I cite them at length because they prove, again, how consciously subversive Buck was in pointing out that the political message of totalitarianism could win anywhere, even if Hitler lost the war. The FBI dossier does not address the collection of essays *What America Means to Me*, Buck's last wartime book, so we are not granted the privilege to access the original glosses of readers specifically trained to identify un-American sentences. Yet there are many pages where one can distinctly perceive the reason why Buck was blotted out from American reading lists with the beginning of the Cold War. In 1943 she wrote: "Before our eyes this war for democracy may turn into a war for a new empire [...] And can we hope to escape fascism if there are those here speaking openly and loudly the very dogmas that brought about the fascist regime in Germany?" (*What America*: 131).

According to Buck the fascist dogmas that were seducing American culture were basically three: race prejudice, impatience with the

slow methods of democratic processes and, last but definitely not least, greed in business. Once more, Buck could not separate racism at home from colonialism abroad, but viewed both as part of a broader international dynamic of empire and she pointed out the close tie between the rise of the Western nation-states and the development of European imperial systems of economic and cultural domination. Even during the war Buck crossed the conceptual borders between the domestic and the foreign, asking her readers to confront the transnational, viral dissemination of fascist ideology. At the same time she emphasized the need for an international collectivity, reaching beyond the boundaries of colony and empire, and beyond the division between the Allied forces and the Axis.

Buck's powerful condemnation of imperialism is often expressed stressing its incompatibility with "real American identity", and by representing it as a foreign activity, an aberration from the national commitment to fight against any form of slavery.

What America Means to Me is also, as its title reveals, a patriotic manifesto of sorts. The book starts with an Emersonian praise of American natural landscape: "Here in our country the real beauty is the untamed beauty of nature, not yet in harmony with man" (198) but the absence of harmony is soon revealed to be a consequence of the unfinished project of American democracy.

Buck reminds her American readers that "Our great strides have always been taken in the cause of freedom – freedom from empire first, freedom from slavery second" (*What America*: 209). Yet the times *have* changed, so Buck reminds her reader that the war against fascism in order to be won requires the willingness to fight for an even greater goal: freedom from imperialist business. There lies the real challenge America is facing:

This precious quality, this great quality of our people, the power of human understanding (...) must never be lost. It must never be lost through the ambition of a few men to make America the new imperialist power. We must fight (...) our own ambitious men who would make of America a country to be feared and hated by those who want to be free (*What America*: 209).

Time and time again, Buck insists on the viral quality of an imperial ideology, that she considers always inevitably fascist and thus indisputably, *inherently* un-American. This fascist, imperialist virus was particularly insidious because it could spread in utter disregard of national frontiers:

Fascism lurks everywhere like the hidden germs of a deadly disease. It hides in places where we least suspect it. There are germ-carriers of fascism in every nation. Those who harbour race-prejudices are germ carriers of fascism. Those who would build up a great international power of business in the hands of the few at the expense of the people are germ-carriers of fascism. Those who dream of America as the next great imperialist power are germ-carriers of fascism. All who secretly or openly scorn the rights of human beings are germ-carriers of fascism. It is these whom we must discover and deprive of their power (*What America*: 207).

In the early 1940s, Buck's pioneering critique of American neo-imperialist attitudes triggered debates on topics that feature prominently in recent cultural analyses (Shaffer, Deshpande, Leong). Her definition of her own self was in fact based on the construction of a transnational identity which translated the discourse of patriotism into the language of race and power.

Yet Pearl Buck tried to prove – both to her American and to her international readers – that the seeming contradiction between “being American” and “being post-nationalist” could be transcended and turned into a far-reaching theoretical viewpoint.

Infused with the missionary zeal she had drawn from her parents, Buck rejected Christianity and embraced the secular “gospel of civil rights and equal opportunity”. It was a gospel that America itself had helped theorize but was sorely, painfully, unable to practice.

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