Woody Guthrie, American Radical
WILL KAUFMAN, 2011
Urbana: University of Illinois Press
Xxv + 270 pp., $29.95. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index

In Woody Guthrie, American Radical, Will Kaufman rescues Guthrie from the de-politicalized rambling troubadour of folk music legend. Epitomized by the popular version of “This Land is Your Land” with its original angry radical verses left out, this romantic de-fanged interpretation of Guthrie’s life distorts Guthrie, a man, who after his political awakening in California, was a political radical and committed Communist (although apparently not a Party member) all his life. Drawing on myriad archival material, Kaufman demonstrates the centrality of Guthrie’s radical politics to any understanding of his music or his life. An especially strong chapter, “Long Road to Peekskill,” traces the evolution from Guthrie’s youthful racism to his dedication to racial equality in later years.

Kaufman’s success in reestablishing political radicalism to an understanding of Guthrie is no small achievement since the colorful, popular image of Woody Guthrie can easily blur Guthrie’s sustained critique of capitalism. If I have questions or reservations about some of Kaufman’s arguments, they do not negate his basic interpretation. My first reservation relates to the problematic nature of Kaufman’s desire to portray Guthrie as a “link to an almost forgotten America,” (p. xvii) which he characterizes as an “American radical tradition” (p. xvii). For Kaufman, that tradition includes a variety of individuals, parties, and movements. He lists, among others, Eugene Debs, the Wobblies, the John Reed Clubs, the Communist Party of the USA (CPSUA), the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU), and the Share Croppers Union. If Kaufman’s point was that these and the others he lists (and those he does not list) have all been expressions of American radicalism, there would be no quarrel. But by trying to connect this variety to “a tradition,” he fuses important differences. Debs’ conception of a radical party was vastly different from the CPUSA or the SWP conception. The origins of the STFU lay with the Socialist Party; the Share Croppers Union’s with the Communist Party. There is not a forgotten American radical tradition; there are several different forgotten American radical traditions with distinctive features.

Guthrie’s radical tradition was that of the Communist Party. Guthrie might complain that its officials were not supportive enough of folk music as a political weapon in the struggles of labor; he might see humor in the “new situation” when the Communist Party’s views of World War II changed. But he never questioned its ideological shifts. Kaufman recognizes that Guthrie’s unquestioning acceptance of the Communist Party’s political position led him to make some embarrassing references to Stalin in his writings and songs. But he never explores what the Communist Party helped provide him, or, for that matter, what it might have prevented him from achieving. At one point, Kaufman quotes Lee Hays asserting his and Seeger’s and Guthrie’s independence of the Party line (“I didn’t pay any attention to them; I knew what I thought was
right") and says that the CPUSA was less important to creating a following for their folk-singing group, Almanacs, than “influential cultural figures on the left” (p. 72). Both claims are correct in a narrow sense. But the influential cultural figures he lists from the Left are all associated with the Communist-oriented Left; the cultural milieu of the Communist movement provided an audience for the Almanacs. And the process of accepting the Communist analysis of the world was not a matter of people like Hays, Seeger, and Guthrie accepting a “line,” but of internalizing the essentialness of the Soviet Union to building a progressive world. Once one internalized this, then its analysis of the world became paramount. For Guthrie, the Communist Party provided an ideological base that limited the range of his radicalism, but gave it a stability, a stability that, one suspects, he needed emotionally. Kaufman calls Guthrie an “obsessive thinker and fitful political strategist” (p. xxi). True, but there was a framework for his political thoughts and strategies that he would not or could not go beyond.

Kaufman’s great strength is in documenting the political Guthrie. At the beginning he frankly acknowledges Guthrie’s unattractive personal attributes. And throughout he notes personal qualities like self-righteousness and habits like creating his own mythic past. On the whole, however, the work pays little attention to Guthrie’s personal life—aside from his early youth. His illness only really enters the book toward the end. There is no discussion of any length of the development of the Huntington’s disease and how, even at an early stage, it might have affected his political rhetoric or his whole personality. It seems clear that this choice is made because of Kaufman’s desire to recover and reassert the political Guthrie. Given his aims, the choice may be warranted. Yet one wonders if one can fully understand the political Guthrie without greater integration of the personal and the political.

Some of Kaufman’s best analysis is found where he corrects Guthrie’s own self-mythologizing in order to establish the development of his politics. Guthrie often transformed his own history so that he was a proletarian, an exploited migrant worker who had fought labor’s struggles from the start. Kaufman understands that there was always a kind of populism, an instinctive distrust of and dislike of arbitrary authority. This kind of populist radicalism developed under the influence of experience and associates into the radicalism of the Communist movement. Kaufman argues persuasively that this evolution was not a response to reading political theory or developing any systematic political thought. He understands the “instinctive nature” of Guthrie’s radicalism: outrage at racism, fascism, and the specificities of capitalist exploitation. Communism may have given him an ideological explanation. But the strength of Guthrie’s radicalism lay in his indignation over specific injustices and the vivid, moving images that expressed it in song.

It is unfortunate that Guthrie’s novel *The House of Earth* was not discovered and published until after Kaufman’s book was published. It would have been interesting to see how Kaufman would have integrated it into Guthrie’s communist radicalism. Begun in the late 1930s, written in the 1940s, and published in 2013, it tells the story of a couple struggling to survive in a ramshackle house in
the Texas panhandle during the dust storms of the thirties. There is plenty about suffering, but despite expressions of anger at bankers and positive references to rebellion, the tone is far different from any communist proletarian literature. Tike and Ella May Hamlin have an almost mystical faith in the adobe house as a solution to their plight. Tike, early in the novel, has an almost trance-like mystical experience where he palpably feels the oneness of himself with all surrounding creatures and objects. And Ella May has an analogous dream of oneness later in the novel. It is a mystical sense of an alternative to the bitterness and exploitation of their lives. But it is not the “scientific socialism” that Guthrie publically embraced.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14743892.2015.1013310

Italian Women and International Cold War Politics, 1944–1968
WENDY POJMANN, 2013
New York: Fordham University Press
viii + 234 pp. $35.00

In her most recent book, Wendy Pojmann analyzes the particular national and international position of two major Italian women’s associations, the socialist-communist Unione Donne Italiane (UDI) and the lay Catholic Centro Italiano Femminile (CIF). Pojmann focuses on the generation of the so-called “Daughters of the Resistance” (p. 17), considering the evolution of both associations between 1944 and 1968. In Italy, the distinct ideological contrast between the two organizations coincided with the continuous political tension between the opposition party Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) and the governing Democrazia Cristiana (DC). On an international level as well, UDI and CIF participated in two separate women’s movements: the pro-Soviet Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the Catholic organization World Movement of Mothers (WMM).

Pojmann points out that UDI and CIF had indeed different conceptions of the position of women in modern society, which coincided largely with their ideological beliefs. The Unione Donne Italiane promoted socialist and communist labor ideals, and accordingly portrayed women as workers rather than as mothers. As a consequence, access to all professional careers, equal pay for equal work, and protection of women workers were among the leftist association’s main concerns. Unlike UDI, the Centro Italiano Femminile idealized the American welfare state and its corresponding model of the middle-class, suburban housewife. The lay Catholic organization’s campaigns