

Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*

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CALIFORNIA'S FIELDS ABLAZE

This massive volume, the labour of a near-lifetime, is certainly the best workplace study of labour in North America published in a generation. Only the magnum scholarship of the late David Montgomery, dean of the field, can rival it, and Montgomery stopped at the early twentieth century, when efforts to fend off the breakdown of skills had been overwhelmed by Henry Ford and his generation of production-line taskmasters. Frank Bardacke takes on something far closer to the present day, at turning points of labour history whose impact is still visible today. No history of California, no history of Mexican-American life and no history of agricultural production can be written again without the insights contained in these pages.

In any account of the United Farm Workers, there is ample room for recrimination and bitterness; but Bardacke shows none of that in his own spirited history. The story of the UFW is inseparable from that of Cesar Chavez, the most magnetic race leader in the mid-to-late twentieth century after Martin Luther King, Jr. Like the latter a champion of non-violence, Chavez was seemingly predestined to bring down the movement with his own failures—although it would perhaps be more accurate, and certainly more generous, to say that it was the failure of the movement that brought down Chavez. The long odds against institutional success for the largely Mexican and Mexican-American agrarian workforce, owning nothing but their labour, made the charismatic super-leader's implosion likely if not inevitable.

Bardacke, who comes from a bohemian family background, was a civil-rights activist in the early 60s, then a campus leader at Berkeley; later he was

one of the many activists and counsellors who staffed the GI coffee houses and later still an agricultural worker: he spent 'six seasons in the fields between 1971 and 1979' harvesting broccoli, lettuce and celery in Salinas, California. He is said to have helped introduce the long-handled hoe in Watsonville, before leaving the fields to become a local teacher. Bardacke has too fine a feeling for the subject to reduce UFW history to an aspect of Cesar Chavez's biography, as many have in the past. Chavez shares the stage with many farm workers whose stories the author tells, focusing on the character of their work, the structure of their crews, their left political backgrounds in Mexico—all of which had major impacts on the union. The differing ways in which the work was done, for example, especially in lettuce and grapes, gave farm workers involved in those crops different measures of power; these were a major factor in the union's two-decade-long struggle with agribusiness and in the final debilitating battle within the union. Moreover, the *agrarista* politics the workers brought with them from Mexico played an essential part in building the union in the fields, and were a major point of difference with the Catholic Social Action ideology of Chavez and many of the top union staffers.

Except for two bitter years spent in the Navy in 1944–46, Chavez—a second-generation Mexican-American whose family lost its small store during the Depression and ended up working the fields—also picked crops until he found a new career for himself. Educated and trained in line with conservative Catholic ideas of service, sacrifice and militant resistance to 'foreign' doctrines such as Socialism or Communism, he could rally not only farm workers and a small army of dedicated radical idealists, but also Catholic figures, from bishops to priests, who had long shied away from progressive movements out of fear of a Communist taint. He could even appeal to rising liberal celebrities like Robert Kennedy, who carried a sordid history of collaboration with the FBI and the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Behind this seemingly personal saga lay a broader activist history. Notable contributions were made here by the *sui generis* Community Service Organization (CSO) and its *savant*, Saul Alinsky. A talented organizer from New Deal days, Alinsky had centred his activity upon communities of non-European descent involved in Chicago's meatpacking industry, and rose in influence with the success of militant, interracial unions. He survived the postwar repression and decisively separated himself from the Left's remnants by arguing that his kind of community reform was the best protection against the advances of Communism. As such, he gained influence and patronage from sections of the Catholic Church, positioning himself to create (among a considerable series of projects) the CSO, funded mainly

by liberal philanthropists whom he wooed. The CSO, then, exemplified the Alinsky model by which 'organizers' changed communities by stirring people into a sustained mobilization.

From the early 50s onwards, the CSO aimed to bring Californian citizens of Hispanic heritage into the mainstream political process just as much as into the union movement. Here and there, mainly in the inland counties, the CSO did indeed combat endemic police brutality, successfully demand more social services in the *barrios*, and help people to become citizens and to vote, among other achievements. Building a machine meant working at close quarters with Church activists intent on 'out-organizing the Communists' and other secular radicals whose earlier hard work had earned them residual influence. Increasing the participation and influence of Chicanos within the parishes, usually against the wishes of the existing conservative leadership, was no small matter. It also demanded taking on one gigantic, complicated issue: the Bracero Program.

Faced with wartime labour shortages, the US government had contracted with its Mexican counterpart in 1942 to import temporary workers by the tens of thousands each year, mainly into Texas and California. This itinerant population, lacking any rights, abused and underpaid, depressed the wages of resident farm workers, making the Program a divisive political question—nowhere more so than in California. Ending the Program, and thus excluding this Mexican-based workforce, was one of the first major goals of CSO, supported by liberal Democrats except those on the payroll of the agribusiness lobbies. Young Cesar Chavez, a quick study as CSO organizer, was ideally placed to benefit from the sympathy of the new Kennedy administration and especially Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg, an experienced Cold Warrior with wide intelligence contacts. By this time, US foreign policy all but demanded bringing Hispanics and African Americans into the body politic, especially as Democratic voters.

The Bracero issue also raised a recurrent question for the labour mainstream: inclusion or exclusion. The first president of the AFL-CIO (and Goldberg's close ally) George Meany aggressively defended the existence of whites-only union locals on the basis of their rightful autonomy; this reflected the values of AFL founder Samuel Gompers, who had made his name back in the 1880s lobbying against Chinese immigration. These leaders had treated the cross-border racial egalitarianism of the old Industrial Workers of the World and the more recent Communist-influenced CIO—until its purge of 'Red' unions—as not only unwanted but dangerous. Although the Bracero Program was ended in 1964, a fundamental aspect of the larger problem remained: illegal immigrants slipping across the border and into the fields, more by the 60s–70s than ever before. Building a movement

that included but also transcended unionism, and in the process raising the profile of Mexican-Americans, Chavez and his lieutenants established their own strategy of exclusionism, backing expulsion of undocumented Mexican immigrants. Not until the mid-90s would the AFL-CIO shift ground and welcome them as fellow working people.

Meanwhile, liberal activists of the 60s, in particular large sections of the California Democratic Party, viewed the rising Chavez as a godsend. He could deliver votes. He could also create a sensation of devotion to *la causa* not only for himself and his farm-worker devotees, but for the idealists who came from far and wide to gather behind him, live in near-poverty, lose themselves for a time in something that felt like the great CIO drives of the 1930s or the Socialist movement of the Eugene Debs days. Never mind that the United Farm Workers, growing into a social force beyond the CSO, wobbled between solidarity and exclusion, linked as it was to both ends of US labour history, radical and conservative. For the wider public, Chavez's persona so much represented the Chicano movement's coming of age that others further to the left—anti-war activists and, by the end of the 60s, Chicano 'Brown Power' militants—actually gained something from his more cautious and conservative efforts. His triumph and tragedy might indeed be measured in his courageous crossing of assorted lines, facing uneven odds on all sides, always unsure of himself and what might be feasible.

Chavez was buoyed up, his rise made possible, by the dedication of a large cadre drawn from Mexican immigrants and their descendants, but also from various corners of the Left, from generic radical to Communist and Trotskyist, who all gave themselves to the movement and, without raising complaints openly, largely to Chavez himself. One of the great strengths of *Trampling Out the Vintage* is the care with which it treats such circles, as evidenced in the extent to which the book's detail has been drawn from, and its facts checked by, veterans of these struggles. This enables it to make sense—as almost no other work of recent labour history does—of the dialectic between leadership, middle-level leadership and rank-and-file. Figures like fiery grassroots organizer and sometime CSO staffer Dolores Huerta and civil-rights veteran Marshall Ganz, not to mention assorted AFL-CIO progressives, Old Reds and so on, receive sustained attention without romanticization; quite an accomplishment.

If a weakness might be spotted here, it is an under-usage of the labour historian's usual source, the newspaper (in this case *El Malcriado*, appearing in 1964 and almost always to the left of Chavez), and the more recently favoured source—the music, theatre and ritual of a social movement, especially strong but difficult to analyse in this case. Bardacke's attention in this quarter goes to theatre, because of its influence but also its character, in contrast to the cabaret style familiar to Left events from the Popular Front

onwards. El Teatro Campesino, with its evolving presentation to semi-literate audiences, seems to have been equally close to *commedia dell'arte* as to Mexican *carpa* or circus shows, as well as perhaps European medieval feast-day spectacles; but it was also extremely sophisticated and open to rapid adaptations. As Bardacke describes it in one of the colourful passages that make this book so inviting:

from the *commedia*, [Mime Troupe organizer Luis] Valdez took masks, which were not typical in the *carpa*, and made a significant addition of his own: signs hung around the necks of the actors that identified the archetypes they represented. Thus, no theatrical time had to be wasted identifying Patroncito (the Little Boss), Huelguista (the Striker), Coyote (the wily labour contractor) and Esquirol (the strike-breaker), and the actors could immediately proceed to a comic representation of the power relationships between the various characters, which was the heart of the Teatro's improvisations and *actos*.

This vibrancy gave the movement a heady optimism that belied its capacity to surmount the real obstacles to gaining contracts. Agribusiness was both powerful and flexible. Divisions between Mexican, Mexican-American and Filipino farm workers were difficult to overcome. The union's autocratic culture and top-down organization made it hard to build and consolidate power in the fields. Without functioning union locals, farm workers were unable to elect their fellow workers to positions on the UFW staff, and the leadership thereby found itself isolated from the actual lives and problems of its membership. The union had scant ability and little interest in nurturing the kind of rank-and-file power that could have sustained a long-term challenge to the California growers. In the face of these odds, the name of Delano, an otherwise unnotable village in the San Joaquin Valley, became a magical word cutting across the generations of the Old and New Left, and across religious and secular lines. The march from Delano to Sacramento in 1966, a banner of the Virgin at its head, picking up field hands as it approached small towns, looked to be a crusade of the powerless learning their own power. With the Okies and Arkies—who had fled impoverished Oklahoma and Arkansas in the Depression years—practically gone, the themes of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Woody Guthrie's associated class-struggle hymn nevertheless seemed to have come to life again.

Chavez found an apparent answer to farm workers' weaknesses, perhaps too much of an answer, in the Boycott campaigns. Not quite legal, not quite illegal in the terms of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act limiting labour's use of collective action against employers, the Grape Boycott of the 60s-70s swept along the country's liberals—emphatically including sections of the labour movement and clergy closed to any near-Communist cause—into enthusiastic community efforts. A memory from the mid-60s, predating

the anti-war movement and the counter-culture, both of which stoked the culture wars, this recollection now grows so distant we forget the power of its appeal at the time. With widening support came the deification of Chavez himself. Farm workers rapidly became, at least for many, more symbol than reality. Like blues singer Leadbelly placed atop a pile of cotton by showmen seeking to win a Popular Front audience in the late 1930s, erstwhile field hands were presented in faded clothes and tutored on behaviour as they toured to speak to roaring crowds of supporters across the East and the Midwest. The farm-worker movement or cause thus swiftly outgrew the struggling union itself.

And still, as Bardacke recounts in scrupulous detail, the complexity of events on the ground often defied the wider drift. Even as the UFW lent a hand to the authorities in hunting 'illegals', even as Chavez talked darkly of 'conspiracies' against his leadership, the UFW used its political clout to pull Governor Jerry Brown into shepherding through some of the strongest pro-labour legislation in the US. In 1977, faced with their own internal problems, including the disappearance of their president Jimmy Hoffa, the Teamsters—the main competing union—essentially left the fields. This victory arrived, it seems, too late for a decisive sweep in large areas of produce, and it may have emboldened a troubled Chavez into a series of calamitous decisions.

Chavez's insistence upon returning to the grape vineyards, where the UFW was losing ground, rather than the vegetable fields, where they had barely begun to consolidate their gains, was a disaster. It was also the kind of decision likely to be made by a charismatic leader who had ceased to listen to advice from below, even from some of his most faithful lieutenants. He turned upon everyone he mistrusted, conducting a sweeping purge of those with left-wing credentials, practically dissolving the boycott operation and finalizing certain destructive changes within the internal dynamics of the UFW. The purge, and the consolidation of a personality cult, can be explained in many ways, but were epitomized in the strangest development of all, beginning in the mid-70s. Chavez, hard-pressed and inclined to paranoia, turned to group dynamics and the practices of Synanon, a self-help group developed in the Los Angeles area for drug abusers during the 50s–70s that morphed curiously into a leader-dominated sect, complete with its own church. Chavez carefully prescribed its methods only for the UFW leadership cadre of several hundred, who were set to practice among themselves 'The Game' of collectively breaking down one personality at a time, diminishing and then presumably rebuilding his ego. Never explained to ordinary farm-worker members, let alone used among them, The Game never succeeded in creating the regime of unquestioned leadership that Chavez apparently intended. More of the faithful, who had already put up with so much, now

walked away. In a sense, the compulsory game-playing complemented Chavez's personal attraction to the Marcos family of the Philippines: in 1977, seeking to shore up his standing among Filipino workers in the US, he went to Manila as the dictator's honoured guest. As with many other aspects of Chavez's character, to call this bad personal judgement would be too simple, and Bardacke is not inclined toward psychoanalytic interpretations.

By the end of the 70s, with the social movements and abundant idealism of the earlier decade slipping into the past, things continued to fall apart. Investigative journalists discovered assorted pockets of corruption within the union, as the campaign among vegetable workers, abandoned earlier, now appeared increasingly Sisyphean, and the boycott apparatus could not be rebuilt. Soon Ronald Reagan was president, and Republican George Deukmejian was California governor. Growers steadily won back fields lost to unionization, even as fresh—or more highly publicized—information on the effects of pesticides on farm workers offered shocking evidence of corporate crime and consumer dangers. Chavez, past sixty, made one desperate last fast, thirty-six days long. Among the celebrities paying homage were Martin Sheen, Eddie Albert, Edward James Olmos and Robert Blake. It was, in its Hollywoodesque quality, one last mirror to the Popular Front solidarity effort of the 1930s and 40s with and among Mexican-Americans in California—and in that sense, a mirror also of the Left that young Chavez and his allies had determinedly rejected. Time had, in any case, run out on another generation's effort. Chavez died in 1993, and efforts to revive the UFW have not succeeded.

The depth of Bardacke's insight, as developed within the pages of *Trampling Out the Vintage*, is extraordinary. These pages contain the fruit of hundreds of field reports, interviews, stories told as to a close friend or trusted comrade. They also contain priceless accounts of the many UFW staffers and volunteers who made the movement possible, and whose efforts are among the most important of any Left activism from that era. Bardacke is the only person who could tell these stories. His is a remarkable achievement.