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Exploitation, Class Struggle, and Capitalist Ideology in John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*

الاستغلال، الصراع الطبقي، والإيديولوجيا الرأسمالية في رواية «المعركة المشبوهة» لجون شتاينبك

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Introduction

In Dubious Battle addresses the plight of migrant farmers in California during the 1930s, a time marked by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. These farmers, who had lost their land, were forced to sell their labor to corporate agricultural companies. During this period, jobs were scarce. Steinbeck depicts the exploitation of these workers in corporate farms, illustrating the unequal distribution of wealth and the concentration of resources in the hands of a few individuals whom he describes as fascists in his letters. For Steinbeck, the policies of fascist capitalists aimed at the farmers gave the communists an opportunity to spread chaos in the U.S. This chaos is manifested in labor strikes, such as the Peach and Cotton Strikes that took place in California in 1933.

Although Steinbeck explored the struggle between landlords and migrant farmers, some critics interpreted him as a Marxist advocating for class struggle and revolt. Literary critics and commentators often labeled him a radical or even a communist. For instance, John J. Han writes,

“Freeman Champney, among others, considers Steinbeck a pro-communist based on a sociological reading of works such as *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*” (2004: 21).

William Rose, in *The Saturday Review*, adds,

“The author’s attempt has been to bring out the heroic motives in action in those whom the newspapers denounce as ‘reds’” (Williams 2013: 119).

However, in the Marxist doctrine, true Marxists are those who attribute exploitation to the capitalist system rather than to individual’s shortcomings, such as laziness.

In *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck associates the exploitation and deprivation of the migrant farmers with capitalism, while simultaneously attributing it to

a lack of individual hard work and laziness. In doing so, he obscures the true source of their suffering: a capitalist system in which the capitalists, through their pursuit of profit, dominate the economic and social order.

This paper applies the theories of Karl Marx and Georg Lukács to analyze how Steinbeck downplays the totality of class struggle and economic forces behind the exploitation of the proletariat. By attributing the cause of deprivation to individual laziness and not to capitalism as a system, Steinbeck distracts from the historical role of class struggle in the rise of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, by portraying revolts as futile, he undermines the potential for systemic change. Therefore, this article sheds light on how Steinbeck, through his narrative, contributes to maintaining the passivity and false consciousness of the working class, while stifling alternative protests and the influence of the communist movement in the fictional Torgas Valley—an area inspired by the Tagus Ranch in California, known for its migrant worker strikes during the Great Depression.

1. A Marxist Reading of the Source of Exploitation and Destitution

1.1 Commodification versus the Absence of Individual Hard Work

In some instances, we find that Steinbeck, in *In Dubious Battle*, attributes exploitation and deprivation to the landlords and their system. In the novel, the author sheds light on the struggle between capital and labor, illustrating how the fascist landlords dominate the entire region and exploit the migrant farmers in California during the 1930s.

As the landlords cast their control over the economy and the political sphere, the farmers find themselves forced to sell their labor power. This idea is central to Marxist theory, where capitalism is seen as a system that transforms human beings and their labor into commodities exploited by the dominant class. As Lukács argues:

[...] the objectification of their labour-power into something opposed to their total personality (a process already accomplished with the sale of that labour-power as a commodity) is now made into the permanent ineluctable reality of their daily life. Here, too, the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system. (1968: 90)

The farmers lost their land and came to work in the agricultural sector. Old Dan is a migrant worker selling his labor power, along with other farmers, to corporate companies. Steinbeck shows how the apple pickers have limited

options. The apple fields are the only place left for them to work. In one passage, Mac states that the apple orchards in the Torgas Valley are “owned by a few men” (43). In his letters, later collected under the title *A Life in Letters*, Steinbeck clarifies who these few men are — those who own almost everything: I must go over into the interior valleys. There are five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry, but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them, with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget. (1975: 131)

What Steinbeck means by “fascists” is the extreme version of capitalists. These capitalists exploit the migrant workers in the Torgas Valley. Georg Lukács once compared the relationship between the worker and the owner to that of “the spider and the fly in its web” (qtd. in Nineham 2010: 11). As laborers become private property, they are reduced to a commodity devoid of their humanity. The boss, then, can use, sell, or abandon them at will. The character Jim reflects this idea when he comments that his father “reduced his movements to a machine-like perfection” (65).

In the novel, it is shown that even small growers, like Mr. Anderson, are also under the threat of the land barons. Thus, in *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck offers an unflattering image of the agricultural system in the U.S. and openly criticizes the capitalists, arguing that their policies distort the image of the U.S. as a country of equal opportunities. Steinbeck depicts how the large growers double their wealth through various means. The fascist landowners take control of vast expanses of land and force farmers to labor in the apple fields for long hours in exchange for low wages that do not cover even the basic necessities of life. The landowners take the picked apples, further alienating the farmers from the products of their labor. In the introduction to *Capital I*, Ernest Mandel summarizes Marx’s concept of alienation:

[...] the needs of the worker as a producer and a citizen – his need to develop a full personality, to become a rich and creative human being, etc.; these needs are brutally crushed by the tyranny of meaningless, mechanical, parcellized work, alienation of productive capacities and alienation of real human wealth. (Marx 1990: 72)

Dan works from dawn to dusk, despite the fact that he is an old man. The rickety ladder that Dan and the other farmers use to climb the apple trees symbolizes the neglect of basic worker safety and the low investment in tools by the owners. Dan has worked all his life, but the low wages and the lack of

opportunities due to corporate farming prevent him from ever owning his own land and enjoying a prosperous life. The company store charges inflated prices for food and clothing. This exposes how the capitalists work to maximize their profits, while farmers remain exploited in the process of wealth accumulation. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács explains that under capitalism, social relations and actions are often treated like those between objects. Every action is calculated to meet the needs of the capitalists. (1968: 167-168)

As demonstrated, one can extract from *In Dubious Battle* the way the exploitation and deprivation of the farmers are tied to the system. However, the novel also presents instances where this exploitation is linked to laziness, an absence of individual hard work, and a lack of self-reliance. The American Dream convinced many people that the U.S. was the land of equal opportunities, where anyone who worked hard could achieve success. This ideology is based on the notion of individual effort, implying that in cases of failure, people must blame themselves, not the system. This idea, arguably, helps to neutralize the anger of the workers by shifting the responsibility onto them.

Steinbeck amplifies this ideology in *In Dubious Battle*, where he promotes self-reliance and individual hard work as the solution to the farmers' plight. In a scene where Dan delivers a speech in honor of Joy's death, he positions himself as a leader guiding the younger generation, blaming them for being too lazy to work hard and improve their situation. For Steinbeck, the farmers' preference for joining the communists instead of working hard suggests that they fail to realize that their own effort, rather than class struggle, holds the key to improving their lives. Therefore, *In Dubious Battle* can be interpreted as suggesting that the farmers are exploited because they do not exert sufficient effort to change their living conditions, relying instead on the hope that communism will solve their problems.

1.2 What is behind this Contradiction from a Marxist Lens

Steinbeck does not fully relate exploitation and deprivation to the capitalists or to the system of corporate companies, but he also relates it to the laziness of the farmers. Even though he, like the Marxists, exposes the way corporate farming exploits the workers and inhibits them from ameliorating their financial status, in other instances, he shows how the farmers are to blame for their situation. Dan, for instance, accuses the farmers of thinking that the younger generation is too lazy to achieve wealth. However, Dan fails to fully relate the source of the farmers' suffering to corporate farming,

which, according to the novel, condemns the poor to remain deprived. As his life and his vision are fragmented due to the nature of the system, he contradicts himself without realizing that he himself has spent his life working hard for many years, yet he failed to achieve upward mobility. From a Marxist standpoint, Dan's conclusion about the situation of the workers allows Steinbeck to manipulate the opinion of the masses. Just like Dan, the proletariat is indirectly pushed to believe that the blame falls entirely on them. Steinbeck transmits a blurred vision of the political, economic, and social situation. Thus, matters are not understood in their totality. For the Marxists, relating exploitation and deprivation to the lack of self-reliance and not completely to the capitalists and the nature of their system is just a technique to extend the false consciousness of the working class. In fact, this idea of individual hard work and blaming oneself for not achieving prosperity is related to the American Dream, which is accused of being a capitalist narrative used to restrain the working class from revolting against the few individuals who own the wealth of the country. In his argument about the phalanx, Steinbeck praises the individual and condemns the group. In the novel, the group is manifested in the strikers. From a Marxist standpoint, instead of exposing and revealing how capitalist narratives affect the consciousness of men, Steinbeck reinforces their effect.

2. A Marxist Reading of the Source of Violence during the Strike

2.1. The Policy of the Landlords and the Behavior of the Phalanx

In some passages, Steinbeck shows how violence stems from the capitalists' policies, and in others, he relates it to the biological factors of the phalanx.

With the Depression, the Growers' Association reduces the wages of the farmers. This infuriates the workers, especially with the instigation of the Communist Party. When the farmers refused to regain their work, the landowners replaced them with others. This led to more violence. The capitalists exert their influence on law enforcement agencies. The vigilantes are shown to kill and injure numerous strikers. The novelist highlights the horrific scenes of the heavy artillery used to repress the strikers.

Steinbeck also relates the source of violence to biological factors that transform individuals when they are in a group, or what Steinbeck calls "the phalanx". In the case of *In Dubious Battle*, this is manifested in the strike. In his theory of the phalanx (1933), Steinbeck discusses the changing behav-

ior of individuals when they are in a group. In his letter to Georg Albee, he writes about the phalanx:

You are dealing with a creature whose nature you cannot know intellectually, of whose emotions you are ignorant. Whose reasons, directions, means, urges, pleasures, drives, satieties, ecstasies, hungers, and tropisms are not yours as an individual. (1976: 39)

In *In Dubious Battle*, when the farmers organize themselves into a group, they transform into a single unit. They lose their rationality and start to act like animals as they are controlled by biological factors. For Dr. Burton, the mob wipes out the individual, and it is hard to predict the behavior of the mob or even control it. He adds that violence leads to violence. The Communist Mac considers that the group can achieve the goal aimed for and can avoid violence if it is properly guided. During the strike, the strikers show anti-social behaviors. They follow the guidance of Mac without questioning his decisions. When they see the corpse of Joy, the sight of blood ignites their sense of fighting. In one passage, Mac informs Jim: "Didn't I tell you? They need blood. That works. That's what I told you". (231) Knowing the effect of blood on the mob, Mac exploits it again at the end of the novel. He uses the corpse of Jim, whose face is distorted and covered in blood, to rekindle the strikers' sense of revolt.

Steinbeck gives the group animal traits. For example, London's eyes resemble that of a "gorilla" (57), denoting violence. Steinbeck even uses the beliefs of some workers to transmit his idea of the violent side of the group. In one passage, Dan describes to Jim the anger of the group and how they use their teeth to bite, denoting that they possess animal traits. The novel shows the transformation of Jim and how he gradually starts to favor violence due to the influence of the phalanx. For him, "all great things have violent beginnings" (189). For Dr. Burton, the phalanx leads to violence. He states:

"...the end is never very different in its nature from the means...
you can only build a violent thing with violence" (189).

Mac informs London that hunger controls men and makes them do anything. In the mob, this source of stimulus turns men into creatures capable of facing heavy artillery. Thus, for the novelist, the group reduces men to an animal level, unable to think critically. Even though the strikers increasingly fall into devastation, they continue to follow the orders of the Communist Mac.

For the novelist, the Communists are unable to lead the strikers, notwithstanding that the leaders are shown to have read several books about revolt and freedom. Jim, for example, has read:

“Plato’s *Republic*, and *Utopia*, and Bellamy, and like Herodotus and Gibbon and Macaulay and Carlyle and Prescott, and like Spinoza and Hegel and Kant and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. He even made me read *Das Kapital*.” (29-30)

The Communist Mac is aware that the workers in a group may lose their rationality, but we get the sense that he underestimates its true power. This is seen later on in his comments. Mac notices how Jim seems to be devoured by the phalanx due to his behavior and mystical ideas, where he seems to worship the radical cause. At the end of the novel, the strike appears to fail and come to an end. Numerous strikers lose their lives while others starve and regret joining the strike. This indicates Steinbeck’s position on labor strikes and Communist strike leaders. The term “communism”, for Marx, means “[...] abolition of private property” (Marx and Engels 1998: 22). However, it is important to mention the great dispute between the two ideologies: communism and capitalism. In the time when Steinbeck wrote his novel, communism was also a term associated with the USSR and was seen as a power against the capitalist USA. In the novel, the newspaper reports the strikers as “fruit tramps, led and inspired by paid foreign agitators” (215). These foreign agitators are probably the Russians. Accordingly, I argue that Steinbeck relates Marx’s communism, its connection to the revolution of the proletariat, and the policy of the Soviet Union, arguing that they use the working class to instigate chaos in the U.S.

2.2 The Image of the Strike in Relation to the Policy of the Capitalists and the Effect of the Phalanx

In any case, whether relating violence to the capitalists or to the biological factors awakened by the effect of the phalanx, it will always lead to giving the strike an unflattering image. It transmits the idea that strikes cannot lead to change, as there will be violence; if not from the side of the capitalists, it will be from the violent side of the group. In *In Dubious Battle*, the strike instigators are not fully educated about the behavior of the phalanx, a theory that has its roots in the crowd behavior theories of the 19th century. Steinbeck, like the anti-Marxist intellectuals, seems to be influenced by this view. Steinbeck uses *In Dubious Battle* to make men experience the outcomes of labor strikes and to portray the behavior of the communists as he projected them. He presented his view of how the strike cannot lead to social change. Thus, for him, there is no system that can emerge through revolt and class struggle.

In Marxism, however, what Steinbeck is doing is suppressing class struggle. This makes the masses believe that capitalism is the only system that can rule, and following the lead of the communists and going on strike would lead to chaos.

For Marx, communism is the substitute for capitalism and the step that is supposed to come after a socialist state. As all Europeans had considered communism a powerful ideology, the communists have a burden to spread their views and demands. Thus, Marx called for a revolution. (Marx and Engels 1998: 14-34) Labor strikes are one of the methods used by the followers of Marx. Steinbeck, in his novel, has dealt with this as a theme, showing how he is dead set against this social movement. Instead of praising the communists, he portrayed them as manipulators who exploit the plight of the working class.

“The bourgeoisie had concealed the true situation, the state of the class struggle.” (Lukács 1968: 224) The working class is ignorant of the historical process. Steinbeck exposes the class struggle between the two classes and shows how the proletariat class breaks the strong effect of commodification, but at the same time, he distorts the image of the strike, which, for the Communist Party, is a strong movement that can reduce exploitation. For the Marxists, exposing the struggle and then giving a negative report about the strike extends the false consciousness of the working class. It helps the capitalists to ensure the consent of the workers to the rules and laws of the system. Accordingly, class struggle is concealed.

In *In Dubious Battle*, the farmers acquire class consciousness before the rise of the strike. After that, they experience a violent social movement. This influences the opinion of the farmers and leaves them thinking that protests will lead to affliction and misery. This conceals other revolts. In Marxism, it is due to the process of constant struggle that the proletariat class reaches true class consciousness and realizes the powerful influence of the ideological and repressive state apparatus. Thus, the manipulation and the policies of the capitalists come to light. Steinbeck, in his letters, calls for the interference of the government against the communists. In Marxism, however, class struggle is central. Social change is to be reached through labor revolt, and promoting otherwise is a deviation from the Marxist doctrine.

Conclusion

This research paper shows how in *In Dubious Battle* the source of exploitation is not solely related to capitalism and how violence is, again, not linked directly to the capitalists only. The novel transmits a sense that revolts will not lead to a shift in systems. This tendency hides the fact that the bourgeois themselves established their system through revolts and struggle. For the Marxists, this is a capitalist tendency and a true deviation from the Marxist

doctrine. Steinbeck works to prevent the influence of the Communist Party, who use labor strikes to impose their power in the U.S. For the followers of Marx, not relating exploitation and deprivation solely to the capitalists prevents men from seeing matters in their totality. It makes them unable to fathom or detect the source of their suffering. This extends the false consciousness of the working class. This takes us to what Georg Lukács believes about modernist works, arguing that it is a product of a reified consciousness. Thus, it holds contradictions, and the historical totality will be transmitted in fragments. It renders man

“unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself. It is also impossible for him to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence.”

There is a

“negation of history... The hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own existence. There is not for him — and apparently not for his creator — any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon.” (1969: 21)

Notwithstanding, I was able to extract some instances where exploitation, deprivation, and suffering are related to capitalism, I argue that Steinbeck never meant the radical change of the system due to his position against the communists.

Besides, the novelist's portrayal of the strike and the violence that stems from it, as well as his passages about the group versus the individual in his letters, show how he favors individualism, a notion said to be related to capitalism. Steinbeck is aware of the influence of the American Dream. Hence, he employs it to transmit his beliefs. For the Marxists like Antonio Gramsci, this is a hegemonic tool. In the case of *In Dubious Battle*, it is used to influence the masses and prevent the communists from reaching power against the liberal government. For Gramsci, “Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously ‘born’ in each individual brain ...” it is rather a group of individuals or even one individual who forms it and works his way to spread it among the masses. (1971: 192-193) In his letters, Steinbeck stated how he abhors communism. In his novel, he legitimizes the power of the landlords by blending his beliefs about the source of exploitation with capitalist narratives. This reinforces the status of capitalism. As stated before, Lukács, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, highly criticizes modernism, arguing it does not give a true political view. Accordingly, Steinbeck contributes to the reinforcement of the false consciousness of the working class.

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Abstract

John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* diverges from classical Marxist narratives in a sense that it refrains from instigating the working class to revolt against the capitalists. Unlike Marxist theorists who attribute exploitation exclusively to capitalism, Steinbeck also links it to individual factors such as laziness and the lack of hard work. Furthermore, he presents strikes as violent social phenomena. This paper employs Marxist philosophy to analyze how Steinbeck's portrayal of class struggle in *In Dubious Battle* serves to suppress the idea of revolution and this, in the Marxist thought, limits the potential for social change. By examining these dynamics, the paper argues that Steinbeck strategically distances his narrative from traditional Marxist interpretations of class exploitation.

Keywords

Marxism, John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle*, class struggle, individualism, labor strikes

Résumé

Contrairement aux thèses classiques du marxisme, John Steinbeck, dans *In Dubious Battle*, ne cherche pas à inciter la révolte du prolétariat contre les capitalistes. Tandis que les marxistes attribuent l'exploitation exclusivement au capitalisme, Steinbeck en fait également une question de paresse et de manque d'effort individuel. Par ailleurs, il présente la grève comme une force sociale violente. Cet article, en utilisant la philosophie marxiste, analyse comment Steinbeck, à travers

son roman, écarte l'idée de lutte des classes et restreint la possibilité de changement social. Il montre ainsi comment l'auteur détourne la perspective révolutionnaire du marxisme en dissimulant le potentiel transformateur de la lutte des classes.

Mots-clés

Marxisme, John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, lutte des classes, travail acharné, grève

الملخص

في روايته المعركة المشبوهة، يبتعد جون ستينباك عن السرديات الماركسية التقليدية حيث لا يُصوّر العمال كقوة ثورية ضد الرأسماليين. بينما يربط المفكرون الماركسيون الاستغلال حصريًا بالنظام الرأسمالي، يربط ستينباك الاستغلال أيضًا بعوامل فردية مثل الكسل وغياب الجدية في العمل. علاوة على ذلك، يصوّر الكاتب الإضرابات كظاهرة اجتماعية عنيفة. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استخدام الفلسفة الماركسية لتحليل كيف قام ستينباك في المعركة المشبوهة بإخفاء فكرة الصراع الطبقي، مما يحد من احتمالات التغيير الاجتماعي. من خلال هذه الدراسة، نناقش كيف يُبعد ستينباك الرواية عن التفسيرات الماركسية التقليدية للصراع الطبقي.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الماركسية، جون ستينباك، المعركة المشبوهة، الصراع الطبقي، العمل الجاد، الإضرابات العمالية

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The farmers lost their land and came to work in the agricultural sector. Old Dan is a migrant worker selling his labor power, along with other farmers, to corporate companies. Steinbeck shows how the apple pickers have limited

options. The apple fields are the only place left for them to work. In one passage, Mac states that the apple orchards in the Torgas Valley are “owned by a few men” (43). In his letters, later collected under the title *A Life in Letters*, Steinbeck clarifies who these few men are — those who own almost everything: I must go over into the interior valleys. There are five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry, but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them, with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget. (1975: 131)

What Steinbeck means by “fascists” is the extreme version of capitalists. These capitalists exploit the migrant workers in the Torgas Valley. Georg Lukács once compared the relationship between the worker and the owner to that of “the spider and the fly in its web” (qtd. in Nineham 2010: 11). As laborers become private property, they are reduced to a commodity devoid of their humanity. The boss, then, can use, sell, or abandon them at will. The character Jim reflects this idea when he comments that his father “reduced his movements to a machine-like perfection” (65).

In the novel, it is shown that even small growers, like Mr. Anderson, are also under the threat of the land barons. Thus, in *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck offers an unflattering image of the agricultural system in the U.S. and openly criticizes the capitalists, arguing that their policies distort the image of the U.S. as a country of equal opportunities. Steinbeck depicts how the large growers double their wealth through various means. The fascist landowners take control of vast expanses of land and force farmers to labor in the apple fields for long hours in exchange for low wages that do not cover even the basic necessities of life. The landowners take the picked apples, further alienating the farmers from the products of their labor. In the introduction to *Capital I*, Ernest Mandel summarizes Marx’s concept of alienation:

[...] the needs of the worker as a producer and a citizen – his need to develop a full personality, to become a rich and creative human being, etc.; these needs are brutally crushed by the tyranny of meaningless, mechanical, parcellized work, alienation of productive capacities and alienation of real human wealth. (Marx 1990: 72)

Dan works from dawn to dusk, despite the fact that he is an old man. The rickety ladder that Dan and the other farmers use to climb the apple trees symbolizes the neglect of basic worker safety and the low investment in tools by the owners. Dan has worked all his life, but the low wages and the lack of

opportunities due to corporate farming prevent him from ever owning his own land and enjoying a prosperous life. The company store charges inflated prices for food and clothing. This exposes how the capitalists work to maximize their profits, while farmers remain exploited in the process of wealth accumulation. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács explains that under capitalism, social relations and actions are often treated like those between objects. Every action is calculated to meet the needs of the capitalists. (1968: 167-168)

As demonstrated, one can extract from *In Dubious Battle* the way the exploitation and deprivation of the farmers are tied to the system. However, the novel also presents instances where this exploitation is linked to laziness, an absence of individual hard work, and a lack of self-reliance. The American Dream convinced many people that the U.S. was the land of equal opportunities, where anyone who worked hard could achieve success. This ideology is based on the notion of individual effort, implying that in cases of failure, people must blame themselves, not the system. This idea, arguably, helps to neutralize the anger of the workers by shifting the responsibility onto them.

Steinbeck amplifies this ideology in *In Dubious Battle*, where he promotes self-reliance and individual hard work as the solution to the farmers' plight. In a scene where Dan delivers a speech in honor of Joy's death, he positions himself as a leader guiding the younger generation, blaming them for being too lazy to work hard and improve their situation. For Steinbeck, the farmers' preference for joining the communists instead of working hard suggests that they fail to realize that their own effort, rather than class struggle, holds the key to improving their lives. Therefore, *In Dubious Battle* can be interpreted as suggesting that the farmers are exploited because they do not exert sufficient effort to change their living conditions, relying instead on the hope that communism will solve their problems.

1.2 What is behind this Contradiction from a Marxist Lens

Steinbeck does not fully relate exploitation and deprivation to the capitalists or to the system of corporate companies, but he also relates it to the laziness of the farmers. Even though he, like the Marxists, exposes the way corporate farming exploits the workers and inhibits them from ameliorating their financial status, in other instances, he shows how the farmers are to blame for their situation. Dan, for instance, accuses the farmers of thinking that the younger generation is too lazy to achieve wealth. However, Dan fails to fully relate the source of the farmers' suffering to corporate farming,

which, according to the novel, condemns the poor to remain deprived. As his life and his vision are fragmented due to the nature of the system, he contradicts himself without realizing that he himself has spent his life working hard for many years, yet he failed to achieve upward mobility. From a Marxist standpoint, Dan's conclusion about the situation of the workers allows Steinbeck to manipulate the opinion of the masses. Just like Dan, the proletariat is indirectly pushed to believe that the blame falls entirely on them. Steinbeck transmits a blurred vision of the political, economic, and social situation. Thus, matters are not understood in their totality. For the Marxists, relating exploitation and deprivation to the lack of self-reliance and not completely to the capitalists and the nature of their system is just a technique to extend the false consciousness of the working class. In fact, this idea of individual hard work and blaming oneself for not achieving prosperity is related to the American Dream, which is accused of being a capitalist narrative used to restrain the working class from revolting against the few individuals who own the wealth of the country. In his argument about the phalanx, Steinbeck praises the individual and condemns the group. In the novel, the group is manifested in the strikers. From a Marxist standpoint, instead of exposing and revealing how capitalist narratives affect the consciousness of men, Steinbeck reinforces their effect.

2. A Marxist Reading of the Source of Violence during the Strike

2.1. The Policy of the Landlords and the Behavior of the Phalanx

In some passages, Steinbeck shows how violence stems from the capitalists' policies, and in others, he relates it to the biological factors of the phalanx.

With the Depression, the Growers' Association reduces the wages of the farmers. This infuriates the workers, especially with the instigation of the Communist Party. When the farmers refused to regain their work, the landowners replaced them with others. This led to more violence. The capitalists exert their influence on law enforcement agencies. The vigilantes are shown to kill and injure numerous strikers. The novelist highlights the horrific scenes of the heavy artillery used to repress the strikers.

Steinbeck also relates the source of violence to biological factors that transform individuals when they are in a group, or what Steinbeck calls "the phalanx". In the case of *In Dubious Battle*, this is manifested in the strike. In his theory of the phalanx (1933), Steinbeck discusses the changing behav-

ior of individuals when they are in a group. In his letter to Georg Albee, he writes about the phalanx:

You are dealing with a creature whose nature you cannot know intellectually, of whose emotions you are ignorant. Whose reasons, directions, means, urges, pleasures, drives, satieties, ecstasies, hungers, and tropisms are not yours as an individual. (1976: 39)

In *In Dubious Battle*, when the farmers organize themselves into a group, they transform into a single unit. They lose their rationality and start to act like animals as they are controlled by biological factors. For Dr. Burton, the mob wipes out the individual, and it is hard to predict the behavior of the mob or even control it. He adds that violence leads to violence. The Communist Mac considers that the group can achieve the goal aimed for and can avoid violence if it is properly guided. During the strike, the strikers show anti-social behaviors. They follow the guidance of Mac without questioning his decisions. When they see the corpse of Joy, the sight of blood ignites their sense of fighting. In one passage, Mac informs Jim: "Didn't I tell you? They need blood. That works. That's what I told you". (231) Knowing the effect of blood on the mob, Mac exploits it again at the end of the novel. He uses the corpse of Jim, whose face is distorted and covered in blood, to rekindle the strikers' sense of revolt.

Steinbeck gives the group animal traits. For example, London's eyes resemble that of a "gorilla" (57), denoting violence. Steinbeck even uses the beliefs of some workers to transmit his idea of the violent side of the group. In one passage, Dan describes to Jim the anger of the group and how they use their teeth to bite, denoting that they possess animal traits. The novel shows the transformation of Jim and how he gradually starts to favor violence due to the influence of the phalanx. For him, "all great things have violent beginnings" (189). For Dr. Burton, the phalanx leads to violence. He states:

"...the end is never very different in its nature from the means...
you can only build a violent thing with violence" (189).

Mac informs London that hunger controls men and makes them do anything. In the mob, this source of stimulus turns men into creatures capable of facing heavy artillery. Thus, for the novelist, the group reduces men to an animal level, unable to think critically. Even though the strikers increasingly fall into devastation, they continue to follow the orders of the Communist Mac.

For the novelist, the Communists are unable to lead the strikers, notwithstanding that the leaders are shown to have read several books about revolt and freedom. Jim, for example, has read:

“Plato’s *Republic*, and *Utopia*, and Bellamy, and like Herodotus and Gibbon and Macaulay and Carlyle and Prescott, and like Spinoza and Hegel and Kant and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. He even made me read *Das Kapital*.” (29-30)

The Communist Mac is aware that the workers in a group may lose their rationality, but we get the sense that he underestimates its true power. This is seen later on in his comments. Mac notices how Jim seems to be devoured by the phalanx due to his behavior and mystical ideas, where he seems to worship the radical cause. At the end of the novel, the strike appears to fail and come to an end. Numerous strikers lose their lives while others starve and regret joining the strike. This indicates Steinbeck’s position on labor strikes and Communist strike leaders. The term “communism”, for Marx, means “[...] abolition of private property” (Marx and Engels 1998: 22). However, it is important to mention the great dispute between the two ideologies: communism and capitalism. In the time when Steinbeck wrote his novel, communism was also a term associated with the USSR and was seen as a power against the capitalist USA. In the novel, the newspaper reports the strikers as “fruit tramps, led and inspired by paid foreign agitators” (215). These foreign agitators are probably the Russians. Accordingly, I argue that Steinbeck relates Marx’s communism, its connection to the revolution of the proletariat, and the policy of the Soviet Union, arguing that they use the working class to instigate chaos in the U.S.

2.2 The Image of the Strike in Relation to the Policy of the Capitalists and the Effect of the Phalanx

In any case, whether relating violence to the capitalists or to the biological factors awakened by the effect of the phalanx, it will always lead to giving the strike an unflattering image. It transmits the idea that strikes cannot lead to change, as there will be violence; if not from the side of the capitalists, it will be from the violent side of the group. In *In Dubious Battle*, the strike instigators are not fully educated about the behavior of the phalanx, a theory that has its roots in the crowd behavior theories of the 19th century. Steinbeck, like the anti-Marxist intellectuals, seems to be influenced by this view. Steinbeck uses *In Dubious Battle* to make men experience the outcomes of labor strikes and to portray the behavior of the communists as he projected them. He presented his view of how the strike cannot lead to social change. Thus, for him, there is no system that can emerge through revolt and class struggle.

In Marxism, however, what Steinbeck is doing is suppressing class struggle. This makes the masses believe that capitalism is the only system that can rule, and following the lead of the communists and going on strike would lead to chaos.

For Marx, communism is the substitute for capitalism and the step that is supposed to come after a socialist state. As all Europeans had considered communism a powerful ideology, the communists have a burden to spread their views and demands. Thus, Marx called for a revolution. (Marx and Engels 1998: 14-34) Labor strikes are one of the methods used by the followers of Marx. Steinbeck, in his novel, has dealt with this as a theme, showing how he is dead set against this social movement. Instead of praising the communists, he portrayed them as manipulators who exploit the plight of the working class.

“The bourgeoisie had concealed the true situation, the state of the class struggle.” (Lukács 1968: 224) The working class is ignorant of the historical process. Steinbeck exposes the class struggle between the two classes and shows how the proletariat class breaks the strong effect of commodification, but at the same time, he distorts the image of the strike, which, for the Communist Party, is a strong movement that can reduce exploitation. For the Marxists, exposing the struggle and then giving a negative report about the strike extends the false consciousness of the working class. It helps the capitalists to ensure the consent of the workers to the rules and laws of the system. Accordingly, class struggle is concealed.

In *In Dubious Battle*, the farmers acquire class consciousness before the rise of the strike. After that, they experience a violent social movement. This influences the opinion of the farmers and leaves them thinking that protests will lead to affliction and misery. This conceals other revolts. In Marxism, it is due to the process of constant struggle that the proletariat class reaches true class consciousness and realizes the powerful influence of the ideological and repressive state apparatus. Thus, the manipulation and the policies of the capitalists come to light. Steinbeck, in his letters, calls for the interference of the government against the communists. In Marxism, however, class struggle is central. Social change is to be reached through labor revolt, and promoting otherwise is a deviation from the Marxist doctrine.

Conclusion

This research paper shows how in *In Dubious Battle* the source of exploitation is not solely related to capitalism and how violence is, again, not linked directly to the capitalists only. The novel transmits a sense that revolts will not lead to a shift in systems. This tendency hides the fact that the bourgeois themselves established their system through revolts and struggle. For the Marxists, this is a capitalist tendency and a true deviation from the Marxist

doctrine. Steinbeck works to prevent the influence of the Communist Party, who use labor strikes to impose their power in the U.S. For the followers of Marx, not relating exploitation and deprivation solely to the capitalists prevents men from seeing matters in their totality. It makes them unable to fathom or detect the source of their suffering. This extends the false consciousness of the working class. This takes us to what Georg Lukács believes about modernist works, arguing that it is a product of a reified consciousness. Thus, it holds contradictions, and the historical totality will be transmitted in fragments. It renders man

“unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself. It is also impossible for him to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence.”

There is a

“negation of history... The hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own existence. There is not for him — and apparently not for his creator — any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon.” (1969: 21)

Notwithstanding, I was able to extract some instances where exploitation, deprivation, and suffering are related to capitalism, I argue that Steinbeck never meant the radical change of the system due to his position against the communists.

Besides, the novelist's portrayal of the strike and the violence that stems from it, as well as his passages about the group versus the individual in his letters, show how he favors individualism, a notion said to be related to capitalism. Steinbeck is aware of the influence of the American Dream. Hence, he employs it to transmit his beliefs. For the Marxists like Antonio Gramsci, this is a hegemonic tool. In the case of *In Dubious Battle*, it is used to influence the masses and prevent the communists from reaching power against the liberal government. For Gramsci, “Ideas and opinions are not spontaneously ‘born’ in each individual brain ...” it is rather a group of individuals or even one individual who forms it and works his way to spread it among the masses. (1971: 192-193) In his letters, Steinbeck stated how he abhors communism. In his novel, he legitimizes the power of the landlords by blending his beliefs about the source of exploitation with capitalist narratives. This reinforces the status of capitalism. As stated before, Lukács, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, highly criticizes modernism, arguing it does not give a true political view. Accordingly, Steinbeck contributes to the reinforcement of the false consciousness of the working class.

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Abstract

John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* diverges from classical Marxist narratives in a sense that it refrains from instigating the working class to revolt against the capitalists. Unlike Marxist theorists who attribute exploitation exclusively to capitalism, Steinbeck also links it to individual factors such as laziness and the lack of hard work. Furthermore, he presents strikes as violent social phenomena. This paper employs Marxist philosophy to analyze how Steinbeck's portrayal of class struggle in *In Dubious Battle* serves to suppress the idea of revolution and this, in the Marxist thought, limits the potential for social change. By examining these dynamics, the paper argues that Steinbeck strategically distances his narrative from traditional Marxist interpretations of class exploitation.

Keywords

Marxism, John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle*, class struggle, individualism, labor strikes

Résumé

Contrairement aux thèses classiques du marxisme, John Steinbeck, dans *In Dubious Battle*, ne cherche pas à inciter la révolte du prolétariat contre les capitalistes. Tandis que les marxistes attribuent l'exploitation exclusivement au capitalisme, Steinbeck en fait également une question de paresse et de manque d'effort individuel. Par ailleurs, il présente la grève comme une force sociale violente. Cet article, en utilisant la philosophie marxiste, analyse comment Steinbeck, à travers

son roman, écarte l'idée de lutte des classes et restreint la possibilité de changement social. Il montre ainsi comment l'auteur détourne la perspective révolutionnaire du marxisme en dissimulant le potentiel transformateur de la lutte des classes.

Mots-clés

Marxisme, John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, lutte des classes, travail acharné, grève

الملخص

في روايته المعركة المشبوهة، يبتعد جون ستينباك عن السرديات الماركسية التقليدية حيث لا يُصوّر العمال كقوة ثورية ضد الرأسماليين. بينما يربط المفكرون الماركسيون الاستغلال حصريًا بالنظام الرأسمالي، يربط ستينباك الاستغلال أيضًا بعوامل فردية مثل الكسل وغياب الجدية في العمل. علاوة على ذلك، يصوّر الكاتب الإضرابات كظاهرة اجتماعية عنيفة. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استخدام الفلسفة الماركسية لتحليل كيف قام ستينباك في المعركة المشبوهة بإخفاء فكرة الصراع الطبقي، مما يحد من احتمالات التغيير الاجتماعي. من خلال هذه الدراسة، نناقش كيف يُبعد ستينباك الرواية عن التفسيرات الماركسية التقليدية للصراع الطبقي.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الماركسية، جون ستينباك، المعركة المشبوهة، الصراع الطبقي، العمل الجاد، الإضرابات العمالية