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John Steinbeck's Doubts about Capitalism and the "Collective" in the First Third of the Dust

Bowl Trilogy: In Dubious Battle

Not long after John Steinbeck published his novel, *In Dubious Battle*, in 1936, a review in the *New York Times*, written by critic Fred T. Marsh called the novel “both dramatically and realistically, the best labor and strike novel to come out of our contemporary economic and social unrest” (qtd. in Benson and Loftis 194). While never becoming as popular as *The Grapes of Wrath*, the novel has maintained a solid scholarly reputation as one of Steinbeck’s best novels and is regarded as one of the best works of proletariat literature to emerge from his time. Jackson J. Benson and Anne Loftis in their article “John Steinbeck and Farm Labor Unionization,” map out the critical review Steinbeck received, and in their research, they found that one scholar, Harry Thornton Moore, the first to publish a critical book on Steinbeck’s work, discovers evidence which suggest that the strike Steinbeck dramatizes in his novel could have actually happened. Following Moore’s lead, in 1958 scholar Peter Lisca uncovered old letters written by Steinbeck to his editors at the time, which spoke of communist labor organizers Steinbeck kept close contact with. Lisca’s letters offered Moore further evidence to suggest that the strike and valley *In Dubious Battle* depicts could have actually taken place, but Steinbeck responds to Moore in a letter and quickly denies his findings. First, he denies any claims that he is a socialist. Then, he stresses that *In Dubious Battle* takes place in “a composite valley as it [follows] a composite strike,” (Benson and Loftis 195). By calling both his valley and his strike composite, Steinbeck denies that the two exist, but his word choice is specific. Steinbeck’s coy attitude

about revealing his sources suggests that he, like many Americans during the 1930s, was cautious of being branded as a communist, and claims that his intent for the novel was for it to present his own personal theory on how the individual loses himself when organized into a collective. *In Dubious Battle* frames the exploitation of the American laborer within capitalism as an already existing condition and uses this reality as a driving motive that questions both the morality and the desires of those participating in the strike, as well as acting as a vessel in which Steinbeck presents his own unique commentary on the dangers of collectivism.

It should be noted, however, that Steinbeck himself was not a socialist. In his article, “Steinbeck as Anti-Fascist,” Charles Williams describes Steinbeck’s political affiliation, and his unwillingness to be labeled as a socialist, as key clarifiers of his intentions for *In Dubious Battle*. Williams found that Steinbeck’s “Argument of Phalanx” (his personal theory on the dangers of collectivism), was a response to what Steinbeck considered the inescapable “emotions of war, of migration, of hatred, [and] of fear” (Williams 52) which emerged during times of unrest. While he sympathized with the American Communists’ goal to alleviate the laboring class of their systematic shackles, he did not trust those who organized under an ideology, as the Party did not seem to care as much as he did about these dangerous emotions. By calling Steinbeck an “Anti-Fascist,” Williams groups Steinbeck and every other left-leaning political group he exposed himself to under one titled-signified goal, and by doing so, contextualizes the various diverging ideological perspectives within *In Dubious Battle*.

Jim Nolan represents both the process, and the outcome Steinbeck fears about collectivism, but he also represents a purposefully easy-to-relate-to mind, which during the course of the novel changes. At the beginning of the novel, Jim has nothing. With no home and hardly any belongings, Jim walks into the small office of the local American Communist Party

branch, referred to in the novel as “the Party,” and asks the labor organizer there, Harry Nilson, if he can register as a member of the party. Jim tells Harry that he wants to join because he has nothing left to keep him from doing so. His father was shot in a riot by a police officer, and his mother died while Jim was in jail for vagrancy. Nilson empathizes with Jim, but presses his intentions for joining further, leading Jim to say:

“In the jail there were some Party men. They talked to me. Everything’s been a mess all my life. Their lives weren’t messes. They were working towards something. I want to work toward something. I feel dead. I thought I might feel alive again” (Steinbeck 8).

While Steinbeck had written to many of his colleagues and editors about his theory of collectivism, he never intended to present it as theory. Benson and Loftis had found that his intention was “not to write a philosophical dissertation on his theory, but to think it through and then find the fictional symbols which would act as a vehicle for his creative writing,” (Benson and Loftis 197). Under Benson and Loftis’ simile, Jim Nolan is the steering wheel of Steinbeck’s vehicle, and his transformation from an un-radicalized individual to a collectivized radical is the road Steinbeck wants his readers to follow. However, as a labor strike novel, this path can be interpreted differently. Jim tells Harry that he feels dead, and that joining the party will make him feel alive again. This sentiment suggests that Jim is farther along Steinbeck’s original path than he thinks. Harry asks Jim if he is educated. Jim tells Harry that while he only finished two years of high school, he is very well-read thanks to an unnamed man he met in a park. Jim continues on to say that the old man “made lists like Plato’s Republic, and the 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*” (Steinbeck 9). Steinbeck’s series of names suggests two factors of Jim’s education.

Firstly, Jim has received a mostly classical education, which most educated Americans—but more importantly, most educated radicals—at the time would have received. Secondly, Jim has already been geared towards radicalizing. The order and pairing in which Steinbeck lists out his protagonist's education starts classical and progressively gets more radical until ending with the obvious marker of Marx. By examining Jim's intent for joining the party, as well as his education, Jim's character can be described as a bright, young mind who is looking to understand the nature of his place in society. However, under the novel's framework, as the protagonist of a proletarian text, Jim can also be read as a bright, young mind who is exhausted from capitalist exploitation and wants to do something about it.

Yet when discussing the theme of exploitation, especially in regard to a proletarian novel, an understanding of the genre and its mechanisms is crucial towards understanding where *In Dubious Battle* falls in the canon. In her book, *Radical Representations*, Barbara Foley collects and examines the prevalent proletarian fiction novels which emerged during the 1930s. Foley finds in her novel that many of the writers and critics who were expanding the proletarian genre at this time “were conscious participants in the literary movement that named itself proletariat,” (Foley vii) and that scholars “debated at length—and without resolution—whether proletariat novels were by, for, about, or written from the perspective of the working class” (Foley vii). What Foley discovers is that during this time, those who were pioneering this new wave of proletarian fiction placed a vast amount of importance on who the voice behind a text was, and that beyond all else, a proletarian text should reflect an accurate representation of the working class. However, there is a third clause, which at the time seemed to have made determining a text as proletarian difficult. Foley describes that “the Marxists’ critical pronouncement often signaled

the strong—if not theoretically unspecified—conviction that proletarian fiction, as a ‘weapon,’ should be revolutionary rather than reformists in its implications” (Foley 118).

Under this socially accepted, but theoretically vague clause, the final absolute function of a proletarian text during the 1930s was that a proletarian text should come from a proletarian perspective, accurately present the proletarian condition, and inspire the working class to rise up against the oppressive capitalist structure. *In Dubious Battle* only fulfills one of these clauses and does so on a very clever technicality. Ultimately, Steinbeck is not a proletarian writer, and therefore cannot truthfully possess an authentic proletarian voice. However, this did not stop him from creating one. Benson and Loftis find that as a young man, Steinbeck “learned about farm workers and their problems when he worked as a laborer and straw boss in the fields for the Spreckels Sugar Company, which owned a series of ranches up and down the Salinas Valley” (196). While his exposure was never intended to help him with *In Dubious Battle* specifically, Benson and Loftis explain that a change in his aspirations as a writer guided him towards his affiliation with labor unrest. As Steinbeck matured as a writer, “he came to believe that the power and depth he was aiming for could only be achieved if his narrative had ‘truth,’ that is, if it were actually taken from life,” (Benson and Loftis 196). Steinbeck had realized that in order for him to achieve canonical fame, his work must stem from reality, so when he decided to use a labor strike as the framework for his theory, he determined that the presentation of his characters must be authentic in order for his novel to hold meaning. Realism, then, is a crucial component of what makes *In Dubious Battle* such a compelling narrative, but also as John F. Lavelle writes in his book, *Blue Collar Theoretically*, when understood as a genre convention of proletarian literature, realism allows non-proletarian authors to reflect the themes of class struggle “through plot, narrative, and characterization,” (98) without their work being dismissed as art independent

of the economic conditions at the time. In short, invoking realism in a text, allowed authors like Steinbeck to participate in the genre in a way which was class conscious without being class dependent.

While he himself was not a socialist, Steinbeck's close relationship with communist labor organizers gave him the authentic proletarian voice needed for *In Dubious Battle*. Through a series of discreet social connections Steinbeck came into contact with Carl Williams and Cecil McKiddy, two labor organizers who were on the run after participating in a cotton strike down south. Steinbeck became fascinated with these men, and he saw an opportunity to help both himself and the two poor communists he was hosting. Benson and Loftis discovered that Steinbeck decided to "pay them for their story, and since much of McKiddy's information was about the strike leader Pat Chambers, he would write a first-person narrative from Chambers point of view—a diary of a communist labor organizer" (201). McKiddy's diary was a gold mine for Steinbeck and contained in it a well of knowledge on how labor strikes were conducted. Specifically, about how to organize the workers, establish a camp, and maintain a strike from start to finish. The language of the diary, as Benson and Loftis describe it, was also written in the colloquial tongue of the migrant worker.

McKiddy's diary gave Steinbeck all of the personal information needed to craft the strongest socialist voice in his novel, Mac. Not long after joining the Party, Harry takes Jim to a man named Mac, a veteran labor organizer planning to lead a strike in the Torgas Valley. Hearing word that the Growers Association will be cutting the already low wages of the migrant workers coming in to work, Mac sees an opportunity to strike in the making. Taking Jim along as his apprentice, the two travel to the Torgas valley by train. Once the two have arrived, Mac finds a lunch wagon owned by a Party sympathizer named Al Anderson who points the two towards

where the migrant workers are camped out. When the two arrive at the camp, Mac quickly gets them involved with the delivery of a child who belongs to the daughter of the group's leader. Mac tells the leader of the group, London, that he's worked in hospitals and that he feels compelled to help. London tells Mac that there is already a woman tending to his daughter's needs, but Mac convinces him that he is a better fit. After the midwife is forced out of the situation, Mac organizes the workers, who work in perfect unison to deliver the child. After the ordeal is done, Jim was surprised that Mac possessed any medical training. Mac responds, saying "I never knew till now. I never saw one before. The only thing I knew was that it was a good idea to be clean. God, I was lucky it came out all right. If anything'd happened, we'd be sunk," (Steinbeck 60).

Steinbeck's characterization of Mac acts as a specific presentation of a communist labor organizer. Mac reveals that his intentions for carrying the child had nothing to do with the child's safety, but rather that the act allowed him to gain the workers' trust. This is not the only time Mac's ruthless strategizing comes into play. After delivering the child, Mac takes Jim along with him back to Al's lunch wagon, where he convinces Al to take the two to Al's father, in order to convince his father to allow the strikers to camp on Anderson's privately owned apple orchard. At first, Mr. Anderson is hesitant, seeing how his neighbors (the other landowners) would not take kindly to him hosting a gang of strikers. Mac quickly disarms the old man with a convincing speech:

"And who are your neighbors?" Mac asked quickly. 'I'll tell you who they are: Hunter, Gillray, Martin. Who holds your paper? Torgas Finance Company. Who owns Torgas Finance Company? Hunter, Gillray, Martin. Have they been squeezing you? You know God damn well that they have. How long you going to last? Maybe one year; and

then Torgas Finance takes your place. Is that straight? Now suppose you got a crop out with no labor charges; suppose you sold it on a rising market? Could you clear out your paper?" (Steinbeck 115).

Mac's quick thinking successfully wins him a foundation to build his strike on top of, but it also depicts his mastery of Marxist ideology and how to weaponize it. Mac calls to attention the lack of power Mr. Anderson has in the Valley, and how susceptible he is to the Growers Association. What Mac is doing is using the Marxists definition of exploitation and presenting it in terms a landowner could understand. Under the Marxist definition, exploitation refers to the appropriation of the working classes' value by capitalists. Capitalists need laborers to work and provide them with capital. Under capitalism, the one who earns the majority of the profit yielded from the capital worked is the one who owns the land, not the laborer working it. Under the Marxist lens however, the true value of a product is not the product itself but within the laborers who made it. Mr. Anderson sees the value of his land as something which will provide for him, but Mac flips the tables on him, and shows how in actuality, Mr. Anderson is merely just another provider for the larger capitalists in the valley. The reality of Mr. Anderson's situation is that while his land provides him with capital, the majority of that capital goes directly into the pockets of those above him, simply because they wish it so.

Mac stands as Steinbeck's strongest socialist voice, but it is not the only ideological voice in the novel. Once Mac gets land to build the strikers camp on, he is quick to fill it with everything they need. One of these necessities comes in the form of a doctor, named Doc Burton. While Burton himself sympathizes with the Party, he is not a socialist, and acts as the second ideological perspective Jim Nolan comes in contact with. As the events of the strike unfold, Burton makes a comment to Mac on how he acts around the laborers in the camp. He tells Mac

that “You’re a mystery to me. You imitate any speech you’re talking part in. When you’re with London and Dakin you talk the way they do. You’re an actor,” (Steinbeck 145). With an answer to everything, Mac responds, saying “you know, Doc, men are suspicious of a man who doesn’t talk their way... It’s not the same thing in your case, Doc. You’re supposed to be different” (Steinbeck 145). Mac does not challenge the Doc’s claims of dishonesty, and instead responds with results. In order for the strike to be successful, he needs to gain the strikers’ trust. He then distinguishes himself away from Burton, saying that he is different from the doctor. Here, Steinbeck’s fears of collectivism and the ideals of his socialist voice collide. Mac is quick to organize the group, and while everything the strikers are doing are ultimately geared towards the benefit of everyone, Mac makes a distinction as to how that will be carried out. Taking the role of leader, he has his own set of responsibilities that are separate from the doctor’s. These responsibilities also separate Mac from the group as well, and manifests in the texts through his actions. Mac doesn’t lie to the strikers when organizing them, but he’s far from truthful with his intentions. To Mac, cracking a couple of eggs to make an omelet is par for the course. Burton, however, sees these eggs as what they really are; human lives which are not to be played with. While both Burton and Mac want the strikers to succeed, there are constant disagreements on methodology between the two.

Throughout the novel, Steinbeck establishes an ongoing conversation between the three ideological perspectives within *In Dubious Battle*. The first is Jim, a young man convinced he has nothing left to lose, the second is Mac, a result-oriented Marxist, and the final is Doc Burton, a humanist. During the events of the strike, Jim takes a bullet wound to his shoulder. As it heals, the Doc is persistent with Jim, stressing that he needs to be careful. Jim tells the doctor that he doesn’t care about the pain, and the doctor quickly responds by telling Jim he was afraid he

would say that. The doctor tells Jim that he has “something religious in his eyes,” (Steinbeck 206) and that he’s seen it in young boys like Jim before. Jim does not like the doctor’s comments and tells Burton that there’s nothing religious about him. Jim then tells Burton that he’s happy, and that participating in the strike makes him feel “full-up” (Steinbeck 206). The doctor responds to Jim and says “I know. Don’t let it die. It’s the vision of heaven” (Steinbeck 206). Jim again tells the doctor that he does not believe in heaven, and then asks the doctor if he’s heard that before. The doctor responds, saying “yes, something like that. Particularly when they’ve done something stupid, when a man’s made a mistake, and died for it. Yes, I get it, Jim --pretty often” (Steinbeck 207).

While Jim takes pride in the feeling that’s washed over him throughout the course of the strike, Doc Burton warns him that following that feeling will only lead him to death. It’s the same feeling he described to Harry when he joined the Party. From Doc’s perspective, this desperate need Jim possesses to become more than just himself is dangerous. This sentiment acts as a marker for where which the ideologies shared by Mac, Jim, and Doc Burton, start to diverge. As a humanist, Burton places the value of human life above all else. Mac is organizing a strike to spark a revolution, in hopes of making all human lives equal, however in order to do so, the value Burton holds so highly, must be put to the side. Yet in the middle of these two ideologies, stands Jim, an impressionable, bright young mind who just wants to get involved with something bigger than himself. Throughout the novel, Mac denies Jim the opportunity to “do something,” that is to say that Jim wants some autonomy, or a way in which he as an individual can help the cause. But Mac never gives Jim this opportunity, which highlights Steinbeck’s overall fear of how collectivism strips away individuality. Towards the end of the novel, after seeing Mr. Anderson’s home burns down at the hands of unknown thugs, Jim changes. Doc Burton asks

Jim what he is getting out of the strike, Jim tells him that “[he] don’t know and [he] don’t care” (Steinbeck 263). He then says, “it doesn’t matter... I used to think like you, Doc, but it doesn’t matter at all” (Steinbeck 263). Here Jim confirms his commitment to the cause, but later on in the novel, his radicalization blooms in full color. Taking control of the strike by force, Jim turns to Mac and scolds him, saying “I wanted you to use me. You wouldn’t because you got to like me too well. That was wrong. Then I got hurt. And sitting here waiting, I got to know my power. I am stronger than you, Mac. I am stronger than anything in the world, because I’m going in a straight line” (Steinbeck 283).

The power that Jim is referring to can be inferred as his own individual power, but from what he has learned from Mac, what he is actually referring to is the ability to harness the collective power of the group and exploit it in a way which will preserve the strike. It is at this point in the novel, however, that the only way to preserve the strike, is to respond to Anderson's house burning down with more violence. Mac tells Jim that he's now beyond himself, and he's seen men turn in the same way that Jim has, he even tells Jim that he's “scared of [him]” (Steinbeck 283). Jim now possesses within him, the fear of collectivizing which Steinbeck wants to bring attention to in his novel. As a fully radicalized socialist, Jim only sees what's in front of him. He only sees the strike. However, he is not a true socialist, not in the same sense that Mac is, because unlike Jim, Mac sees the bigger picture. Mac sees the strike as a cog in a larger machine. To Mac, the strike represents a chance to spark change across the nation, but to Jim, the strike is an act of revenge.

John Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* stands as a proletarian novel in the least conventional of terms, but still manages to function as an authentically realistic depiction of how the laborer is subjected to exploitation. Through portraying his own personal theory, Steinbeck creates a

commentary on collectivism that is separate from socialism. The violence he fears of collectivism does not stem from any specific ideology, but rather how adhering so strongly to any single ideology can strip man's individuality away from himself and with it, his humanity. Without approving or condemning the socialist movement, Steinbeck is able to question the methodology of the Party, and by doing so, Steinbeck calls attention to the dangerous and corrupting potential group collectivism holds.

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