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John Steinbeck As a Radical Novelist

Shawn Jasinski
University of Vermont

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JOHN STEINBECK AS A RADICAL NOVELIST

A Thesis Presented

by

Shawn Mark Jasinski

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

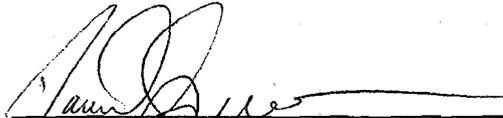
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
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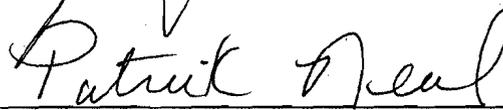
Thesis Examination Committee:



David Jenemann, Ph. D **Advisor**



John Gennari, Ph. D



Patrick Neal, Ph. D **Chairperson**



Frances E. Carr, Ph. D **Vice President for Research
and Dean of Graduate Studies**

Date: April 4th, 2008

ABSTRACT

The radical literary tradition of the 1930's inspired many American authors to become more concerned with the struggle of the proletariat. John Steinbeck is one of these authors. Steinbeck's novels throughout the 1930's and 1940's display a lack of agreement with the common Communist principles being portrayed by other radical novelists, but also a definite alignment with several more basic Marxist principles. The core of his radical philosophy comes in the form of his interest in group-man or the phalanx. An interest that is rather uncommon for the period, as most radical novelists were more concerned with illustrating the solitary nature of the proletarian worker. Over the course of his career this philosophy evolves, as can be illustrated through an analysis of *In Dubious Battle*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Cannery Row*. *In Dubious Battle* is highly critical of Communist labor organizers, and sets Steinbeck apart from the radical tradition by questioning rather than supporting their motivation. The labor organizers manipulate the phalanx in this novel, and Steinbeck leaves the reader with the impression that the group-man is being corrupted. *The Grapes of Wrath* is also a socially motivated novel, with an abundance of Marxist undertones, but most importantly the novel provides Steinbeck with a better medium within which he can further examine the phalanx. Throughout this novel Steinbeck remains separate from other propagandists, as he supports his own agenda rather than that of the Party. Steinbeck's communal exploration comes to fruition in *Cannery Row*. While the novel has received a relatively small amount of critical attention due to the common presumption that Steinbeck intended the work to be a diversion from war, the characters of *Cannery Row* provide Steinbeck with the ultimate vehicle to illustrate the importance of the phalanx.

Together these novels represent the evolution of Steinbeck's radical philosophy, particularly as it pertains to his vision of communal existence. While this vision of collectivity is what aligns Steinbeck with the most basic of Marxist principles, the mysticism he surrounds it with is what serves to set him apart from the more utilitarian communist appreciation of the phalanx. This argument will come largely in the form of analysis of Steinbeck's mouthpieces, which are characters in the novels that illustrate Steinbeck's philosophy either through speech or action. The conclusion of the analysis will show that Steinbeck is definitely a radical novelist, even though he is sometimes at odds with the tenets of the greater radical tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the twentieth-century found the United States recovering from both war and economic depression, and across the country American workers were struggling. The literature of the 1930's embodied an interest in the plight of the laborer, as authors began to become more intimately concerned with the struggles of the proletariat. Some may argue that this literary movement to the left was spawned by the popularity of communist beliefs reaching an all time high in the American populace, but to do so would be to give Party members far more credit than they deserve. In his analysis of American literary communism, entitled *Writers on the Left*, Daniel Aaron suggests that, "for the majority of writers who were associated in some way or another with the movement, it was the times, not the party, that made them radicals. The party attracted them because it alone seemed to have a correct diagnosis of America's social sickness and a remedy for it" (160). This broad appreciation for leftist politics resulted in a mish-mash of radical literature wildly varied in regard to both content and intention. The more customary "radical tradition" was limited by guidelines intended to produce a homogenous message, but the general shift to the left that was taking place resulted in an abundance of texts by a wide range of authors concerned with the struggle of the proletariat and the oppressive force of capitalism.

Part of the problem in defining radical literature results from the fact that many of these authors aligned with the radical tradition due to unintentional overlap between their personal beliefs and those of the Communist Party. In *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, David Madden argues that, "writing in the thirties had a class bias" (157) in general,

whether the author was considered to exist within the radical tradition or not. There is a certain level of agreement on this point, as Frederick J. Hoffman says of writers in the 1930s and 1940s, that, “the most dramatic events of their times are those of class conflict” (185). However, these authors are not the only members of American society veering to the left. A broader social concern for the treatment of the proletariat, and the proletarian lifestyle was developing. In *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning says, “For the first time in the history of the United States, a working-class culture had made a significant impact on the dominant cultural institutions. Both high culture and mass culture took on a distinctly plebian accent” (xx). All of this concern was not without risk though, as the more propagandist intentions of radical literature became nothing more than fodder for the gristmill of popular culture. Walter B. Rideout cites Sinclair Lewis describing the proletarian novel as, “a class of novels as standardized as the automobiles that roll from an assembly line at ford” (198). Some may argue that the politically charged intentions of radical novelists were defeated by the success of their own work.

The definition of a radical novel referred to most commonly in contemporary criticism is the one set forth by Rideout in his book, *The Radical Novel in the United States*. Rideout argues, “A radical novel, then, is one which demonstrates, either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socioeconomic system and advocates that the system be fundamentally changed” (12). This definition seems to be basic enough as it merely stipulates the authors simply uphold some Marxist principles and demonstrate them in their work.

In *Radical Representations*, Barbara Foley makes an even more vague appraisal when she says, “The definition of proletarian literature as literature treating the subject of matter of working-class experience was perhaps the most commonly invoked criterion for determining whether or not a text should be defined as ‘proletarian’” (109). Foley uses the term “proletarian literature,” which originated in the works of Mike Gold. During the 1920’s and 1930’s Gold contributed to the *Liberator* and the *Daily Worker*, as well as founding *New Masses*. Gold’s Communist Party loyalties were firmly rooted in his appreciation of Stalin, and he not only coined the term “proletarian literature,” but also attempted to set the bar for the radical genre with his wildly fictional, yet semi-autobiographical novel entitled *Jews Without Money*. Gold also attacked other leftist authors that he believed to lack commitment to Party ideals. Foley’s definition is one of the most basic, but like Gold she also draws one of the firmest lines between authors that do and do not belong within the radical tradition. John Steinbeck is one of the authors that is almost always placed either teetering over, or just outside of this line. Laura Hapke makes this point rather succinctly when she says, “There should be a distinction, however, between the proletarian novel and the social novel, practiced by Steinbeck and others, as one that celebrates the common man but is resistant to ‘politically dogmatic solutions to workers problems’” (221). Other theorists argue that Steinbeck was certainly operating within the radical framework, but the opinion that “Steinbeck was not a ‘proletarian novelist’” (Rideout, 288), is far more common. The important question is not whether or not Steinbeck is a radical novelist though, but rather why he occupies such a precarious position. While there are a variety of parallels and contrasts to be found,

Steinbeck's concern for the worker's solitary state is what spawns the greatest similarities and differences, as Steinbeck is one of the only authors that display the benefit of collectivity rather than the distress of solitude.

John Steinbeck was unquestionably an author greatly concerned with the struggle of the American working class. However, Daniel Aaron says that of novelists making any sort of commitment to leftist politics, John Steinbeck was one of the "most uncertain and unreliable of all" (309). Steinbeck also receives an abundance of doubt because the radical tradition often required authors to sacrifice the quality of their art for the sake of propaganda. Steinbeck was mostly unwilling to make such sacrifices, and while one could argue that he maintained his artistry while also living up to the notion that "the proletarian novel is motivated by didactic aims" (Foley, 250), the resounding conclusion is that his works are works of art, not propaganda. In order to examine Steinbeck's relationship with the radical tradition, we must first acknowledge that these two halves of the equation are not irresolutely divided. In addition, while there is certainly some division between radical novels and novels influenced by radical principles, both of these forms are representative of the literary movement to the left that took place in the United States up until the end of World War II. This serves as an adequate cutoff point not only because war often serves to separate historical periods, but also because the rapid expansion of capitalism during the industrial boom created by the war effort put an end to the economic restriction that had been lingering since the depression.

The examination of John Steinbeck as a radical novelist encompasses decades of evolution for both America as well as for the author himself. By examining three of

Steinbeck's most left bound novels it becomes clear that his works not only adopt leftist principles, but also exhibit an ongoing struggle for Steinbeck to define his own philosophical and political views, which happen to share several common themes with Marxism. *In Dubious Battle* was published in 1936 and illustrates Steinbeck's disagreement with the communist movement of the period. The novel demonstrates the burgeoning of Steinbeck's interest in the phalanx, and analyzes the group-man phenomenon in relation to the labor organizations of the 1930's. *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, illustrates the blending of radical sub-genres and other mediums of the period, as well as the evolution of Steinbeck's communal vision. *The Joads* illustrate the continuation of Steinbeck's philosophy of the phalanx, and serve as the space in which he works out these beliefs from multiple perspectives. *Cannery Row*, published in 1945 as WWII came to a close, displays a more fully developed vision of communal existence that exemplifies Steinbeck's own leftist beliefs. The denizens of *Cannery Row* provide Steinbeck with the means to treat a small group as representative of his anti-capitalistic communal vision for society as a whole.

Running throughout all of these novels there are a few recurring elements to be analyzed. Steinbeck's beliefs appear to parallel Marxism in several ways. An analysis of these similarities will help to illustrate where Steinbeck aligns with the radical tradition, as well as where he does not. Secondly, each novel contains a character or characters seemingly in tune with Steinbeck's own leftist beliefs, and an analysis of these characters yields a thorough depiction of Steinbeck's own political and philosophical development. The transition that takes place brings Steinbeck from texts like *In Dubious Battle* that

allow him to work with the idea of the group-man as part of their narrative, to texts like *Cannery Row* that are designed with the philosophy of the phalanx at the forefront. This evolution of Steinbeck's concern with the phalanx, or the group-man phenomenon, will form the core of this argument. This is the most important point of consideration, and the analysis of Steinbeck's Marxist content and the use of mouthpieces will revolve around this discussion of the group-man concept. This philosophy of the phalanx forms the heart of Steinbeck's radical vision. Steinbeck's preoccupation with collectivity is also what serves to set him apart from many of the other radically concerned authors writing in the same period, as well as what places him in a closer proximity to a more collectively concerned organic communism.

While Steinbeck's novels are repeatedly concerned with the concept of the group-man and the idealism of a communal existence, other authors of the period such as John Dos Passos were constructing an image of a far more fractured and isolationist United States. The majority of the novelists known to be aligned with leftist beliefs were illustrating the principle Lukacs sets forth in *The Theory of the Novel* that, "to be a man in the new world is to be solitary," (36). In the *U.S.A.* trilogy Dos Passos' characters interact through a series of business dealings and sexual liaisons, but none of them ever form any lasting relationships, either platonic or romantic, that provide even a modicum of the dependable reliance that exists between many of Steinbeck's characters. Steinbeck presents his own commentary on the isolation felt by the cogs of the proletariat in *Of Mice and Men*, when George and Lenny form a rare and inexplicable bond that is forced to dissolve, leaving their communal vision of the American dream lying bloody in a

riverbed a few miles south of Soledad. A location that drives home the message of a solitary existence. The explanation of Steinbeck's approach in contrast to other author's of the period may stem from the notion that radical authors tended to address these social issues either from a position supporting the working man, or one condemning the lifestyles of the upper class. Steinbeck relies almost entirely on the first of these two options. Sherwood Anderson's *Poor White* nicely blends critiques of the workingman's struggle and the upper class's luxury, but Anderson's characters still remain divided individuals. Even in marriage Hugh McVey is denied the sense of belonging he seeks throughout the novel. While *In Dubious Battle* is not an overly optimistic novel, as his vision evolves Steinbeck leaves behind some of his cynicism and becomes more singularly concerned with group-man and the hope that collectivity offers both as an escape from isolation and a way out from under the grinding yellow heel of capitalism.

Sinclair Lewis was also concerned with the need for leftist literature, even though he was skeptical of the Communist Party's influence over the genre. The novel *Babbitt* demonstrates his critique of capitalist society, although, like Steinbeck, Lewis does so in a rather unique style. George Babbitt lives a solitary lifestyle, in which his friendships are shallow, his business relationships are superficial, and his familial connections have run cold. Babbitt cannot even find solace in the arms of another woman. There is no place in which he can find a sense of belonging, because he is unable to make even the most basic of human connections. Lewis does a masterful job of depicting Babbitt as a solitary figure even when he is in the company of others. The novel may not focus on the working class, but George's awkward middle-class position denies him the ability to

belong either above or below, forcing him to become an outsider. *Babbitt* does not conform to almost any notion of the radical tradition, except for this basic isolation that serves as a symptom of existing within a capitalist system. Steinbeck incorporates this theme as well, but he does so while providing the image of collectivity as an alternative. Lewis, Dos Passos, and Anderson all depict a lamentation of isolation, rather than a hope for collectivity.

This analysis of Steinbeck's novels must also be mindful of how his foray into radical literature is shaped by other texts produced by radical novelists, and the fact that what may in fact be his most radical text is not produced until he begins to write in a style that is more uniquely his own. The examination of these novels will illustrate the way that Steinbeck's brand of leftist philosophy is controversial because the parallels between his works and the concerns of the Communist Party set forth by Marxist principles, result from an organic agreement between Steinbeck and the foundation of leftist philosophy. Steinbeck strives to act according to his own principles, as he is reluctant to be spoon fed communism, but left to his own devices his philosophy remains similar to a more fundamental set of Marxist beliefs. The separating factor in this relationship comes down to the mysticism laced within Steinbeck's moral philosophy, which Marx would most likely consider to be a display of naïveté. Steinbeck's vision is one of hope for humanity through reliance on one another, and the communal vision that develops over the length of his career is what makes him a truly radical novelist, even if not by the usual standards of the radical tradition as set forth by critics like Rideout and Foley.

CHAPTER 1: *IN DUBIOUS BATTLE*

The concept of the group-man that permeates through John Steinbeck's writings of the 1930's and 1940's is an analysis of collective existence, and the notion that like any organism, the sum of a phalanx's parts are not equal to the whole. Steinbeck's preoccupation with group-man was heavily influenced by the farm labor organization movements taking place in California during the 1930's, as this period, "brought not only the Depression, but, increasingly, severe labor strife as well – general strikes, marches, riots, and vigilante action" (Benson & Loftis, 198). These labor disputes provided the background for many of the novels that helped to form the radical tradition as a whole, and while Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* is following suit, the novel is more complex than the simple narrative of a strike. On the surface *In Dubious Battle* tells the story of an apple pickers strike organized by two communist labor leaders, the experienced Mac and the neophyte Jim. The novel focuses on the methods of the strike leaders, and their treatment of the mob they help to form. In *The Radical Novel in the United States*, Walter B Rideout describes four primary types of radical novels, the first of which are, "those centered about a strike" (171). In 1936 when John Steinbeck published *In Dubious Battle*, critics immediately found themselves uncertain as to whether it was just another strike novel or if his condescension toward the labor organizers made the novel something else all together. The most basic point of contention was that strike novels tend to follow a standard narrative arc, in which, "the climax is reached when the strike succeeds or is broken" (Rideout, 172). *In Dubious Battle* fails to fit this mold, and the

result is that critics now, such as Rideout, as well as critics of the thirties and forties tend to place Steinbeck's work in a separate category of works that are concerned with social issues, but not entirely supportive of communist beliefs. The differences between Steinbeck's novel and those readily accepted as radical, help to illuminate Steinbeck's own radical philosophy as well as his points of disagreement with farm labor organizers and the Communist Party.

While the majority of critics have acknowledged the inability of *In Dubious Battle* to be accepted as a standard strike novel, other critics have offered alternative perspectives. Frederick J. Hoffman claims, "The superior novel of this class is John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*" (189), and even as he may be overly presumptive in doing so, Hoffman's claim does force the reader to consider the effectiveness of Steinbeck's novel as a vehicle for the expression of his own views. In their analysis of *In Dubious Battle*, Jackson Benson and Anne Loftis offer the example that, "When John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* came out in early 1936, Fred T. Marsh in a review in the New York Times called it 'both dramatically and realistically, the best labor and strike novel to come out of our contemporary economic and social unrest' (194). However, Benson and Loftis suggest that this statement is not exactly correct even when interpreted as applying more to Steinbeck's overall realism rather than the accuracy of his portrayal of the strike leaders. Steinbeck's novel was real enough to captivate audiences, and "it is dramatically effective and *convincingly* realistic" (B&L, 194), but these things simply prove that Steinbeck is able to construct a narrative capable of being convincing to the reader, not that the novel is compelling in a way that would align his message with other leftist

authors. Ironically, radical novels were generally driven by an attempt to make communist propaganda more realistic by making a political narrative, and then further embedding politics within that narrative. This is exactly what Steinbeck has done, but instead of party propaganda, he has created a narrative to bear his own philosophical and political views. Views organized around his interest in the phalanx

Steinbeck complicates the realism of his novel by, “Borrowing the physical setup of an earlier strike, the Peach Strike on the Tagos Ranch in Tulare County in August 1933, and taking the major events of the Cotton Strike of October 1933” (B&L, 202). The Torgus Valley Strike depicted in *In Dubious Battle* is a composite of earlier events that have been heavily fictionalized. Mary Heaton Vorse’s *Strike!* is generally considered to be one of the premier novels of the strike form. Vorse was never actually aligned with the Communist Party, although her novel did receive the endorsement of Mike Gold, which worried other authors like Sinclair Lewis, who thought such an endorsement would limit the reach of an important leftist author. While Vorse also borrows from real events, she does so to demonstrate the power and effectiveness of the strike in Gastonia. Steinbeck on the other hand uses the strike to critique the communist labor organizers, and provides no conclusion to the labor struggle. Looking at the treatment of Steinbeck’s strike leaders Mac and Jim in comparison to those involved in these similar strikes, illustrates Steinbeck’s reluctance to accept the totality of communist politics. Radical forms, particularly that of the strike novel, are primarily supposed to convey a concern for the struggle of the workingman, which Steinbeck does in his compassionate portrayal of the struggling laborers. However, *In Dubious Battle* is continually attacked from both

sides because it portrays the need for a change in the American capitalist system, but simultaneously attacks those most prominently seeking that change.

On January 15th, 1935, Steinbeck wrote a letter to George Albee about his decision to write *In Dubious Battle*. He writes, “I had an idea that I was going to write the autobiography of a Communist” (Letters, 98), and as Benson and Loftis point out, this was going to be “a first-person narrative from Chamber’s point of view – a diary of a communist labor organizer” (201). Steinbeck’s research into labor organizations had led him to receive numerous accounts of the actions of Pat Chambers, who was one of the most prominent strike leaders and labor organizers of the 1930’s. Mac and Jim are supposed to be roughly based on these accounts, but most likely they are composites not only of Chambers but also of all the party men that Steinbeck was meeting at the time. Therefore the gap between the descriptions of Chambers and of Steinbeck’s leaders is almost inexplicable. This becomes one of the great points of contention in the argument as to the radicalism of the novel, because as Barbara Foley points out in *Radical Representations*, *In Dubious Battle* uncharacteristically, “signals highly ambiguous attitudes toward its Communist-organizer protagonists, while proletarian novels are usually fairly clear about where the reader’s approval should be directed” (Foley, 273). The fact that Steinbeck leaves the reader in a position from which interpreting the actions of the leaders will almost assuredly elicit a negative response is what sets this novel apart not only from the radical tradition, but also from real life descriptions of the labor activists.

As a district organizer for the Communist Party founded Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, Pat Chambers was known to be a caring and compassionate man, intimately concerned with the lives of the workers. Mac and Jim on the other hand seem to be concerned with nothing other than the success of the strike and how that success would figure into the big picture for the Party. The strike is not as much about the men that are striking, as it is about what victory will mean when the cotton-picking starts in the next valley, and how they can effect labor relations as a whole. Dakin, one of the natural leaders of the itinerant farm workers used by Mac, says, “You’re a cold blooded bastard [Mac]. Don’t you think of nothing but ‘strike’?” (169). Dakin is responding to Mac’s desire to use his deceased comrade Joy, to illicit further support for the strike. In *John Steinbeck’s Fiction*, John Timmerman points out that, “While Mac ‘uses’ them like ciphers in development of his movement, Chambers seemed to be motivated by a genuine admiration for the men and commitment to them” (81). Mac seems to have no admiration for the men, and instead treats them more like cattle waiting to be branded with the party insignia. Mac is not part of the group; he only wishes to take advantage of their collective strength. When the police and vigilantes begin to make life more difficult for the strikers, Mac wishes for blood and says, “This bunch of bums isn’t keyed up. I hope to Christ something happens to make ‘em mad before long. This is going to fizzle out if something don’t happen” (165). Mac is hoping for a stampede. On the other hand, “Chambers more often acted as a counselor of restraint” (B&L, 204). Mac’s hope for blood is about as far from a matter of restraint as possible. Chambers cared for the men, even admiring their spirits as Timmerman

proposes, but Mac says, “Don’t you go liking people, Jim. We can’t waste time liking people” (121). The strike leaders that Steinbeck constructs are cruel and inhuman. They are driven by an unrelenting desire for revolution, and treat the strikers as pawns rather than comrades. While many of these organizers were portrayed as heroic in radical novels, Benson and Loftis claim, “it is probable that [Steinbeck] did not believe in their heroism and selflessness” (209), because he was receiving his information secondhand. This may in fact be the case, but Steinbeck also could have vilified his own strike leaders as a means to demonstrate the disparity he believed to exist between their philosophy and his own. In many ways Steinbeck depicts Mac as a force serving to continue the worker’s solitary existence, rather than striving to encourage communal values.

The level of violence that is depicted is also a historical exaggeration. During the course of the Torgus Valley Strike there are two murders. During this period of time, “in two instances, strikers were shot and killed” (B&L, 215), and therefore both of these events make it into Steinbeck’s narrative. Not only is the number of deaths disproportionate though, but Mac also makes it seem as if this is common. When Joy is killed by a vigilante sniper, Mac says, “Joy always wanted to lead people, and now he’s going to do it, even if he’s in a box” (173), and then props Joy up on a wagon so his body can be literally paraded through town. Steinbeck makes the parade all about the cause rather than an event serving multiple purposes. There is no mention of paying respect to the dead, only the cause. Mac excuses the cold-bloodedness of his actions by saying, “We got damn few things to fight with. We got to use what we can,” and, “We’ll get a hell of a lot of people on our side if we put on a public funeral” (175). Mac’s utter

disregard for human life is a recurring theme throughout the novel, and Steinbeck is undoubtedly trying to make a point about the Party mentality toward a revolution at any cost.

In case the reader does not pick up on this the first time with Joy, the novel ends with a far more exaggerated example of quasi-martyrdom. By concluding with Jim's death the novel becomes a means by which to make the reader aware of just how cold Mac really is. Joseph Beach says, "The strength of proletarian fiction is that note, of comrades who want nothing for themselves alone – who sink their personal interest in that of the whole tribe of underdogs" (Beach, 252). Jim's death could be taken in this fashion as well. One could argue that the novel helps to illustrate how willing the labor organizers are to sacrifice themselves, but the sad tone and cold repetition that Steinbeck employs, deprive the novel of that satisfaction. Closing with Mac on a platform next to Jim's corpse, announcing, "Comrades! He didn't want nothing for himself" (349); Steinbeck delivers no inkling of satisfaction. Instead the reader is left with the notion that the struggle for revolution is both costly and eternal, and therefore most likely not worthwhile. When London, another of the head workers that Mac and Jim use, says, "the whole thing sounds kind of Bolshevick," Jim replies, "What do you care what it sounds like, if it works?" (284). This could be construed as an argument against Steinbeck's portrayal of the strike leaders as negative, except for the fact that despite the traditional strike novel formula, there is no success to be found in *In Dubious Battle*. The battle is left off as a perpetual struggle, conveying Steinbeck's own personal doubts. However,

there does seem to be some element of hope in the novel, which mainly comes in the form of Dr. Burton.

Steinbeck frequently creates characters that mirror his own belief system. These characters often exhibit the traits of Steinbeck's friend Ed Ricketts as well. Ricketts was a marine biologist that inspired a large portion of Steinbeck's moral and political philosophy. The mouthpieces Steinbeck constructs do not always take the form of just one character, but in the case of *In Dubious Battle*, there is Dr. Burton. In his autobiography of Steinbeck, Jackson Bensons says, "In this novel Rickett's influence would seem to have an overt expression in a character, Doc Burton, who is modeled after Ricketts and who in speech and behavior reflects Rickett's philosophy" (244). While the character is based on Ricketts, he also serves as a mouthpiece for Steinbeck's own views as can be seen in the similarities between Dr. Burton's dialogue with Mac and Jim and Steinbeck's own commentary found in his letters. They are both intrigued by group-man and demonstrate a subtle lamentation of how the phalanx is being abused.

Dr. Burton represents an outside perspective to the group-man forces at play in the novel. John Timmerman proposes that, "within each of these novels, however, and in all the later works, Steinbeck offers an alternative to the Group Man: the compassionate and creative individual" (Timmerman, 25). Dr. Burton fills this role, and by setting Dr. Burton apart as an individual, Steinbeck is able to ascribe his own views into the argument more directly. One difference being that, "Although Doc Burton is generally regarded as Steinbeck's mouthpiece, the author never condemns Mac and Jim for their radical social philosophy" (Han, 44). However, Dr. Burton shares the same questioning

position as Steinbeck in regard to the communist movement. Dr. Burton even has some of the same experiences as Steinbeck. When Francis Walker introduced Steinbeck to farm labor organizers, “since one was either for them or against them – there was no compromise – he did more listening than talking” (B&L, 199). Dr. Burton finds himself in the same position with Mac and Jim, as he says, “I don’t know why I go on talking” (153). Despite existing within the physical scene, both Dr. Burton and Steinbeck are outsiders because the labor organizers have no desire to understand the gray area in which they exist; a place between revolutionary allegiance and communal appreciation.

Mac cannot understand why Dr. Burton helps them, and yet does not blindly commit to the cause. Mac says, “You’re not a Party man, but you work with us all the time; you never get anything for it. I don’t know whether you believe in what we’re doing or not, you never say, you just work. I’ve been out with you before, and I’m not sure you believe in the cause at all” (149). Mac questions Dr. Burton’s ability to support the Party, which is ironic in the same way that challenging Steinbeck’s radicalism is. Dr. Burton may not believe in the propaganda, or even in the notion of revolution itself, but he is simultaneously living the sort of lifestyle that an actual communal existence would require, by unquestioningly fulfilling his specific role for the sake of the whole. Dr. Burton acts as if he sees himself as part of a larger human collective, of which the strikers are a smaller segment, and Steinbeck’s later novels suggest that he feels similarly. The enigmatic position Dr. Burton occupies within the strike is indicative of Steinbeck’s own difficulty in placing his views on the phalanx in contrast to those of communist labor organizers like Mac.

Dr. Burton's reply to Mac in this exchange is where Steinbeck's own voice becomes evident. Dr. Burton says, "Well, you say I don't believe in the cause. That's like not believing in the moon. There've been communes before, and there will be again. But you people have an idea that if you can establish the thing, the job'll be done. Nothing stops, Mac. If you were able to put an idea into effect tomorrow, it would start changing right away. Establish a commune, and the same gradual flux will continue" (149). In the same way that Steinbeck's radical politics focus on communal existence, this is the portion of Mac's cause that Dr. Burton is interested in, even if he doubts the finality of the situation. Dr. Burton charges that Mac cannot truly be successful because he is too inflexible. Dr. Burton continues to say, "I want to see the whole picture – as nearly as I can. I don't want to put blinders on the blinders of 'good' and 'bad,' and limit my vision. If I used the term 'good' on a thing I'd lose my license to inspect it, because there might be bad in it. Don't you see? I want to be able to look at the whole thing" (149). In this defense Dr. Burton has perfectly encapsulated Steinbeck's own reluctance to commit whole-heartedly to any particular doctrine or philosophy, in attempt to preserve his ability to discern the truth for himself. Steinbeck is concerned with the workingman, and he does think that radical change needs to take place, but he wants to be able to consider these issues on his own terms instead of having to choose between adopting the Party's principles or being used a pawn, which are the two basic roles offered to the characters of *In Dubious Battle*.

One of the most intriguing parts of this exchange between Dr. Burton and Mac is the fact that Steinbeck gets to write the leftist response to his own position. Mac

questioned Dr. Burton at the onset, but the exchange concludes with a diagnosis. Mac says, “The trouble with you, Doc, is you’re too god damn far left to be a communist. You go too far with collectivization. How do you account for people like me, directing things, moving things? That puts your group man out” (151), and this may be the actual line of opposition Steinbeck believes to exist between his own views and those of people like Pat Chambers. The collectivization Mac speaks of is much like the notion of organic communism set forth by Marx, and in this sense both Dr. Burton and Steinbeck are inadvertently more orthodox in their Marxism than his communist characters are. Thomas M. Tammaro makes a very interesting point about how Dr. Burton becomes the key to interpreting the novel as a whole, because in order to make the reader sympathize with the cause, “all [Steinbeck] would have needed to do was bring Doc Burton back into the struggle to take his place among the rank and file” (101). The question of how to interpret Jim, as either a fanatic or a martyr, is made clearer by the notion that the most sympathetic character in the novel is never brought into the fold. Dr. Burton is certainly Steinbeck’s mouthpiece in the novel, and he is also the means by which Steinbeck makes the reader aware of his attempt to use this narrative as an analysis of group-man. Dr. Burton says that to learn about a medical condition, one must go to the site. Steinbeck sought out labor organizers and Dr. Burton worked in strike camps, so that they could analyze group-man first hand.

In a 1933 letter to George Albee Steinbeck says that man, “arranges himself into larger units, which I have called the phalanx” (79). This interest in the phalanx or group-man principle was one of Steinbeck’s utmost preoccupations throughout his career.

Intrigued by the way that the sum of the parts did not equal the whole, Steinbeck was not only interested in group-man, but in the communal existence that group-man was capable of propagating. However, *In Dubious Battle* represents Steinbeck's group-man philosophy in its earliest stages. The reader is offered a glimpse of the positive force group-man can become as they swarm over Anderson's farm picking the apples at an alarming pace as payment for using his land. This scene is of the group-man unopposed or externally controlled though, and this is certainly a novel about opposition. Benson and Loftis say, "His intentions, he told his friends, 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 it in his creative writing" (197), and Timmerman points out that, "in his earliest references to the novel, Steinbeck often described it as the Phalanx novel" (83). However, this investigation of Steinbeck's own philosophical views is based on the premise that *In Dubious Battle* is in fact a vehicle for this argument, but in no way the final vehicle. The phalanx argument provided in this novel is not about the nature of the phenomenon in general, as much as about application.

The strikers of *In Dubious Battle* achieve the mob mentality, but a mob becomes more of a type of group-man than an example of the overall phenomenon. In 1933, John Steinbeck wrote to Carlton Sheffield, "It is quite easy for the group, acting under stimuli to viciousness, to eliminate the kindly natures of its units. When acting as a group, men do not partake of their ordinary natures at all" (75). *In Dubious Battle* is an analysis of the stimulus Steinbeck is describing more than about group-man itself. Dr. Burton makes this point when he says, "group-men are always getting some kind of infection" (150),

and this is the difference between the positive output of the communal group-man that picks Anderson's apples, and the mob mentality that overcomes them as they assault strike breakers and yearn for the blood Mac is eager for them to have. When Mac questions how Dr. Burton accounts for his role in the strike, the doctor replies, "You might be an expression of group-man, a cell endowed with a special function like an eye cell, drawing your force from group-man, and at the same time directing him, like an eye. Your eye both takes orders from and gives orders to your brain" (151). However, Steinbeck's comment as to the role of stimuli on group-man might also suggest that Mac is more of a virus than an eye, infecting the group and turning the phalanx into a mob. Mac "believes that an individual may be manipulated and sacrificed to benefit the masses" (Han, 43), and therefore he can never truly become part of the group. The confusion over this point is palpable in the text, and is indicative of the fact that Steinbeck is still formulating these thoughts himself. The mentality that one must be willing to endure wounds, as must the group-man as represented by a single amalgamated form like a mob, is contradicted if individuals must be manipulated to serve their role, proving that the group is not an organic form. Jim is the obvious contradiction to this as he both longs to become part of the phalanx, as well as becoming part of the leadership. In turn, Jim's death allows for him to become a sort of group-man martyr, but Mac's political motivation keeps him on the outside. Mac's role suggests that the labor organizers are perhaps foolish in their attempts to use the mob, rather than realizing the true power and possibility of group-man's communal roots. Mac and Jim have become so preoccupied with constructing the dictatorship of the proletariat, that they have

forgotten the final collective goal of communism. Mary Heaton Vorse ascribed the same forgetfulness to Russian Communists, and denied the American Communist Party her loyalties in fear that they would follow a similar pattern of stalling socialism giving way to despotism. Steinbeck's argument is not quite as pointed, but his critique of the Mac's manipulation of the phalanx illustrates a similar fear.

The example set by Jim's involvement in the strike is far more in tune with the group-man mentality than Mac's, because as Jim says, "I wanted you to use me" (280). Jim naturally appreciates group-man. When he is explaining why he wants to join the labor organizers, he says, "I used to be lonely, and I'm not any more. If I go out now it won't matter. The thing won't stop. I'm just a little part of it. It will grow and grow," and, "My old man used to fight alone. When he got licked, he was licked. I remember how lonely it was. But, I'm not lonely any more, and I can't be licked, because I'm more than myself" (260). While Mac's influence over Jim turns him toward the treatment of group-man as a mob, Jim understands the true power of being a piece of something far greater. Owens says, "man's need to belong to something larger than the isolated self, even if that something is as dubious as the cause depicted in the novel" (81), and this is very much the case with Jim. Jim is an example of all those who feel the power of group-man and are not aware that the labor organizers are tapping into this power to support their own political goals, and not merely for the good of the group. Steinbeck says, "When your phalanx needs you it will use you, if you are the material to be used" (Letters, 81), and Jim's longing to be used may transform him into the material that is required. However, because of Mac's influence, "while Jim is moving closer to this euphoric sense of

belonging to something larger than himself, he is becoming progressively dehumanized” (Owens, 81). This is why Timmerman claims, “The novel reveals the brutal inability of the Group Man psychology to arrive at any significant answer” (Timmerman, 90), but this is not the case. The novel does not indict group-man psychology as a whole; it indicts the corrupt usage of this psychology and accuses the Communist labor organizers of doing so. Mac and Jim are portrayed as being more interested in the socialist dictatorship of the proletariat itself, than in the revolution of socialism as a path to the collective order of communism.

The underlying Marxist principles that Steinbeck is either consciously or inadvertently drawing from, approach utopian notions of communal existence, and just as Mac accuses Dr. Burton of being too far left, Steinbeck may have been as well. In a very bold comment for 1933, Steinbeck wrote to Carlton Sheffield, “Russia is giving us a nice example of human units who are trying with a curious nostalgia to get away from their individuality and reestablish the group unit the race remembers and wishes” (76). Steinbeck looks at communism in Russia as a positive example of man attempting to rediscover his group roots, even if the process is flawed. *In Dubious Battle* introduces Steinbeck’s reader to the idea of the phalanx, but this novel is far from being Steinbeck’s all-inclusive thesis on the group-man mentality.

Between the nearly non-existent parallels connecting Steinbeck’s characters and the labor organizers they were based on, the not so subtle correlations linking Dr. Burton and Steinbeck’s own views, and the complicated depiction of the phalanx, *In Dubious Battle* is far more complex than a simple strike novel. The on going debate as to where it

fits in regard to the radical tradition is well founded, but by looking outside of this text at the evolution of Steinbeck's political philosophy one can construct a much broader landscape in which this is merely the beginning. In a January 15th, 1933 letter to Geroge Albee, Steinbeck writes, "I had an idea that I was going to write the autobiography of a Communist," but instead, "I have used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself," and now, "I'm not interested in strike as a means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition" (98). However, the symbol of the strike may have bourn too much of its own inherent significance to allow Steinbeck the ability to clearly convey his commentary on the phalanx as well.

Steinbeck knew that he was going to anger both those that oppose the communist movement and those that support it. Critics that suggest, "*In Dubious Battle* succeeds because it avoids polemics and propaganda" (Tammaro, 101), are not paying enough attention to the fact that just because Steinbeck is not supporting the propaganda of the Party does not mean that he is not making a very pointed argument of his own. *In Dubious Battle* is a condemnation of the techniques he believes to be employed by the labor organizers, and their corruption of group-man as a whole. Warren French says, "*In Dubious Battle* is the best novel about a strike ever written because Steinbeck refused to become a blind partisan and rather showed how struggles between laborers and employers – however provoked or justified – can inevitably prove only destructive and demoralizing to both parties" (99). Yet, this novel does far more than that. Steinbeck

does not merely critique the situation between laborers and employers, but between laborers and labor leaders as well.

The “dubious battle on the plains of Heaven,” Milton depicts in *Paradise Lost*, from which Steinbeck draws his title, is a futile engagement effortlessly concluded by the Son of God. Timmerman suggests the allusion to Milton is designed to emphasize the, “hazy battle of the strikers” (87), which is never truly a battle between black and white as much as it is a confrontation between shades of gray. The uncertainty as to which side is justified in their actions is as debatable in *Paradise Lost* as it is in *In Dubious Battle*, because this is just the beginning of a much greater narrative progression that unfolds in Steinbeck’s writing over the next decade. The phalanx has only just begun to be explored.

CHAPTER 2: *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

In the 1781 publication of *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote, “The farmer thus ploughing with his child, and to feed his family, is inferior only to the emperor of China ploughing as an example to his kingdom” (55). The American psyche in the eighteenth-century was one centered on farming, not only as the backbone of the domestic American economy, but also as a noble and rewarding lifestyle. In Cletus Daniel’s *Bitter Harvest*, he argues, “Farming was not just an occupation but a way of life, one singularly fitted to promote and safeguard those values of self-reliance, freedom, industry, simplicity, and thrift celebrated and presumably practiced by the agrarians who largely composed this country’s founding generation” (15). The dream of self-reliance on which this country was founded, and the desire to no longer serve under the nobility of England, pushed settlers across the Atlantic, but with the rise of slavery in the south and industrialization in the North, a new brand of landholding nobility was created. This scene had evolved rather cruelly by the time Steinbeck set out to write *The Grapes of Wrath*. Industrialization had set upon farmers as agricultural profit margins shrunk, until greedy landowners and banks drove them from the land that once gave birth to the American dream. As the nation matured, industrialization decimated the ability of the farmer to make a living on his own, and the lives of tenant farmers made things seem as if, “pretty soon now we’ll have serfs again” (Grapes, 364).

The back drop for *The Grapes of Wrath* is the tale of how “farming became industry” (Grapes, 298), and farm families were driven from the land as the dust storms of the 1930’s added to the suffocating pressures of the depression. These uprooted farmers set out to seek greener pastures, and found them in California, only to discover they were not welcome. The Joad family is the means Steinbeck uses to convey the horror of these events, and the atrocities committed in the name of the bottom line. Mimi Gladstien says, “the Joads gain much of their literary cachet from the similarities of the problems suffered by immigrants everywhere. The experience is universal” (134), and this is the effect Steinbeck was hoping for. This novel was not simply about the Okie migration, but about the treatment of one group of humans by another. Perhaps this is why Steinbeck created an almost entirely white cast for his novel. In *The Marxian Imagination*, Julian Markels says, “we see the radical novelist often bypassing the representation of overdetermination” (53), and this may have been precisely what Steinbeck was doing. The claim that Steinbeck is consciously whitening his characters in order to serve the purpose of avoiding overdetermination is bold, especially in contrast to other radical novelists that were true to the race of their characters as part of their attention to detail. The more believable alternative would be that Steinbeck was simply following a long-standing tradition of white authors depicting white characters. However, other authors like Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were careful to focus on white characters so that their social activism would reach as broad of a base as possible. Either way, this whitening resulted in the race of his characters not

being entirely accurate in Steinbeck's depiction of the California farm workers, although he was otherwise a stickler for detail.

In his autobiography of Steinbeck, Jackson Benson reports, "[Tom] Collins apparently fancied himself a social scientist" (343), and provided Steinbeck with a great "stack of material" (342) regarding the lifestyles of the migrant workers in the government camp Collins managed. While this information was used to help shape the characters and incidents in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck did not have to rely predominantly on third party information the way he did for *In Dubious Battle*, because "The family Steinbeck was writing about was actually a composite of several families he had encountered in visiting one squatters' camp after another" (Benson, 334). This supposed attention to detail was met with some uncertainty, as many critics thought, "Most of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century attempts to deal with the 'poor but honest' workingman as a 'prince in disguise' failed to convince, because the writers themselves were temperamentally and culturally too far removed from the proletarian's world. Their books were more often than not merely well-intended slumming expeditions from which they returned exalted or depressed" (Daniel, 206). Steinbeck was intimately concerned with the struggles of these workers though, and spent vast amounts of time visiting itinerant worker camps, and government camps throughout the late 1930's, especially during 1938 while he was writing this novel. In fact his attention to detail spared so little that, "*The Grapes of Wrath* crafted a portrait that many former Dust Bowl migrants have long regarded as demeaning," in turn, "*The Grapes of Wrath*, for all its good intentions, ironically helped to solidify some of the unfortunate images

which Californians already associated with the newcomers from that region” (Gregory, 111). However, both the white washing of his characters and the unforgiving portrayal of the Okies, served to create a more powerful piece of social commentary. In addition, these visits to worker camps allowed Steinbeck to witness the point of group-man’s formation.

While Steinbeck was one of the leftist authors that would not sacrifice aesthetic for didacticism, *The Grapes of Wrath* was a novel that Steinbeck intended as something pointedly concerned with itinerant farm workers. This novel was designed from the onset to be a social commentary, meant to convey Steinbeck’s own moral and political philosophy to the reader. In the journal he kept while he was writing this book, he wrote, “This must be a good book. It simply must. I haven’t any choice,” and that he must struggle to make it so, “until the whole throbbing thing emerges” (Working Days, 25). Steinbeck felt passionately about *The Grapes of Wrath* because he was concerned about the itinerant workers suffering all over California, while the creation of this text also gave him an opportunity to further expound upon his own leftist beliefs and the nature of the phalanx. Perhaps the amount of passion that went into the crafting of this particular novel is the reason Joseph Beach said, “*The Grapes of Wrath* is probably the finest example produced in the United States of what in the thirties was called the proletarian novel” (250). *The Grapes of Wrath* is more widely accepted as a radical novel, but the emerging mysticism concerning the phalanx that Steinbeck ascribes to his more leftist characters, simultaneously serves to uphold the rift between him and the more traditional

radical novelists. An analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* will illustrate the evolution of Steinbeck's philosophy, as the tone of *In Dubious Battle* is left behind.

The Grapes of Wrath is more widely considered as a radical novel, not just because Steinbeck forgoes the attack on labor organizers and strives to create a more realistic image of his subjects, but because this novel embraces many of the forms that radical novels rely upon. While *In Dubious Battle* toys with the form of the strike novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* borrows from multiple radical formations. The four main forms described by Rideout are, “ (1) those centered about a strike; (2) those concerned with the development of an individual's class-consciousness and his conversion to Communism; (3) those dealing with the ‘bottom dogs,’ the lowest layers of society; and (4) those describing the decay of the middle class” (Rideout, 171). This novel is not centered around a strike, although the plot is driven by one to some degree, and the narrative provides a sort of behind the scenes look at the forces both working toward and against labor organization in general. The second and third categories are those that apply most readily. The Joad family as a whole is forced to become more class-conscious, but three characters in particular move in to the realm of communism by distinct individual paths. Ma is always mindful of the power in numbers and the wrongs that are being perpetrated in the name of capitalism, Preacher Casy turns from religion to communism, and Tom receives the most full-bodied transformation of all as Casy's death propels him into a life of actively pursuing justice for the proletariat. Barbara Foley says, “The bildungsroman is the classic form of the bourgeois novel” (321), which is transcended only by the proletarian bildungsroman. Steinbeck acknowledges this by incorporating several of

these within the same text. Steinbeck also makes these conversions logically understandable for the reader. In the example of Casy's initial realization of the power of communal effort, Casy says, "Well one day they gave us some beans that was sour... Well, sir, then we all got yellin' ...and they give us some other stuff to eat" (490). The point is easy to follow, and allows the reader to see the creation of a supposed communist as something far less threatening than the indoctrination that takes place in the fields of *In Dubious Battle*.

This is not to suggest that Steinbeck came to be more tolerant of the leftist organizers though, because he is still doing this to illustrate his own philosophy of the phalanx and not the beliefs of the Party. As for dealing with the lowest members of society, Steinbeck has done a fine job of ensuring that the reader understands the place of the itinerant farm worker. They have no place. Steinbeck does less to illustrate the decay of the middle class in the Joad narrative, but he does elsewhere. As Rideout says, "Not only is the grim life of the workers in the mill, saloon, and slum depicted with thorough exactness, but also the pleasanter existence of the owners" (17), and the intercalary chapters help to provide this perspective so that the Joad narrative can continue uninterrupted. Timmerman suggests, "Such passages also serve to universalize the story for the reader; by being placed in historical context, the Joads become part of our own story" (107), and these chapters combined with the amalgamation of forms certainly suggest that Steinbeck was attempting to force the reader into participating within his narrative.

This is not to argue that Steinbeck is attempting to place himself within the radical tradition, but rather to illustrate the influence the radical tradition had on Steinbeck's construction of a social novel concerned with issues that commonly fell within the realm of radical literature. In addition to adopting some of the basic forms found in the radical tradition, Lara Hapke suggests that many aspects of *The Grapes of Wrath* narrative, "the fallen patriarch, dreaming of a comeback," with, "the labor remembrances of the father in the sons narrative," and "vignettes of the saintly mother" (Hapke, 224), are recurring images throughout radical literature. These three points actually serve to provide the impetus for almost the entire plot as old Tom Joad seeks new horizons, young Tom Joad is driven by the events that have shaped his father's life as well as his own, and Ma Joad is repeatedly the source of strength and virtue along the way. Steinbeck is clearly drawing from the radical tradition in this novel, but he is doing so without ever demonstrating an unambiguous agreement with the values of the Communist Party. The presence of additional influences helps to demonstrate the way Steinbeck is simply a socially motivated artist using all of the various tools available to him.

Steinbeck's narrative exhibits many parallels with the basic components of the traditional African-American migration narratives, such as Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter*. Farah Jasmine Griffin's work on the African American migration narrative illustrates that these narratives have, "four pivotal moments" in common: an event that propels the action, an initial confrontation with the new landscape, and attempt to negotiate the landscape, and finally a realization of either possibilities or limitations (3). These events comprise the plot of Steinbeck's novel perfectly. Perhaps, these are

merely the inherent parts of any migration narrative, but by making these points so prominent Steinbeck might have been able to make African-American readers identify with the text even though the characters were all white. Steinbeck was clearly drawing from the radical tradition, but similar to the parallels between his own leftist beliefs and those of the party, these may have been coincidental alignments due to the verisimilitude of the subject matter. However, the philosophy that is set forth throughout the text is also full of uncanny parallels, not so much with the Party, but with Marx himself.

Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath* there are an abundance of underlying Marxist principles. This is not to suggest that Steinbeck is reproducing Marx, but rather that there is a basic agreement between the philosophy of Marx and the philosophy of Steinbeck. This agreement is one of the reasons that Steinbeck occupies such a precarious position in relation to the radical tradition of the 1930's. Steinbeck's philosophy is more similar to the Marxism on which the philosophy of the Party is based, than it is with the philosophy of the Party being illustrated in most radical novels. As illustrated earlier in this chapter, Steinbeck depicted the agrarian lifestyle as the heart of the American dream. This image is present throughout a majority of his novels, most poignantly in his depiction of the American dream in *Of Mice and Men*, which presented an image of group-man's ability to exist without being reliant on the capitalist system. In *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx suggests that, "Agriculture is the only productive labor" (130), and this basic principle sets up the correlation between Marx's argument and Steinbeck's commentary on the industrialization of farming.

The Joad narrative begins with the family being forced off of their land because their profits are not high enough to satisfy the bank that owns the property. Marx says, “The landlord, like all other men, love to reap where they never sowed, and demand a rent for even the natural produce of the land” (E&P, 92), and this is the exact circumstance that drives the Joads westward. In this case the landowner is a bank, and Steinbeck says, “The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it” (43), which draws from the principle that, “the landlords interest is inimically opposed to the interest of the tenant farmer” (E&P, 97). Marx and Steinbeck’s arguments both serve as a critique of the application of capitalism to farming, and the influence of industrialization. Steinbeck makes his attack on landowners personal through the voice of Preacher Casy, who says, “If he needs a million acres to make him feel rich, seems to me he needs it ‘cause he feel awful poor inside hisself” (266). Casy is speaking of the landowners in California rather than the bank in Oklahoma, but the principle remains the same because they are both wildly abusing the farm workers.

The role of industrialization that comes up for both Marx and Steinbeck is emphasized by Marx’s notion that, “Since the worker has sunk to the level of a machine, he can be confronted by the machine as a competitor” (E&P, 69). Steinbeck is very moved by this development, and he spends a great deal of time analyzing the tractors that rule the land once tenant farmers are removed. In the journal Steinbeck kept while he was writing the novel, he says of the tractor chapter that, “this one’s tone is very important – this is the eviction sound and the tonal reason for the movement” (Working

Days, 23). The importance of the chapter comes from the tone it sets for the rest of the work, placing man at odds with the industrialization that accompanies the spread of capitalism throughout all levels of American existence. Farms became nothing more than, “A tractor and a superintendent. Like factories” (Grapes, 44). The farms were not the only things to change though, as the men were forced to change as well, not only the men that were forced to leave, but the men that stayed behind. Steinbeck writes, “The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was part of the monster, a robot in the seat” (Grapes, 45). These were the men that surrendered to capitalism at the price of their humanity in Steinbeck’s depiction.

As the Joad family moves west the model Marx sets forth continues to prove valid. Marx says, “The worker has become a commodity, and it is a bit of luck for him if he can find a buyer” (E&P, 65), and this is never more evident than upon the Joad’s arrival in California. As land owners, “imported slaves,” saying, “and if they get funny – deport them” (Grapes, 298), the worker was forced to accept lower and lower wages. Thousands of workers would compete for hundreds of positions, and the land owners were always able to find someone a little bit hungrier, to work for a little bit less. Marx emphasizes this point as well, which also serves the same purpose for Steinbeck. Marx says, “Eventually wages, which have already been reduced to a minimum, must be reduced yet further, to meet the new competition. This then necessarily leads to revolution” (E&P, 105). While *The Grapes of Wrath* does not build to a revolution or even a strike, the boiling point of the novel does provide Casy, Tom, and even Ma with

the realization that a change is necessary. Steinbeck describes this as well when he writes, “The associations of owners knew that some day the praying would stop. And there’s the end” (308). Steinbeck and Marx both suggest, that eventually the workers will provide their own relief by banding together and declaring that enough is enough. They will stop praying and start acting. This is expressed in the way that Tom moves beyond the passive beliefs of his mother and sets out to actively pursue change. While the links between Steinbeck and Marx are incontrovertible on these specific issues, there is also an agreement on some important broader concerns.

Even the most basic Marxist principles are contained in Steinbeck’s narrative. Marx says, “Political economy can therefore advance the proposition that the proletariat, the same as any horse, must get as much as will enable him to work” (E&P, 72), and the Californian landowners assure that they will get nothing more. When the Joads work for “Hooper Ranches, Incorporated” (481) the farm provides housing and an on site store for the convenience of the workers. By convenience they mean so that they can set high prices and end up paying the worker half of what they are really making because the workers give it all back to them just to survive. A day’s work from the whole family gives the Joad enough money to buy two pounds of fatty hamburger, and loaf of stale bread. The shopkeeper even suggests that the fatty hamburger is good because they can, “use the grease that comes out of her for gravy” (480). The Joads are maintained at inhumane standards all for the sake of maximizing profit. This episode also illustrates the notion that, “Capital is nothing but accumulated labor” (E&P, 70), because the Joads

never even receive capital, they simply trade in their time reports for the food they need to survive.

The itinerant farm worker is a perfect model to illustrate the dehumanization of the proletariat as they are forced to live along the side of the road and to fend for themselves like wild animals. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx says, “The proletariat is without property; his relation to his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family-relations; modern industrial labor, modern subjugation to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character” (35). The Joads represent the lowest rung of the social order, and even as their family unit is forced come together, they are stripped of their traditional roles within the family. They all become part of a single organism working to survive. Marx’s political beliefs are rooted in the communal power man has, once they are no longer divided by class, just as Steinbeck has conveyed his own hope for the phalanx or group-man.

These parallels between Steinbeck and Marx are the reason that Steinbeck himself reports to “have heard it called Communist propaganda” (Letters, 203), and that the “the Associated Farmers keep up a steady stream of accusation that I am first a liar and second a Communist” (Letters, 188). However, both of these quotes suggest that Steinbeck did not consider the text to be communist propaganda. He was not writing *The Grapes of Wrath* to convey the philosophy of the Party, but rather to convey his own beliefs, which happened to closely correspond to the Marxist beliefs on which the Party was founded. Collectivity is also one of the most significant parallels between Marx and Steinbeck, as

they both suggest men must overcome the artificial divisions between them if they ever wish to escape the oppression of capitalism. In *The Political Unconscious* Frederic Jameson discusses the Marxist notion that the initial division of labor put an end to primitive or organic communism, which was an “unfallen social reality,” and it was this fall that led to the oppression of modern capitalism (21). Steinbeck’s characters seem to be in a constant struggle to get back to this point, in this novel as well as elsewhere. Casy makes a rather succinct point about the division of labor when Ma says, “It’s women’s work,” and Casy replies, “It’s all work. They’s too much of it to split it up to men’s or women’s work” (138). Casy’s communal vision is so pure that even gendered labor division is meaningless to him, which is an uncommon position to be found even in the works of more fundamental radical novelists. This depiction also illustrates a desire to pass directly from capitalism to communism, leaving out the period of socialism that Steinbeck demonstrated a hesitancy to welcome in his depiction of *In Dubious Battle*’s labor organizers. *The Grapes of Wrath* presents a far different picture of the phalanx than could be seen in the strikers of *In Dubious Battle*, and looking more at this presentation helps to set Steinbeck’s vision apart from that of the communist organizers, and Marx as well.

The Okie migration is an ideal medium in which to demonstrate the ability of man to come together, and while drawing attention to the plight of the itinerant workers may have been Steinbeck’s main objective, he also used this opportunity to expand his treatise on the nature of the phalanx. In fact the migration provided an opportunity to examine a cross section of group-man on a small scale. Jackson Benson says, “He saw the Okie

migration as a smaller phalanx within the larger” (Benson, 387), which would obviously appeal to Steinbeck’s often scientific method. As he frequently references tidal pools as small independent ecosystems serving as models of the whole, no doubt drawing from his relationship with the marine biologist Ed Ricketts, the Okie migration was much like a tidal pool. The migrant workers were cut off from the rest of the world, giving Steinbeck an opportunity to both analyze and depict a smaller and more cohesively structured phalanx. He says as much in his journal when he writes, “Well today work is to indicate the curious democracy of the larger group” (Working Days, 33). He is openly concerned with making sure that he accurately portrays the nature of the collective.

As the Joads take to the road, Steinbeck illustrates the simplistic manner in which the group structure comes into being. In an intercalary chapter, Steinbeck writes, “it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good. And when the sun went down perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there” (Grapes, 249). The group comes together from necessity, and in many ways Steinbeck seems to be lamenting the fact that human beings are no longer dependent upon each other. Steinbeck illustrates his own emotion as he writes, “I break myself every time I go out because the argument that one person’s effort can’t really do anything doesn’t seem to apply when you come on a bunch of starving children and you have a little money” (Letters, 161). In *The Grapes of Wrath* this same point is made almost exactly when Muley says, “Fella’s got somepin to eat an’ another fella’s hungry – why, the first fella ain’t got no choice” (63). Muley seems to be conveying Steinbeck’s own thoughts

perfectly. However, unlike *In Dubious Battle*, this novel has no single mouthpiece, but rather several of them that serve to act out a dialogue, as Steinbeck sorts out these different perspectives for himself. The common point between these characters is their various perceptions of the phalanx.

The role of the mouthpiece is remarkably altered in *The Grapes of Wrath* because of the structure Steinbeck uses. By alternating between chapters concerned with the Joad's narrative, and chapters of historical and political commentary coming directly from the narrator, Steinbeck moves away from the more subtle form of *In Dubious Battle*. In *Radical Representations*, Barbara Foley suggests that, "The most influential Marxist critics were committed to the view that literary texts should make their politics felt through implicit, concrete, and non-didactic means" (Foley, 139). These chapters seem to oppose the way Steinbeck eschews didacticism by placing heavy commentary in the mouths of characters rather than having it stem from narration, and "also serve to universalize the story for the reader; by being placed in historical context, the Joads become part of our own story" (Timmerman, 107). The intercalary chapters, or "hooptedoodle" as Steinbeck will refer to them later, provide the necessary background to make the reader feel as if the circumstances surrounding the Joads are realistic and that the Joads interpretation of these events is correct. However, Steinbeck does also create several characters that seem to provide the same kind of commentary Dr. Burton provided; commentary that could be directed almost directly to the reader, but instead passes from one character to another.

Steinbeck wrote in his journal that, “In fact all of them are important” (Working Days, 29), in regard to the characters found in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and this might serve as part of the reason the Ma, Tom, and Casy all have moments similar to Dr. Burton’s. The views expressed by these characters are somewhat different from those found in the intercalary chapters though because they are more intimately concerned with group-man. Steinbeck’s intentions over the importance of this novel come into play again here, as while the structure of the novel itself serves to emphasize this point, these three characters illustrate the evolution of Steinbeck’s philosophy of the phalanx. We do find the examples of how the migrants come together in the intercalary chapters, but the dialogue between characters is what allows Steinbeck to work out these beliefs in front of the reader.

The first character in the family to hint at the power of the phalanx is Ma Joad, and she seems to be in tune with the stirrings of group-man from the very beginning. One of the first things she tells Tom when he returns from prison is that, “They say there’s a hun’erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all mad the same way, Tommy – they wouldn’t hunt nobody down” (99). Ma is referring to Tom’s illegally leaving the state in violation of his parole, and she suggests that once Tom becomes part of the migrating Okie phalanx, there will be nothing they can do to stop him. This is one of the first instances in which Steinbeck suggests that the phalanx provides a way to escape from external control, which becomes a more significant theme in *Cannery Row*. Motley says that Ma is shaped by “communal feelings” (51), and these feelings not only provide Ma with hope and strength, but they are also part of the circumstances that allow Tom’s

bildungsroman to exist within the novel. In this sense, Ma is the first character to illustrate the phalanx mentality in *The Grapes of Wrath*, even if she begins merely on the scale of maintaining the family unit. Ma's vision also expands though, as she becomes part of the migrant phalanx. Yet she remains rather passively hopeful throughout the novel, while other characters become more active.

Preacher Casy is a considerably important character, because he has lost faith in religion and during his time wandering the wilderness in search of answers he comes to understand the group-man. When Grandma Joad requests that Casy say grace, even though he no longer considers himself a preacher, he says that while he was wandering, "I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' an' draggin' an' fightin'. Fella like that bust the holiness. But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang – that's right, that's holy. An' then I got thinkin' I don't even know what I mean by holy" (105). Casy's confusion over what constitutes holy seems to be shared by Steinbeck as well. When Jim is caught up in the phalanx mentality of *In Dubious Battle's* strikers, Dr. Burton says, "I mean you've got something in your eyes, Jim, something religious" (206). In 1933 Steinbeck wrote to Carlton Sheffield that, "We only feel the emotions of the group beast in times of religious exaltation" (74), but this seems to have changed for Steinbeck. The phalanx in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not felt only in times of religious exaltation, but rather for Casy and later Tom the phalanx itself is almost mystical. Timmerman argues, "Casy is one of the most significant characters in

the novel, and through him Steinbeck establishes the broad view typified in earlier works by a character like Doc Burton” (113), but Casy’s bildungsroman merely helps to set the stage for Tom’s far more dramatic conversion.

As Tom rapidly develops into a supporter of the phalanx philosophy and leftist principles, he does so on his own, rather than joining the labor organizers like Casy does. In this way Tom is the character that most accurately embodies Steinbeck. Tom is in agreement with Marxist principles, but he has come to them from his own reasoning. He wants to do something about class injustice, but he wants to do so on his own terms. When Tom speaks of the government camps he is expressing the same optimism Steinbeck felt when he visited them. Tom says, “I been thinkin’ about how it was in that gov’ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves...I been a-wonderin’ why we can’t do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain’t our people. All work together for our own thing – all farm our own lan’” (Grapes, 536). Dooley suggests that, “Every lower-case utopia described in *The Grapes of Wrath* begins with the baseline of work – if necessary work for hire, but eventually culminating in working one’s own place” (12), but Tom’s “our” does not need to be interpreted as individualistic. The “our” Tom uses is not referring merely to the Joads, or even the entire migrant population, but to everyone. Tom’s “our” is a recognition of man’s interconnectedness. This vision is of communal existence on a broad, if not all-inclusive scale. However, Tom’s role in the novels ends as he “carries communal values into a more active mode” (Motley, 63). The famous Tom Joad “I’ll be there” (Grapes, 537) speech is the embodiment of these active principles, and in some ways it seems that Tom is left out of the novel after this point because

Steinbeck does not know how to follow. Steinbeck, like Ma Joad, is more of a passive supporter of group-man than he is an active participant like Tom.

The split between the views of Steinbeck's characters in this novel and the views of the Reds is smaller than that of *In Dubious Battle*, but none the less permanently fractured. Tom says, "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, on'y a piece of a big one" (537), and this mystical notion that Steinbeck sets forth through both Tom and Casy is what keeps his communal vision from being accepted as similar to communism. This mysticism also adds to the inability of critics to place Steinbeck clearly within or without the radical tradition. The natural mystic of the phalanx pervades through to the end of the novel, and the closing scene leaves the reader with a rather perverse sense of optimism.

After losing her own baby, Rose of Sharon's seemingly unending stream of misfortune does not come to an end, but through her final action in the novel she literally nurses the human spirit. Driven to dire circumstances, "Ma Joad urges her daughter, whose baby dies in childbirth, to suckle a starving man in the name of a universal human family" (Hapke, 240). Barbara Foley suggests that only with this final action, with Rose of Sharon's final action, "Ma Joad's collective outlook has won out" (408). The involvement of Rose of Sharon is particularly important because she is being brought into the fold at last, after clinging to her individualism throughout the novel. Ma Joad's perspective wins out not only because she at last convinces Rose to accept her vision, but because in doing so the reader is left with an almost inspirational, though disturbing, image of collective strength and support. Steinbeck wrote, "The incident of the earth

mother feeding by the breast is older than literature” (Letters, 178). The “earth mother,” as he says, is what Rose of Sharon has become and she is a beacon of hope not only for the downtrodden migrants that the novel has depicted, but also for the communal existence that Steinbeck seems to be so desirous of.

The *Grapes of Wrath* certainly serves to complicate rather than simplify Steinbeck’s position in relation to the greater radical tradition, but even in this complicated form the novel does help to illustrate the reason critics are so reluctant to make a definitive decision in this regard. Steinbeck undoubtedly channels Marx, but he does so in such a way that he seems to be simply arriving at the same conclusions almost one hundred years later. The matter is complicated even further by the mysticism that shrouds Steinbeck’s philosophy of the phalanx, and his delivery of this argument presented simultaneously along side of the migrant narrative as a specific social commentary. One thing that is odd about the success of the novel is that despite his desire for this novel to be good, he was surprised at how powerful it became. In a letter to Elizabeth Otis he wrote, “I’m frightened at the rolling might of this damned thing” (Letters, 188), as if he did not actually believe that he could produce some part of what he describes in *The Grapes of Wrath* when he says, “They’s gonna come a thing that’s gonna change the whole country” (224). Steinbeck is reluctant to accept his own form of active participation. While *The Grapes of Wrath* has laid the foundation for a deeper understanding of the human collective Steinbeck imagines, *Cannery Row* is the text in which he attempts to create believable circumstances in which one may be able to witness the practical application of these principles, even if only by chance or convenience.

CHAPTER 3: CANNERY ROW

Just as Steinbeck's radical philosophy evolved over the course of his career, his style and subject matter did as well. The most prominent period of transition took place after *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939. In his introduction to Steinbeck's *Working Days* journal, Robert DeMott says, "Steinbeck did not quit writing, but by the early 1940s, no longer content to be the chronicler of Depression-era subjects, he went afield to find new roots, new sources. He would never be the same writer again" (19). Steinbeck moved away from the direct political commentary of *In Dubious Battle*, and the propagandist social commentary of *The Grapes of Wrath*. As these elements fell aside the phalanx was left at the forefront of Steinbeck's vision. This new direction is based on, "going to those things which are relatively more lasting to find a new basic picture" (Letters, 194) as he wrote to Carlton Sheffield in late 1939. With this transition Steinbeck did not give up the practice of constructing narratives designed to inform the reader of his moral and political philosophy though. Steinbeck said, "The point of all this is that I must make a new start" (Letters, 194), as can be seen in novels like *Cannery Row*. This fresh start is what finally helps Steinbeck to construct a novel solely dedicated to the analysis of group-man. The novel is unabashedly concerned with organic constructions of human relation, faced with the synthetic influences of capitalism and modern civilization. However, unlike his earlier novels the specific circumstances are relatively unimportant.

Cannery Row does not have a particularly formal narrative construction. The reader is presented with a series of events involving Doc, Mack and the boys, and some of the other more colorful residents of Monterey. The driving force behind much of the action is Mack and the boys' desire to throw a party for Doc, and when they mess up, the rest of the book is about trying again. The depth of the novel comes not from the plot but from the richness of Steinbeck's depiction of his characters, and the communal existence that allows them to so easily make their way through a rather hostile environment. This may be why the novel has received an unreasonably small amount of critical attention. Hailed for its non-teleological approach by critics like Timmerman and Hayashi, the novel is most frequently accepted as such and passed over. The rough non-fictional quality of the text may drive some critics away as well, but within this text a scrutinizing reader can see the final formation taken by Steinbeck's radical philosophy. This is the point at which his interest in the phalanx and his alignment with leftist politics intertwine entirely, as group-man becomes an alternative to life within the capitalistic class system. The notion that this novel along with the earlier *Tortilla Flat* and the later *Sweet Thursday* are intended merely as lighthearted preoccupations for both Steinbeck and his audience, pays little attention to the depth of Steinbeck's content, as well as his own acknowledgement of the novel's importance.

Steinbeck's letters throughout 1943 and 1944 leading up to the publication of *Cannery Row* illustrate the author's intention to exceed the treatment of this novel as a playful romp like *Tortilla Flat*. In December 1943 Steinbeck writes, "I'm working on a funny little book" (Letters, 265). By July, 1944 he writes, "I have been working madly at

a book” (Letters, 270), and by the time the book is ready to be published in September he writes, “I don’t know whether it is effective or not. It’s written on four levels and people can take what they receive out of it” (Letters, 273). Throughout the writing process Steinbeck’s expectations for the novel increasingly heightened until at last the rich depth of *Cannery Row* was assured. In his autobiography of Steinbeck, Jackson Benson suggests, “With *Cannery Row*...he began by telling his friends that he was not working on anything terribly important – perhaps to ease the pressure of writing – and then once it was completed, he talked about the book’s complexity” (Benson, 554), but the view Benson expresses neglects the effect Steinbeck speaks of. Steinbeck is not simply nervous about the response of his friends, he is once again concerned over the effectiveness of his novel; the same way he was worried with *The Grapes of Wrath* being good enough to convey his social commentary in a manner that would be convincing to the general audience. However, there is a far greater indication of the novel’s importance found in the portrayal of his characters.

Cannery Row and *Tortilla Flat* both tell the story of society’s dregs banding together to survive in Monterey, California. In *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck writes, “The paisanos are clean of commercialism, free of the complicated systems of American business, and, having nothing that can be stolen, exploited, or mortgaged, that system has not attacked them very vigorously” (2). The “paisanos” are not the philosophers of *Cannery Row*, but they are the communal predecessors of Mack and the boys. While the similarities between Mack and the boys, and the paisanos are obvious, the clear difference is no less important. Part of the reason *Cannery Row* was thought of as a

lighthearted narrative was because *Tortilla Flat* had been, and Steinbeck did little to oppose that view. Timmerman says the critics' negative criticism of *Tortilla Flat*, "was perplexing to Steinbeck, since it came from a book which he considered a light diversion" (135). *Cannery Row* cannot be placed in the same category though, and this is evidenced by Steinbeck's use of one of the tools he may have used to avoid overdetermination in his earlier novels. While *Tortilla Flat* abounds with diversity, *Cannery Row* exists in the same world as *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which almost all of the characters are white. In *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning says, "In the racial populism of Steinbeck, the noble white Americans of *The Grapes of Wrath* are set against the minstrel show Mexican Americans of *Tortilla Flat*" (267), lampooning Steinbeck's treatment of race in one of the only novels where it exists with any amount of diversity, and this may be why Steinbeck later decided to once again avoid this diversion. *Cannery Row* is reminiscent of Benson and Loftis' discussion of *In Dubious Battle* when they say, "In order to produce such a work, he had to choose what to include and what to leave out in such a way as to balance the power gained from a convincing narrative with the deeper meanings he wanted that narrative to convey" (198). Avoiding the overdetermination of race once again ensures that class remains the driving force behind the conflict of the novel. As seen in Steinbeck's other more didactic novels, there definitely seems to be a lesson learned from *Cannery Row*, even if his form has evolved to employ a far greater level of subtlety. The illustration that merits these techniques is once again a desire to demonstrate the power and possibility inherent in groups of men.

The phalanx Steinbeck presents to the reader in *Cannery Row* is rather unorthodox. There is no strike to pull the men together, no migration that forces them to interact; there is simply the need for the most basic human amenities and a desire for camaraderie. As Steinbeck wrote to George Albee years earlier, “From the phalanx [man] takes a fluid necessary to his life” (81), and this is what he aims to express through the depiction of Mack and the boys. There is something beautifully ironic in simultaneously suggesting that the phalanx provides an alternative to capitalism, and that the only available vehicle for depicting this point is found by using the outcasts of capitalism itself. Mack and the boys can only exist the way they do because they are already outside of the capitalistic civilization engulfing Monterey, and America as a whole. This may be why, “Steinbeck nonetheless found himself irresistibly drawn to this throbbing little cluster that served him as a metaphor for all life” (Timmerman, 156). Mack and the boys serve to demonstrate a far greater possibility than a couple of bums squatting in a shack.

The vagrants of *Cannery Row* provide a more optimistic outlook than the paisanos of *Tortilla Flat*, because their phalanx is designed from the ground up, rather than resulting from an inheritance. In *Tortilla Flat*, Danny inherits several houses, his friends all become covetous, and in the end private ownership leads to their demise. Their collective fails because property is owned, and Danny misses the time when, “The weight of property was not upon him” (170). Unlike *Cannery Row* there is an unequal division of property in *Tortilla Flat*, as Danny’s house and bed are Danny’s alone, and his friends fear that their communal existence is only temporary. In *Cannery Row* the phalanx

receives a home free of charge, but also free of responsibility, as they are not technically the owners. The arrangement is perfected as, “Mack knew that some kind of organization was necessary particularly among such a group of ravening individualists” (39), so he lays the groundwork for their communal existence with something as simple as chalk. Steinbeck describes the scene as, “Mack, with a piece of chalk, drew five oblongs on the floor, each seven feet long and four feet wide, and in each square he wrote a name. These were the simulated beds. Each man had property rights inviolable in his space. He could legally fight a man who encroached on his square. The rest of the room was common property to all” (39-40). Mack’s use of chalk emphasizes the fact that within the functioning collective there is no need for physical boundary because each man is expected to respect one another. Chalk can easily be rubbed away or ignored, but Mack and the boys respect the notion that each man only needs enough space for himself to meet the basic human need for sleep, and that the rest of the available property should not be controlled by any single man, but rather by the desires of the whole. The basic form of the phalanx comes in this presentation of Mack and the boys’ living arrangement, while the greater discussion of the communal significance comes both directly from Steinbeck’s narration as well as from the character Doc, as another Ed Ricketts based mouthpiece. Although in this case Doc is actually Ed Ricketts.

In a 1939 letter to Carlton Sheffield, Steinbeck wrote, “Communist, Fascist, Democrat may find that the real origin of the future lies on the microscope plates of obscure young men, who, puzzled with order and disorder in quantum and neutron, build gradually a picture which will seep down until it is the fibre of the future” (Letters, 194).

The obscure young scientist that influenced Steinbeck's work was Ed Ricketts. The imagery of the phalanx as cellular pieces of a whole, the use of tidal pools as a recurring image for a small phalanx being representative of the whole, and the general scientific method Steinbeck applied to his research all stemmed from his relationship with Ricketts. *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* are novels based on the fictionalization of Ricketts, and within them Doc becomes not only a mouthpiece for Steinbeck, but the source and inspiration behind many of the beliefs being depicted throughout the novel.

When Steinbeck was spending time in Monterey during late 1939, the row, "still had characters who tried to con Ed out of a bottle of beer or money for a drink. In order to escape them, he had taken to getting into his car and backing across the street to Wing Chong's to buy his beer. If he ran out late at night, he simply walked directly across the way to Flora's, where the bar was open twenty-four hours a day. Sometime he and Steinbeck would go over together to sit and drink beer and talk to Flora and her girls" (Benson, 433). While most of *Cannery Row's* narrative focuses on Mack and the boys, the rest of the novel is largely a description of the actual tendencies of Ed Ricketts in 1939 as described by Jackson Benson, although Wing Chong's is now called Lee Chong's. Ricketts influence is undeniable throughout the novel, and even with the addition of some pointed narration, Ricketts's perspective is the one that most shapes the experience for the reader. Steinbeck opens the novel saying *Cannery Row's*, "inhabitants are, as the man once said, 'whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches,' by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, 'Saints, and angels and martyrs and holy men,' and he would have meant the same thing"

(CR, 1). Ed Ricketts and in turn Doc in the novel are looking through the second of these peepholes and encouraging the reader to do so as well. This introduction to the novel serves to situate the reader in a position from which a hooker may be more than a hooker, and with an open mind a band of bums living together in a shack might actually be representative of the awe inspiring power of communal existence.

Just as Steinbeck attempts to open up the reader's perception of *Cannery Row* as a whole, his early narration also serves to introduce Doc as a man whose opinion can and should be trusted. The narrator says Doc is, ““the fountain of philosophy and science and art” (28), and by doing so early in the novel, the reader knows not only to look to Doc for guidance throughout the novel, but also to trust his judgment. Setting up the reader in this fashion will help Steinbeck to convey his meaning more subtly elsewhere.

Therefore, when Doc says, “There are your true philosophers” (141), the reader is confronted by the notion that the philosopher of *Cannery Row* as set forth by the narrator is in fact arguing that Mack and the boys are the true philosophers of the novel. Doc explains his claim by saying, “I think Mack and the boys know everything that has ever happened in the world and possibly everything that will happen. I think they survive in this particular world better than other people. In a time when people tear themselves to pieces with ambition and nervousness and covetousness, they are relaxed” (141-142).

The lives of Mack and the boys become even more idealistic when compared to those of supposedly successful men as Doc suggests, “All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs, and bad souls, but Mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean. They can do what they want. They can satisfy their appetites without

calling them something else” (142). The depiction of Mack and the boys that Doc provides is one not only of communal existence, but also of an existence outside of the constraints of capitalism. They forgo the shortcomings of men constantly worried by the pursuit of fame and fortune, and simply exist as who they are. Most importantly they escape the solitary nature of the modern man. Mack and the boys are a phalanx that is not doomed like the minute phalanx George and Lennie represent in *Of Mice and Men*, and while the road is rough they do persevere. This stems largely from their various cellular functions, like a more successful version of the eye Dr. Burton discusses during his exchange with Mac in *In Dubious Battle*.

The fact that Steinbeck consistently refers to the phalanx of *Cannery Row* as “Mack and the boys,” serves to illustrate their collective identity. However, the boys each bring a different functional quality to the mix as well, whether it be Mack’s brains, Hazel’s heart, Gay’s ability to fix machines, or Eddie’s green thumb and ability to procure booze from La Ida’s. Each member of the phalanx not only contributes independently, but they also take turns at the head of the group. Depending on what is required by a particular situation each man is ready to take charge if his individual expertise is the most applicable. As Lee Chong’s car was being fixed, “Gay was in charge” (64) of the group, directing the phalanx as a whole to accomplish the job as quickly and efficiently as possible, much like the strikers clearing Anderson’s orchard in *In Dubious Battle*. Both scenes exemplify the power of the phalanx when they are not forced, but choose to work as a part of something greater.

Mack and the boys utilize the power of the group for both simple and complex tasks, in a manner that suggests these tasks might be utterly impossible for one man to accomplish on his own. When the boys need a stove for the Palace Flophouse and Grill, they set off together to find one. Their acquisition may require carrying the stove five miles over the course of three days, “but they camped beside it at night” (41), and together they were able to accomplish what would have otherwise required materials or vehicles that they did not have access to because of their economic position. In this fashion, the collective solidarity of Mack and the boys compensates for their lack of capital. What another man might need to pay to have done, Mack and the boys simply band together and accomplish themselves. When they go frog hunting for Doc, they construct an elaborate plan that would not be possible without the strength of the group. Some of the boys scare the frogs across the pond, while others keep them from crawling out along the sides, while at the end of the pool, “two men gathered them like berries” (94). The narrator examines the history of man versus frog concluding by saying, “how could they have anticipated Mack’s new method” (93). The other methods described involve nets, lances, and guns, all of which the frogs have managed to escape, but faced with the ingenuity and strength of group-man they do not stand a chance. Mack and the boys possess almost limitless strength and determination, and yet the reason they are truly able to accomplish these tasks is because the sum of their parts is far overshadowed by the whole. The depiction of Mack and the boys illustrates the ability of man to jump out of capitalism and directly into communism without the dictatorship of the proletariat, which places Steinbeck at odds with the Marxist stages of history. The characters in

Cannery Row do not need characters like *In Dubious Battle*'s Mac, because they have discovered the convenience of a pseudo-communist lifestyle on their own.

Mack and the boys do not live essentially as vagrants merely as a matter of necessity either. Doc says, "They could ruin their lives and get money. Mack has qualities of genius. They're all very clever if they want something. They just know the nature of things too well to be caught in the wanting" (142). The phalanx becomes something more in *Cannery Row* as Steinbeck places the entire philosophy fundamentally at odds with capitalism. Doc emphasizes this very point by not only praising Mack and the boys in comparison to the men with weak stomachs, but also by critiquing the capitalistic society that produces these men in the first place. Doc examines the ironic difference between the values men prize and the values men practice, when he says, "The things we admire in men, kindness and generosity, openness, honesty, understanding and feeling are the concomitants of failure in our system. And those traits we detest, sharpness, greed, acquisitiveness, meanness, egotism and self-interest are the traits of success. And while men admire the quality of the first they love the produce of the second" (143). Mack and the boys are seen as failures because they are not greedy, ambitious, and mean, even though they are kind, generous, and understanding at heart. In this regard, Timmerman argues, "The thematic content of the novel is man versus civilization" (Timmerman, 158), but civilization is too broad of a term. Mack and the boys are not pitted against civilization as a whole, but against the ever-growing influence of capitalism over that civilization. Timmerman suggests that the poison invading *Cannery Row* that provides what he feels to be an unhappy ending is, "an effect of

[Steinbeck's] always jaded view of civilization as a corrosive influence on the affairs of individuals" (169). However, capitalism seems more to blame than civilization, just as collectivization seems more at risk than individual freedom.

Steinbeck may not be openly suggesting, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (CM, 13), but the relationships between classes is the undeniable focus of this novel. The denizens of *Cannery Row* are taking part in an invisible class struggle as they refuse to exist within the capitalistic hierarchy. Mack and the boys are not simply outsiders because they are not part of the capitalistic system; they are outsiders because they want to exist outside of the capitalistic system. Similar to Lukacs' suggestion that proletariat must provide the conclusion to their own suffering in *History and Class Consciousness*; Mack and the boys are embracing the power of their position outside of capitalism's grasp. These outsiders have given Steinbeck the means by which to illustrate the simplicity and success of a communal system that exists independently of capitalism. They don't even require money, as is demonstrated by their use of frogs as capital, trading them with Lee Chong for goods. The strikers were too bound up by their motivation taking the form of money, and the Joads were carried west by the processes of capitalism itself, but Mack and the boys are truly free. They rely solely on each other, and together they are most certainly stronger than the sum of their parts, as Steinbeck described the phalanx. The novel is comical and light hearted at times, but this only serves to increase the subtlety with which Steinbeck finally delivers his treatise on the group-man that began with the research for *In Dubious Battle*. As Benson and Loftis said in their analysis of that novel, "his intentions, he told his friends,

was not to write an philosophical dissertation on his theory, but to think it through and then find the fictional symbols which would act as a vehicle for it in his creative writing” (197). In *Cannery Row* Steinbeck finally discovered the fictional symbols that served as a vehicle to express his beliefs about group-man in his writing.

Mack and the boys may not be the only vehicle Steinbeck found to display his communal vision, but they are by far the most effective. There is no division of property beyond the most basic of human needs, and a flexible shared standard of leadership that serves to benefit the group as a whole. While, as Timmerman says, “The popular assumption of the trilogy is that Steinbeck crafted breezy little comedies” (141), both the content and Steinbeck’s own reaction to the novel’s reception seem to prove otherwise. Benson furthers this point when he says, “The novel was a great personal risk, and much of Steinbeck’s hurt and anger came not from getting bad notices, but from the feeling that in the callous hands of uncaring and insensitive reviewers, the book’s fragility and intimacy seemed to be constantly violated” (Benson, 564). Steinbeck returned to Monterey in the spring of 1945, looking for some semblance of the ideal reality he had depicted in *Cannery Row*. Instead he found that he was not particularly welcome, and that the locals, with the exception of Ed Ricketts, seemed to have taken offense to his depiction of them yet again. In a letter to Pascal Covici he said, “This isn’t my country anymore. And it won’t be until I am dead. It makes me very sad” (Letters, 281). Benson was correct when he said, Steinbeck may go, “looking for *Cannery Row* and find that only Cannery Row existed” (Benson, 556). Steinbeck’s own hope of finding some remnant of the community he depicted in the novel only serves to illustrate how

important this model was to him. Mack and the boys represent far more than a representation of a functioning communal existence; they represent the full evolution of Steinbeck's radical philosophy. *Cannery Row* is further from what is expected of the radical tradition than either *In Dubious Battle* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, and yet this form that is most uniquely Steinbeck's is where we at last find his most radical vision.

CONCLUSION

The philosophy of John Steinbeck that emerges during the 1930's and 1940's is deeply concerned with the isolation felt by the reified proletarian subject, and the hope that comes in the form of collectivity as expressed in Steinbeck's notion of the phalanx. The novels that have been discussed here provided Steinbeck with the opportunity to work out these ideas through the medium of fiction, until at last he was able to construct a text that was able to convey the fruition of his work on *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Cannery Row* presents the reader with a trimmed narrative of the phalanx, which allows Steinbeck to finally convey his own leftist viewpoint.

The novels of Josephine Herbst were accepted as radical in nature almost as quickly as they were published. The blending of art and propaganda that took place in her work clearly signified that she had openly aligned herself with the political left. Unlike Steinbeck, her position in relation to the radical tradition was secure, but the benefit of this association may have been more detrimental than otherwise. Speaking on the stigma associated with the radical tradition as a whole, Herbst says, "I have felt my own work has been considerably damaged by the category, and that the term since the Second World War has been used more as blackmail than as a definitive term with any valid meaning" (Madden, XV). In many ways Steinbeck's position on the cusp of the radical tradition may very well have helped to give his novels the popular reception that they received, as well as the greatly heightened shelf life that continues today. Rideout says, "in our consciousness war drops like a trauma between 'after' and 'before'"

(Rideout, 1), and the majority of authors more intimately associated with the radical tradition were left behind as the second world war acted as a curtain separating Americans from the turn to the left that had been experienced in the 1930's.

John Steinbeck managed to sweep aside this curtain because his philosophy of the group-man was inherently radical even as he was at odds with the greater radical tradition. This argument began by questioning Steinbeck's relationship with the radical tradition, and the idea of radical itself. Just as Steinbeck's philosophy has evolved, the focus of the argument has been forced to evolve as well. Over time Steinbeck narrowed his focus until the concept of the phalanx was the only thing left at the heart of his radical narratives. Hopefully this analysis of his work has helped to illuminate this focusing, as it has also become more focused on collectivity as the sole buttress of Steinbeck's radical philosophy.

Marx's stages of history begin with primitive communism, and then progress through slavery, feudalism, and capitalism before the transitional period of socialism leads to the final collective society of communism. Authors of the radical tradition most commonly depict the miserable solitary existence of the proletarian worker, suggesting that they should rise up and help to bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat that the socialist period embodies. Steinbeck works against the grain by glorifying the group-man as an endpoint that is immediately available. The two approaches could be considered to compliment each other, but Steinbeck's novels demonstrate a hesitancy to accept the dictatorial manifestation of the proletariat that socialism calls for, much like Vorse's fear of American socialism falling to despotism as was the case in Russia. *In*

Dubious Battle highlights Steinbeck's disagreement with the methods of organizers like Mac as they struggle to create the dictatorship of the proletariat, and their abuse of the collective form that the eventual rise of communism would rely upon. *Cannery Row* on the other hand avoids any notion of this socialist dictatorship all together, as the narrative focuses entirely on the pseudo-communist existence of Mack and the boys. *The Grapes of Wrath* serves as a buffer between the two in which Steinbeck blends the depiction of the solitary worker with the portrayal of the phalanx, suggesting a direct link between the need to revolt and the collective existence that would exist with the arrival of communism. In this manner Steinbeck removes the construction of socialism, going directly from capitalism to communism, or perhaps reverting back to primitive communism rather than advancing at all.

The development that takes place over Steinbeck's career as a novelist is not a flawless linear progression, but there is a clear transformation taking place. *In Dubious Battle* signifies a high level of confusion on Steinbeck's behalf, as he is making his first major attempt to portray some analysis of the group-man to his reader. The subject matter inescapably draws the communist labor organizers into question because of the traditional use of the strike novel form as a vehicle for propaganda. Steinbeck questions the party and their practices, but the core of the novel is his commentary on their corruption of the phalanx. Mac and Jim transform the strikers into a mob, so that they can wield the phalanx as a weapon in the communist fight against capitalism, paying little attention to the individual human beings that are being injured as the phalanx is rather carelessly swung about. If radical means in support of communist beliefs, then this may

rule Steinbeck out, but what gives Steinbeck's later works their radical appeal is the evolution of his philosophy of the phalanx. In *The Grapes of Wrath* the phalanx created by the dust bowl migrants remains relatively untouched by outside influence, and in portraying the group as such, Steinbeck surrounds their collective with an air of optimism and hope for humanity. *The Grapes of Wrath* is slightly more focused on the group-man, but the social motivation behind the novel makes Steinbeck incorporate the philosophy of the phalanx into a greater narrative once again, rather than creating a narrative that focuses primarily on the phalanx as the main point of analysis. Beach says, "He has been interested in people from the beginning, from long before he had any theory to account for their ways" (Beach, 250), but over time the theory that he developed became more of a primary focus than a secondary consideration in Steinbeck's novels.

In their work on *In Dubious Battle*, Benson and Loftis said, "His intentions, he told his friends, 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 it in his creative writing" (197). The process of tracing Steinbeck's struggle to find a vehicle to convey his philosophy of the phalanx begins with *In Dubious Battle*, and continues through *The Grapes of Wrath*, but both of these novels are concerned with other issues that take over the role of primary narrative concern. Not until *Cannery Row* does Steinbeck allow himself to write a novel that places group-man at the forefront. While the general audience may have treated the novel as a light hearted distraction from the woes of war, Steinbeck was disappointed that his work was so received because the simplicity of the novel was designed to force the reader to focus on the group-man

commentary. The social unrest and political derision of *In Dubious Battle*, as well as the heavy social commentary of *The Grapes of Wrath* were left behind, but the key buttress of both of those novels remained. Mack and the boys are not designed merely to entertain, they are carefully sculpted to illustrate the bond that exists between them and the immense power found in their solidarity. Beach says, "If I were asked to say just exactly what are the economic theories of John Steinbeck, and how he proposes to apply them in terms of political action, I should have to answer: I do not know" (Beach, 263), but thinking of Steinbeck's radical content in terms of economic theory assures that his true radical vision goes unappreciated. Steinbeck's vision of collectivity is not based on an organized division of labor and property, but rather on an organic agreement between human beings that ensures they each receive as much as they need and are happy with that amount. Steinbeck is not openly calling for revolution, or relying entirely on either attacking the rich or supporting the poor, he is simply struggling to find a way to illustrate the necessity of one man to be willing and able to rely on another for support.

The alignment between Steinbeck's personal philosophy and Marxism is undeniable, and with the basic principle of the phalanx as the foundation of his thinking, Steinbeck shares a strong bond with the basis of Marx's own philosophy. The splitting point between the two is that while Marx is applying the power of collectivity in a purely political apparatus, Steinbeck treats the phalanx as something mystical or even religious. Steinbeck's thoughts are radical in that they exist outside of the realm of normative thought, and while his position in relationship to the radical tradition of the 1930's is uncertain, his novels are designed with undeniably didactic intentions. Over the course

of two decades Steinbeck set out to convey the importance he placed upon the theory of the phalanx, but when he finally conveyed his message in the simplest form possible, his audience thought there was very little message to be found. As Steinbeck stripped off the layers of narrative that clouded his discussion of the phalanx in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*, he inadvertently subtracted the elements that his readers expected to find in novels that were more than amusing colloquial tales. This is unfortunate, because Steinbeck's writing in *Cannery Row* represents some of the most powerful prose found throughout any of his novels. The radical novelist was expected to convey his didactic message with a healthy dose of subtlety, and in the end Steinbeck may have simply done this too well. The difficulty of reconciling art and propaganda usually swings in the other direction, but even as this may seem to be a fault, if Steinbeck's subtlety had been any lesser we may not look upon him with the same amount of respect that we do today, as authors like Josephine Herbst can attest.

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