

*Ideological and Cultural Techniques to Hinder the Rise of the Phalanx. Case Study: John Steinbeck's In Dubious Battle*

الأيدلوجية والعامل الثقافي لمنع إضرابات العمال في رواية  
جون ستين باك "المعركة المشبوهة"

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**Abstract:**

*The prime focus of the present paper is John Steinbeck's use of the ideological and cultural hegemony to prevent strikes. His In Dubious Battle deals with the efforts of communists to organize a strike in California; however, the strike turns into a disaster. The aim of our research is to trace out the reason behind the failure of the strike. We argue that the strike fails as Steinbeck's purpose is to preclude the communists' rise to power and to preserve capitalism. In order to do this, he makes use of cultural hegemony to manipulate people into thinking that labor strikes are doomed to fail.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Hegemony; Strike; In Dubious Battle; Communists; Capitalism;

الملخص:

نتطرق في هذا البحث إلى استعمال جون ستين باك للهيمنة الأيدلوجية و الثقافية لمنع نجاح إضراب العمال في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. رواية "المعركة المشبوهة" تتمحور حول محاولة الشيوعيين لتنظيم إضراب العمال في كاليفورنيا، لكن الإضراب كلل بالفشل.

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الهدف من بحثنا هذا هو دراسة سبب فشل الإضراب. الحجة التي نعرضها في مقالنا هذا هي أن سبب فشل الإضراب يعود إلى محاولة ستين باك لمنع الشيوعيين من الوصول للسلطة و الحفاظ على مكانة الرأسمالية. لتحقيق ذلك، قام الكاتب بتوظيف الهيمنة الثقافية ليجعل الناس يعتقدون أن إضراب العمال محكوم عليها بالفشل.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الهيمنة الثقافية، الإضراب، المعركة المشبوهة، الشيوعيون، الرأسمالية.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The fear of the rise of the mob is a specter that haunted the US for long decades. Steinbeck in his modernist novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) portrays this fear. His novel is set during the Great Depression of the 1930s in the US. It projects the exploitation that the migrant farmers face in the agricultural fields due to the fascist landlords, and how this exploitation motivates the communists to push the workers to go on strike.

The Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the long drought that hit the American west during the 1930s obliged the farmers to migrate and seek work in California where corporate landowners cast their dominance over the region. (Brogan, 2006, p 538) These workers are exploited in the fields for long hours of work in exchange for a low paycheck. Due to exploitation, riots and strikes took place. Most uprisings took place in the agricultural field. The period between 1930 and 1932 had known 40 strikes all crushed by the law enforcement agencies. (Benson and Loftis, 1980, p 198) The economic and political turmoil of the 1930s constitute a raw material for Steinbeck to write *In Dubious Battle*. His novel skillfully projects the strikes that jolted the government and the fascists in the US. Steinbeck strongly denounces the atrocities committed against the workers in the place of work. He is totally against the methods employed by the landowners. For him, the landlords in California are fascists who beat the tar out of the farmers to generate more wealth. Their deeds leave the path open for the communists to instigate the farmers to go on strike. The novel is about two communist organizers Mac and Jim who go to the Torgas Valley in California and organize a strike due to pay cuts. However, unlike what is expected, the strike turns out to be a real chaos.

Steinbeck argues against the unification of workers and the strike as a tool to attain social change. This article is about the reasons behind the failure of the strike in *In Dubious Battle* and the methods used to prevent strikes. As a research strategy, we will use the theory of Cultural Hegemony by the Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci to argue that Steinbeck uses culture and ideology to manipulate the mass and achieve a political agenda. His “Argument of the Phalanx” has a relation with the notion of individualism. This notion is strongly related to the American Dream, an ideology that has been used for so long to secure people’s consent.

## **2. The strike from a capitalist standpoint**

### **2.1 The communists: manipulators to avoid**

*In Dubious Battle* is a novel that shows how the communists make use of the suffering of the migrant workers to achieve political gains. The novelist emphasizes the hypocrisy of the communists and portrays them in an unfavorable manner. For him, these people are a threat to democracy as they are determined to achieve their goal regardless of the wellbeing of the migrant farmers.

In the first pages of the novel, we get instances that the communists are heroes who lead the proletariat to a prosperous future. Jim mentions that his life was uninteresting until he met the party men in jail. For him, the communists have a goal, a thing that he lacks and wants to have. Jim takes these men as heroes whom one should respect for their dedication toward a cause. However, gradually, we know that the communists are not the kind of men who seek the total benefit of the workers. When Jim goes to the Torgas Valley, Dan warns him not to trust the party men. What pushes Dan to say so is his experience. He once joined unions but in the end, the leader sold them to the superintendent. Later on, Mac’s actions support Dan’s claim. Mac, a party organizer, is shown to be a hypocrite who does not care about the safety of the apple pickers. When he comes to the Torgas Valley, he pretends to have some medical training and helps the daughter-in-Law of one of the apple pickers to deliver her child. He lies, not caring about the safety of Lisa, in order to gain the trust of the workers. Mac does all what he can to encourage the conflict. His aim is to grow the movement. The safety of the strikers is not a matter to consider. Throughout the novel, we see how their injury or death is an

advantage for him. In a scene, Jim asks Mac about the strike in case the landlords accept to raise the wage. Mac's replay is: "A strike that's settled too quickly won't teach the men how to organize, how to work together. A tough strike is good...Every time a guardsman jabs a fruit tramp with a bayonet a thousand men all over the country come on our side." (43) At the beginning of the strike, Joy is shot and killed, instead of questioning his methods Mac makes use of his corps to get the strikers angrier. He prevents the strikers not to feel sorry for Joy arguing that "Joy always wanted to lead people, and now he's going to do it, even if he's in a box". (131) In the end of the novel, Jim is brutally killed. Just like what he did with Joy, he uses the corps to rekindle the strike. Steinbeck projects the hypocrisy of the head of the party organizer Mac and how he is unscrupulous. Actually, just like the party men, in some instances, the strikers as well are portrayed in an unfavorable image. Notwithstanding the novelist addresses the miseries and exploitation of the migrant workers, in some cases, his portray of the laborers is just unflattering as that of the communists. Joy is a radical zealot and London is prone to anger. Mac makes him a boss just because he is physically big and strong. In his article, Gibbs argues: "Most of them are coarse; a few are cowards and turncoats; some are shortsighted and self-indulgent. In the mass they are subject to inconstant gusts of emotion - now ferociously valiant, now whimpering with discomfort and fear". (Gibbs, 1942, p 545)

According to Steinbeck, the communists destroy the image of America as a land of prosperity. They are hypocrites who represent terror in the country. They convince the farmers that strikes and revolt are the only paths to social change ignoring the consequences that might come. Once they gain the trust of the workers, they transform into manipulators and corrupters. For the novelist, the communists are ignorant of group behavior. They think they can control the strikers, but in fact, they fail.

## **2.2 The strike: a close path to social change**

For Steinbeck, the method of the communists, the strike, is a threat to stability. He considers that individuals in a group, or as he calls it, the phalanx, will lose their rationality and engage in violence. The communists think they can control them; however, the strike proves the opposite. This led him to conclude that strikes are not a path to democracy. Accordingly, he makes people experience what it

is like to go on strike under the leadership of the communists. In order to explain this, Steinbeck formulates his "Argument of the Phalanx" in 1933 and use *In Dubious Battle* as a raw material to illustrate it.

Mac and Jim go to the Torgas Valley aiming to organize a strike there. Mac thinks he can control the strikers to spread communism. In order to deal with the condition of the phalanx, Steinbeck presents two opposing views, that of Mac and of Dr. Burton. For Mac social change can be achieved through strikes. Burton however, disagrees arguing that violence leads to violence and the phalanx is not easy to control. He pursues by arguing that the phalanx wipes out the individual. "A man in a group isn't himself at all...People have said, 'mobs are crazy, you can't tell what they'll do.' Why don't people look at mobs not as men, but as mobs?" (117) Ignoring Burton's warnings, Mac engages in his doing thinking he can control the crowd. For him, the group will spiral out of control only if it is left without guidance. He tells Sam: "these guys'll go nuts if we don't take charge." (87) For Mac, the sight of blood and hunger stimulate the strikers to fight. When Joy is shot, Mac uses his body to inflame them. When the strikers question London's leadership, he revives their spirit by smashing the jaw of one of the strikers who accused him of hiding food. In the sight of blood and violence, "The eyes of the men and women were entranced. The bodies weaved slowly, in unison. No more lone cries came from lone men. They moved together, looked alike. The roar was one voice, coming from many throats." Mac tells Jim, "Didn't I tell you? They need blood." (229) In the middle of the strike, Mac makes use of the strikers' hunger to promote violence. He tells London that "There aren't any rules a hungry man has to follow". (209) The results of these actions are violence and irrational moves. Whenever the strikers lose their enthusiasm for the strike, Mac finds a way to ignite their sense of revolt. However, Mac's methods degenerate the protesters into a savage mob. During the strike, they lose their freedom and rationality. The workers are pushed to collective action by animal instincts. The novelist gives them animalistic treats. The craziness that Burton mentioned is displayed in the irrational and animalistic behavior of the strikers. Dan admits to Jim that "when the workers get mad " They'll be bitin'out throat with their teeth, and clawin' off lips. (63) Mac is well aware of this and

uses this to pursue his goal. When it comes to Jim, he takes himself a leader; however, the strike transforms him into a fanatic person able to commit terroristic attacks to achieve his goal. Being in a group makes him lose his sympathy. When Mac beats the schoolboy, Mac seems to regret his doing; Jim, with cold blood, tells him: “Sympathy is as bad as fear.” (203)

*In Dubious battle* shows that the phalanx renders men into animals with no free will or rationality. Notwithstanding their condition worsens each day, yet they pursuit their strike.

Steinbeck pondered the new phenomenon of “group-men” — their irrationality, their immunity to abstractions and ideals, their resemblance to “sleep-walkers” marching silently and mechanically toward unseen and unknown goals, their similarity to “animals” aroused not by ideological conviction but by the “smell of blood. (Pells, 1998, p 226)

At the end of the novel, the strikers are shown to use their rationality for the first time and act out of the influence of the party leaders; they want to end this losing battle. Mac however, wants to prolong the struggle. The death of Jim comes at the perfect time. As he did with the corps of Joy, he uses that of Jim to rekindle the spirit of the strikers to fight.

Steinbeck demonstrates Mac’s awareness of the animalistic side of the phalanx and he uses this to stir the strikers. Regardless of this, Steinbeck connotes that Mac lacks the full knowledge of group behavior. He does not fathom the fact that the phalanx is a destructive power that is deemed to be uncontrollable. Mac continues in his doing even though the strike is clearly shown to be a losing battle. Looking at the outcomes, the strike brings no positive outcomes to the apple pickers. During the strike, they starved; some of them died brutally, and others regret their decision to trust the communists.

Steinbeck connotes the communists’ shortcomings. For him, these people do not have the power to control anything. They are reckless to the point that they form strikes when they are clueless of the destructive puissance of the phalanx. In one of his letters, collected in *Life in Letters*, Steinbeck informs his friends Georg Albee that “the phalanx has emotions of which the unit man is incapable, emotions of destruction, of war, of migration, of hatred, of fear”. (Steinbeck, 1976,

p 77) Dr. Burton reinforces Steinbeck's argument of the phalanx by stating that "the end is never very different in its nature from the means...you can only build a violent thing with violence" (189) Just by the start of the strike, Joy dies. This shows that the end does not differ from the beginning. The novelist advocates the idea that strikes or any type of uprising cannot achieve social change in the USA; contrary, it would bring destruction and the communists cannot lead or control the phalanx unlike what they promote.

However reluctantly, Steinbeck appeared to suggest in *In Dubious Battle* that the collective dream might bring neither social change nor an end to loneliness; instead, it threatened to reduce every man to a mindless beast tearing at the bones and tissues of civilization in a burst of hysterical rage. (Pells, 1998, p 226)

The events of the strike connote that Steinbeck does not favor the methods of the communists. The novelist supports the individual and his freedom to function out of any influence. In one of his letters, he writes: "As individual humans we are far superior to in our functions to anything the world has born---in our groups we are not only not superior but in fact are remarkably like those most perfect groups, the ants and bees." (Steinbeck, 1976, p 75) For Steinbeck, instead of strikes, he promotes the role of the liberal government and the role of the individual. After *In Dubious Battle*, he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) where he represents a different kind of group community. The group in *The Grapes of Wrath* is portrayed as hard workers who respect the codes of community and help each other. In the end, they are rescued by the government. The story of these migrant workers presented in the novel is the story of the Okies who found themselves obliged to migrate to California during the great depression. Steinbeck takes it as a success when in a radio address; President Franklin Roosevelt said that when he read a novel entitled *The Grapes of Wrath*, he gave his order to help the migrant workers. (Trodd, 2008, p 12) This shows that Steinbeck promotes the role of the individual and the government over that of the communists. His novel is a wakeup call to the government to look and see below the status of these workers. For him, when the government ignores these migrant workers, it is a distortion of the American Dream and the foundation

of the US as a democratic state which has a mission to spread peace and prosperity. For Steinbeck, the function of *In Dubious Battle* is as Steve Newman opines in his analyses “a warning to those in power that things were not as they should be in a democracy that had become rather inward looking and unaware of its own history. It was also, as *Grapes* would be, a wake-up call to literary America, and a Europe in the midst of political turmoil”. (Newman, 2018) Accordingly, for Steinbeck, strikes and the methods of the communists are not the right solution to the problems facing the working class. It is the government which has to reform the agricultural system. That is why in his novel, he illustrates his argument of the phalanx to make his readers experience what it is like to go on strike under the leadership of the communists.

Steinbeck’s theory of the phalanx, which belongs to the theories of the crowd, favors the individual over the group. This notion of individualism stems from the American Dream, an ideology fully rooted in the American mindset. In our article, we argue that the reason that led Steinbeck to portray a failed disastrous strike and builds his theory and novel upon culture is because he wants to preclude strikes, stop the spread of communism in the US, and preserve capitalism.

### **3. In Dubious Battle: a novel of manipulation**

#### **3.1 Preventing the specter of communism through culture**

The reason that pushes Steinbeck to portray a failed strike is his hatred of communism and the communists. For him, the strikes and riots they promote is a threat to democracy. Accordingly, he seeks to prevent strikes and the communists’ rise to power. As a way to accomplish this, he uses his novel to secure the consent of people. *In Dubious Battle* manipulates people’s opinions by making them experience what it feels like to go on strike. In order to reinforce his argument, he makes use of the American culture. The Argument of the Phalanx, illustrated in *In Dubious Battle*, favors the individual over the group. In his novel, he promotes individualism as this notion has a significant role for the Americans as it is linked to the American Dream.

When Steinbeck wrote *In Dubious Battle*, he contends that his novel is free of propaganda with no political leaning. In his letter sent to Georg Albee, he States: “I wanted to be merely a recording



consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the thing". (Steinbeck, 1976, p 89) Yet, the novel denotes the contrary. Steinbeck praises the individual and condemns the mob; this proves a belief in an ideology. For the Marxist Gueorgui Plekhanov, all art holds an ideology behind. Therefore, literature emanates from an ideology. (Eagleton, 2002, p 15) Steinbeck openly criticizes corporate farming, yet he does not criticize the ideology of capitalism. In his analysis of *In Dubious Battle*, Lincoln R Gibbs states that Steinbeck does not attribute the suffering of the apple pickers in *In Dubious Battle* to capitalism. Exploitation for him comes from the mechanization of agriculture. (Gibbs, 1942, p 178) This shows that this novel is held within the ideology of capitalism. The novelist's goal is to stop the spread of communism and preserve capitalism; he uses the American culture to accomplish his goal.

Deeply influenced by the American Dream, the US is believed to be the land of prosperity. All individuals who have the talent and work hard have equal opportunities to generate wealth and possess power. As the American Dream is built on ideas like individualism and hard work, if one fails to achieve his dreams, he blames himself not the system. Therefore, social movements and strikes do not have a place in the Americans' mindset. In *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck promotes this. When Joy dies, Old Dan delivers a speech to the strikers. At that moment, he imagined himself to be a leader whipping the young generation in order to work hard, change their situation, and let go of laziness.

In *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck proposes two themes, group behavior and walking sleepers. The latter are people who want success without effort. At the beginning of the novel, Jim is represented as a sleepwalker who joins the communist party instead of looking for work. (Magill and Kohler and Mazzeno, 1996, p 316) The American Dream is used as a hegemonic method against revolutionary class consciousness. Upward mobility was on the rise in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. That period was known for its massive industrial proletariat. However, the US convinced its citizens that it is a classless nation. In this prospect, the American Dream plays the role of immunization against class consciousness. All class position embraces the vision that class struggle is not necessary. The American Dream renders the

Americans to believe that it is their task to ameliorate their position but within the capitalist system; in case they fail, the system programs them to blame themselves. This indicates that the American Dream solidifies the class system. (Vanneman and Weber Cannon, 1987, p 257-258) Accordingly, for Steinbeck, the characters presented, instead of working hard, they put their blame upon the capitalist system. Yet, as we have argued, Steinbeck spread this idea as he abhors the communists and favors capitalism. On several occasions, Steinbeck states his hatred of communism and the communists. In his *Life in Letters*, he writes: “I don't like communists either I mean I dislike them as people. I rather imagine the apostle had the same waspish qualities and the New Testament is proof that they had equally bad manners”. (Steinbeck, 1976, p 105) For him, these people steel freedom in order to achieve their cause. However, his aim is to promote individualism in order to hinder the revolt of the working class and preserve capitalism. His argument of the phalanx is related to the theories of the crowd. These theories are formed by bourgeois intellectuals to preserve the interest of their class.

Accordingly, Steinbeck builds his novel so that it manipulates people into thinking that strikes would turn in a savage mob. His aim is to prevent the rise of the working class as he favors capitalism. In order to do so, he forms his own theory of the crowd and relates it to the American Dream. The latter has long been celebrated as an ideology of progress and power, yet history shows that it is an ideology of hypocrisy and manipulation. As an intellectual Steinbeck is aware of that, yet he employs it in his novel.

### **3.2 The truth behind the American Dream**

The American Dream and the exceptionality of America is the spine of the American culture. Historical events of the American policy expose the myth and the hypocrisy of the dream. Celebrating words about the exceptionality of America have long been articulated in political speeches and literature in order to manipulate and serve the needs of the nation and of the individual at the expense of others. Yet, notwithstanding the dream is proved to be corrupted, Steinbeck makes use of it in order to transmit his political agenda.

To name but a few, expressions like “America First”, “Prosper America First”, and “Manifest you Destiny” have long been used in America throughout its history. They denote the exceptionality of the

US as a nation that spread peace and development. It is a land where individuals can gain wealth and power. However, all these celebrations go down in flames when one exposes the story behind. The American dream along with its associated terms, are related to brutality and greediness. (Churchwell, 2018) In the 17th and 18th centuries, the thirst to possess lands, push people to do all what it takes to achieve their goal. This dream starts with the persecution of the native Indians. In that period, there was a boom in the agricultural sector. As the number of labor hand and machines were low, the landlords make us of black slaves. Even though it is inhuman, the legitimacy of this is secured through religion. Hence, people embrace the idea that the black race is meant to serve the white race. (Rae, 2018) The US, instead of being the land of freedom it is a land of racial segregation.

When the Civil War (1861-1865) ended, there was the abolishment of the slave system and the beginning of the Gilded Age (1865-1900). In that period, there was an economic shift, from a dependence on agriculture to industry. Big companies ruled different industries. These companies double their fortune by exploiting the working class. Accordingly, the late 19th century had known chains of strikes. However, these strikes were easily tamed by the law enforcement agencies. (Grenberg, 2015 66-69) The government dedicated the mass media, including books and magazines, to consolidate the capitalist companies. A common national philosophy is spread among the population to protect the interest of the capitalists; it uses the American Dream with its notion of individualism and hard work, qualities which Steinbeck promotes indirectly in *In Dubious Battle*.

The corruption of the American Dream manifests as well even outside the US. In order to grow its economy and power, the US took part in wars outside the nation. It always justifies its interventions and wars by expressions related to the “American exceptionalism” and its duty to spread peace and stability throughout the globe. American intellectuals have always used these philosophies. Yet, the hypocrisy can be easily exposed. The intervention in the Vietnam War (1955-1975) For example, is hailed by a complete failure. Gladstone and Meredith mention in their article that the US spent more than 100

billion dollars in this war. In addition, approximately all who participated in this war suffer from psychological problems. (2011, p 39) Accordingly, instead of spread peace, it spreads terror. Another war that has to be mentioned is the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in 2013. The US names it War on Terror to justify its intervention when the real reason is its interest in oil. (Gardner, 2005, p 91) This indicates that the philosophy that built the US is just a pretext to gain more wealth, power, and domination. For long centuries, the nation has mastered the art of hegemony and ideological control. The policy of the US is the same no matter which political party rules. The speeches of the presidents of the US are full of sentences and expressions that celebrate the uniqueness of the country and its people; this is a hegemonic strategy that solidifies the power of the ruling class. Their power manifests in their ability to crash down all kinds of uprisings. Regardless of all the disillusionment that accompanies the American Dream, Steinbeck promotes it as a philosophy that brings development and wealth. His combination of the argument of the phalanx with the celebration of individualism and his condemnation of workers' unification is well thought of to prevent strikes. Steinbeck knows that culture works like a drug. Hence, his *In Dubious Battle* won't be an effective tool to prevent strikes unless it is built upon a deeply rooted culture. The Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci argues that the states which keep their power and domination through cultural and ideological methods are not easy to overthrow. In these countries, culture has a strong effect upon the consciousness of its inhabitants. They are unlikely to question or challenge the legitimacy of the state or the existing social order. In these types of governments, a direct attack would cause more misery and plight to the protesters. (Eyerman, 1981, p 46-47) Here comes the role of intellectuals like Steinbeck; his modernist novel in a way that legitimizes the authority and power of the government by interlacing his beliefs of the source of oppression with myths. This way, he secures the consent of people and preserves the capitalist system. In fact, Lukàcs strongly criticizes modernism arguing that it is built on mere fragmentation concerning the contradiction and disintegration of bourgeois societies. For him, this movement generates cynicism and nihilism. It does not help the revolutionary cultural politics. (Makaryk, 1993, p 97) Indeed, in *In Dubious Battle*, transmits the idea that the

working class cannot gain power over capitalism as it is the only system that can exist. This way, Steinbeck prevents strikes and all kinds of uprisings.

Ergo, notwithstanding history shows that the American Dream is corrupted and built to manipulate the general opinion, still Steinbeck employs it as he knows the effect it holds. The fear of the rise of the phalanx pushes him to use his modernist novel as a tool to direct people's opinion into thinking that strikes lead to disastrous ends.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

*In Dubious Battle* is a novel that shows how strikes led by the communists are doomed to fail. In order to portray this, he argues, through his argument of the phalanx, that individuals in a group would lose their rationality and engage in violence. The result is more misery and plight. Steinbeck proposes instead, the role of the liberal government to help the migrant workers. However, as argued in our article, this is a manipulation to promote an ideology. The novelist relates his argument of the phalanx with the notion of individualism in order to preclude the rise of the working class to power and preserve the power of the capitalists. This shows the reason why the strike fails in the novel. This way, Steinbeck uses cultural and ideological hegemony to make people believe that following the methods of the communists would lead to a catastrophe and strikes are destined to spiral out of control.

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