

Communism versus Capitalism in John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936)

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Abstract: This article analyses the two conflicting ideologies of Capitalism and Communism in John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936). Its aim is to study the socio-economic situation in the USA during the decade of the 1930s, known as the period of the Great Depression, to show the impact of the latter on the development of the above mentioned ideologies in this period of economic turmoil. *In Dubious Battle* describes the farmers' life during the 1930s and their struggle against the capitalists who deprived them of their basic rights. The events of the novel are based on Steinbeck's observations while he infiltrated in the strikes fought by the working class known also as the proletariat, and led by communist leaders against the capitalist practices of the employers or the Bourgeoisie. The analysis of the ideological conflict in *In Dubious Battle* reveals the strategies of the Communist Party, which has taken the cause of the downtrodden working class to displace Capitalism from the political ground.

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Key concepts: Communism, Capitalism, John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, The Great Depression, The Bourgeoisie, The Proletariat.

الشيوعية ضد الرأسمالية في رواية "في معركة مريية" (1936) لجون شتاينبك

الملخص: تحلل هذه المقالة الأيديولوجيتين المتضاربتين الرأسمالية و الشيوعية في رواية "في معركة مريية" (1936) للكاتب الأمريكي جون شتاينبك. الهدف من التحليل هو دراسة الحالة الاجتماعية والاقتصادية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية خلال عشرية الثلاثينيات المعروفة بفترة الكساد الاقتصادي الكبير لإبراز تأثير هذه الأخيرة على تطور الأيديولوجيتين المذكورتين أعلاه. رواية "في معركة مريية" تصف حياة الفلاحين في فترة الثلاثينيات وكفاحهم ضد الرأسماليين الذين جردوهم من أبسط حقوقهم. أحداث الرواية مقبسة من ملاحظات الكاتب أثناء تسلمه في الإضرابات التي خاضتها طبقة العمال المعروفة بالبروليتاريا وقادها رؤساء أحزاب شيوعيون ضد الممارسات الرأسمالية المطبقة من قبل طبقة أرباب العمل المعروفة بالبرجوازية. تحليل التضارب الأيديولوجي في كتاب "في معركة مريية" يكشف الإستراتيجيات المتبعة من قبل الحزب الشيوعي الذي أبدى اهتمامه بقضية الطبقة العاملة المضطهدة بهدف تنحية الرأسمالية من المجال السياسي

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشيوعية، الرأسمالية، جون شتاينبك، في معركة مريية، الكساد الإقتصادي الكبير، البرجوازية، البروليتاريا

Introduction:

The socio-economic situation of the 1930s is the main focus of the American author John Steinbeck in his fiction. Most of his novels report events that describe the impacts of the Great Depression and the harsh capitalist practices of the Bourgeoisie on the working class. Dealing with the socio economic issues of the period, the author cannot avoid the conflicting ideologies that characterized the relationship between the workers and their employers. While the latter seek to maintain the capitalist practices of the

previous decade to preserve their place in society, the former struggle to get rid of this system that they find exploitative and repressive. All along the decade of the 1930s, the working class, known especially as the Proletariat, were resisting Capitalism by adopting Collectivism, which is more adequate to their situation of struggle and resistance. In the majority of cases, the collective practices of the proletariat result in violent strikes guided by Communist Marxist leaders, aiming to overthrow Capitalism.

In Dubious Battle (1936) exposes vividly the conflicting ideologies that characterized the American society during the period of the 1930s. It focuses on the Capitalist exploitative practices exercised by the ruling class against the working one to dominate the socio-economic life in that period of social and economic turmoil. The novel narrates the harsh situation of the workers, who lived in a state of passivity and alienation for several years due to their submission to the laws of Capitalism. It also shows that the Great Depression which characterized the period and its aftermaths stimulated the workers' awareness of their importance for the economic prosperity of their employers. This fact encouraged them to revolt collectively to end or at least reduce the ruling class's exploitation and repression. To make their voice heard, they resorted to Communist intellectuals to lead their struggle and give it political effectiveness. The novel exposes the traditional conflict between the Capitalists and the Socialists and reveals that both of them seek to impose their own ideas to gain or maintain their power during the economic depression. Through the characters, we may understand that many Americans were deeply disappointed by the ruling system of the period and sought refuge in the ideals of Communism.

Ideological conflict in Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* has been the subject matter of many scholars. The majority of reviewers consider that the author's

depiction of the conflict is characterized by its political objectivity and realistic rendering of the events that hindered the life of the farmers during the Great Depression. The author's description of the farmers' situation is based on his own observations while he infiltrated in their struggle against the capitalists who deprived them of their basic rights. As such, he accurately reports their ideological tendencies which were inspired from Communism as a counter ideology of Capitalism.

New York Times Book Review critic Fred T. Marsh argues that "Steinbeck keeps himself out of the book. There is no editorializing or direct propaganda. His purpose is to describe accurately and dramatize powerfully a small strike of migratory workers, guided by a veteran Communist organizer, in a California fruit valley." (Marsh rep. by Williams, 2013). Marsh's review of the book alludes to the fact that Steinbeck, in his description of the farmer's strike, remains objective. His sympathy with the poor working class that opted for Communism to defend their cause does not mean that he is praising this ideology. He rather emphasizes the point that even the strike leaders take profit from the farmers' suffering to attain personal objectives.

Ndiaga Sylla, in his *Class Struggle in In Dubious Battle (1936) by John Steinbeck and Devil on the Cross (1982) by Ngugi Wa Thinong'o* (2009) analyzes the novel from a social perspective. He focuses on the class antagonism between the landowners, who get power from the maintenance of Capitalist practices, and the farm workers organized by the Communist party, which moved into the state in the early 1930s. Dealing with this antagonism, Sylla argues that Steinbeck sympathizes with the farmers and considers both the communist organizers and capitalist landowners as being responsible of their situation. He maintains that "John Steinbeck in his great

strike novel *In Dubious Battle* does not just simply praise Communism or Capitalism for that matter. He is simply telling the positive and the negative aspects of both” (Sylla, 2009). So, Steinbeck, according to Sylla, shows how communist leaders are determined to heal the workers’ crisis, but reveals at the same time their hidden motives which consist of using the farmers for the party’s interests.

Issue and Working Hypothesis

The above short review of the novel shows that the reviewers, in their dealing with different issues related to the plot, cannot avoid reference to its ideological aspect. The reason is that Steinbeck himself is unable to overlook the two ideologies that characterize the conflict between the farmers and their employers. Communism is, in fact, the cornerstone of the workers’ revolt against their employers, the capitalist class. The aim of this article is to go deeper in the analysis of the ideological conflict in *In Dubious Battle* to explain how the communist party comes to impose itself in the United States during the decade of the 1930s known as the period of the Great Depression. Since the plot of the novel is judged by the majority of reviewers that it is drawn from real events, it remains an important material for the study of the socio-economic as well as the political situation of the period. In fact, the study will be based on the analysis of some characters and themes that reveal the Communist inclination of the Proletariat and the Capitalist tendencies of the Bourgeoisie. The analysis will mainly focus on the strategies of the Communist Party, which has taken the cause of the downtrodden working class to displace Capitalism from the political ground.

To deal with the subject, the analysis will rely on some theoretical concepts and views that reveal the communist tendencies of the strike leaders in the novel and the means used by the Capitalist class to keep power in

society. In fact, the strike leaders, who stand for the main protagonists in the novel, do not hesitate to show their Communist inclination. The manipulation of the farm workers is the main focus in their attempt to overthrow the capitalist class, which dominated the American society, economy and government for many decades. Since the ideological conflict is stimulated by the wide gap between the two classes of the powerful Bourgeoisie and the powerless proletariat, the theme of social class will be dominant in the analysis.

Theoretical Grounds

Communism is an economic system, which stipulates that the means of production must be owned by the people. As a philosophy, Communism is developed by the German philosopher Karl Marx and it is referred to as “Marxism” in the majority of cases. It is given rise by the political theory of Socialism. In fact, both of Socialism and Communism stipulate that the factors of production must be owned by the people. (Amadeo, 2020). In his *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and his co-author Friedrich Engels believe that to achieve a utopian society, a revolution must take place to overthrow the existing government based on Capitalism. An elite leader must take absolute control of the proletariat and their choices. Finally, the destruction of all non communists is required to achieve equality both economically and socially among citizens (Amadeo, 2020). Communism comes in favor of the proletariat, and seeks the destruction of the Bourgeoisie, the owners of land and the means of production. This comes, according to the Marxists, by the destruction of Capitalism (Gregory and Stuart, 2013: 41).

The ideology of classical Capitalism is expressed by the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith in his *An Inquiry into the Nature*

and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776). It stipulates that economic decisions must be left to “the free play of self-regulating market forces”. Capitalism is usually referred to as Liberalism or free trade. The latter leaves “minimum levels of poor relief”, the fact which inspired the revolutionary philosophy of Marxism in the nineteenth century (Encyclopedia Britannica 2021).

The Workers’ Movement against Capitalism and the Rise of Communism in the 1930s

In the first part of *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck emphasizes the absolute dominance of the governing category in society. This group is known socially as the Bourgeoisie, the Capitalist class or the class of the employers, and referred to in the novel as the class of the landowners. The latter uses all means possible, including the state structures, to get more power. The author, therefore, shows how this narrow dominating fraction keeps on reproducing both the means of material and mental production to gain more profits and maintain its status at the high position of the social hierarchy. Concurrently, large groups of society wallow in poverty, exploitation, inequality and marginalization. The novel depicts the characters’ way of life under the Capitalist system and the difficulties they face in their daily lives. It reveals the fact that people do not only suffer from The Great Depression and its consequences, but also from the mistreatment of the governing class and the injustice of the system.

The corruption of the Capitalist institution and its exploitative practices against the workers is demonstrated by Steinbeck in many passages in the novel. The following quotation, for instance, shows at which point innocent people are victims of the system’s restrictive measures and inequalities:

Well, I told'em I wasn't a vagrant and I had a job, and told'em to call up Mr. Webb, he's manager at Tulman's. So they did. Webb asked where I was picked up and the sergeant said at 'a radical meeting,' and then Webb said he never heard of me. So I got the rap (p. 6).

Here, it is noticeable that the so-called Mr. Webb belongs to the Capitalist class which is afraid of the workers that threaten its interests. The passage shows also that individuals are denied all kinds of meetings that defend the rights of the workers, and that the system reacts violently to this kind of practices. Oppression is, then, among the ways used by the ruling class to keep its position in society. So, the workers are ruined physically and financially.

The oppressive practices of the Capitalist system do not stop at the level of individuals, but extend to whole families. In fact, many families are fallen apart due to the fact that one or some of their members refuse to submit to the system. In the novel, the author gives the example of Jim's family and what happened to it because his father followed a revolutionary path against oppression and social degradation. In fact, his "whole family has been ruined by this system." (p. 4).

Within the socio-economic chaos of the period and the successive political failures of the Capitalist system to find solutions to the problems caused by The Great Depression, many people were attracted by the communist rise of the 1930s. In fact, the workers, who were disillusioned by the governing system and devastated by the Great Depression, were willing to make changes within society. Unfortunately, all doors were closed in their faces under the prevailing system of Capitalism. The Communist party remained the only solution which provided them with an opportunity of change. As a result, they started to join it one after another, whether or not

they understood its real principles and motives. In *In Dubious Battle*, Tom is one of the characters that joins the party because of what he has gone through and because he wants to help others in making social and even political changes.

While Capitalism started to lose some of its political power and the trust of people during The Great Depression, Communism experienced an unprecedented movement in the USA. The economic strife and the social unrest of the thirties provided it with the best opportunity to make major reforms at the social, economic, and political levels. In fact, many communist leaders flocked to areas where the working classes lived in order to organize them in groups to ask for their violated rights and fight the repression of the bourgeois class. Their aim was to urge this despaired class to act against the Capitalist individual enterprise that made the rich and the poor live in complete isolation from one another, as if they live in two different nations. Therefore, they tried to bridge the gap between the two classes and they viewed that within society, people must take care of each other. They urged the destruction of Individualism and saw in Collectivism a better way to overcome these hard times.

Steinbeck's two central characters, MacLeod and Jim Nolan represent the union organizers, who call on the whole exploited workers to a revolutionary class struggle to fight for their civil rights as well as their existence. In one of the passages of the novel, Mac explains to the workers how they have to conduct their struggle to reach effective results. He says: "We've got to use everything. Look, we start out with a general plan, but the details have to be worked out with any materials we find. We use everything we can hold of. That's the only thing we can do. We'll just look over the situation" (p. 55). His words indicate that these union figures use whatever means come to

them to awaken the workers' consciousness and make them act against the economic deprivation and political corruption exercised by the capitalists. Their aim is, in fact, twofold; they work to release the workers' difficult situation and to overthrow Capitalism by imposing Communist principles.

Steinbeck tells the story of Mac and Jim's attempt to form a union by mobilizing the downtrodden workers in a social protest against oppression and economic exploitation, drawing on the conventions of what we call proletarian literature. The latter, which is also referred to as the proletarian novel, is the literature created by the working class writers, aiming to raise the consciousness of this oppressed class to raise against Capitalism by conveying pro-socialist messages. The writers of this type of fiction generally make appeal to the use of propaganda (Cuddon, 1999: 703). Mac and Jim, in *In Dubious Battle*, follow the same strategy to reach their goal. In chapter four, Steinbeck shows how they teach the workers to be the type who do not think solely about themselves and exposes the result they reached through their teachings. Once they are in California, they reveal the imperiled condition of self reliance and praise the importance of cooperation. This is well demonstrated when Mac motivates the workers to join their hands to help Lisa to deliver. The workers' solidarity is expressed in the following quotation, which conveys Mac's words and reactions towards the workers' solidarity:

Christ, we got to stand by our own people. Nobody else will. Lean-face boosted himself up. "All right fella," he said. "What do you want us to do?"

In the firelight Mac's face broke into a smile of pleasure and of triumph... "You guys know how to work together."

A change was in the air. The apathy was gone from the men. Sleepers were awakened and told, and added themselves to the group. A current excitement filled the jungle, but a kind of joyful excitement (pp. 62, 63).

From this quotation, we can notice that Mac does not use force to convince the workers to help each other. It is through winning their consent that he succeeds to impose his own ideology.

Later in the same chapter, Steinbeck reveals the fact that these union organizers do not help the girl to save her life. They rather tend to take particular measures to maintain, reform, or radically transform the social order. This is well demonstrated when Mac tells Jim: “We have got to use whatever material comes to us. ‘course it was nice to help the girl, but hell, even if it killed her- we’ve got to use anything.” (p. 66). Their intention is also to get rid of the workers’ passivity and selfishness. For them, when workers stick to each other in a righteous cause, they can accomplish something.

Fortunately for the party leaders, the socio-economic situation of the farmers helps them to reach their goal. The growing poverty led to the rise of new workers’ unions which struggle for political rights and social justice. As a result, the union organizers seize the opportunity to urge the whole working class to strike in order to live a dignified life. Mac and Jim’s aim is, in fact, to bolster the number of the union members and sympathizers. This can only be achieved by the spread of awareness among the workers and even the landowners about the devastating living conditions of the families in the camps, which is the result of the unequal distribution of wealth. The “Reds”, or the “Radicals”, as they are called in the novel, try to get any sort of help from the believers of the cause and draw away many people from the objective position to the intensifying conflict. Mac does everything to

provide the strikers with material help to lead their struggle, because his main focus is to spread the ideals of Collectivism among them. In this context he says: “Listen Dick, I got a list of sympathizers right here. We want money of course; but e ant tents, pieces of canvas, beds. Remember that-tents. Here’s your list. There’s lots of names on it. Make the contacts, and we’ll send cars for the stuff.” (p. 128).

In the novel, Steinbeck stands with the farmers cause, despite his awareness of the party leaders’ intentions. In chapter seven, he denounces the ruling system’s strategies to make the workers go back to work and accept the low wages without any protest. Within this situation, he shows how the workers and their leaders have been taught to stand together as one man. In fact, though the landowners try to bribe London, the leader of the workers, and make him stop the strike, he is resilient enough to challenge the multiple layers of authority working to suppress the collectivist philosophy of the workers. He refuses to betray his comrades. The authorities’ trials to bribe London are demonstrated when Steinbeck writes: “The ‘super’ lowered his voice. ‘I’ll tell you what I’m prepared to offer. You get the men back to work and you’ll get a steady job here as assistant superintendent at five dollars a day.” (p. 135).

When the ruling class failed to gain the trust of the workers through bribery, it takes other measures, force included, to stop the protest movements. In fact, the offer of the sheriff to London changes when the workers refuse to get back to work. The tone of the landowner becomes more aggressive and threatening. “We want you to come back to work.”, he says, “But if we do have to fight, we have to fight, we have weapons. The citizens are pretty tired of all this riot. And of course we may have to call troops, if we need them” (p. 255). It is, then, apparent that the landowners take all the

necessary measures to ban these social movements and maintain the social order that ever existed during the 1930s.

By revealing the ruling class's behavior, Steinbeck attempts to make his readers aware of the fact that the workers are condemned to obey the rules that deprive them from their rights. He shows this clearly in Dakin's words, when he says that in theory people "got the right to strike in this country", but "then they make laws against picketin" (p. 87-88). These words indicate that the ruling system perceives these movements as a threat that will disturb what they consider the natural selection of wealth. In fact, the system seeks to maintain the notion of "the survival of the fittest" to protect its interests.

As the story draws to a close, Steinbeck depicts the violence that accompanies the strike and its heavy consequences on the working class. He offers further evidence of the complexity of the conflict when things get worse for the workers. This is demonstrated by him when he portrays the devastating situation in which the workers and their families live, trying to get a better wage:

They had beans, swimming in pork fat to eat. Mac and Jim brought their cans from the tent and stood in line until some of the mess was dumped into each of their cans. They walked away. Jim took a little wooden paddle from his pocket and tasted the beans. "Mac," he said, "I can't eat it."

"Used to better things, huh?" you've got to eat it." He tasted his own, and immediately dumped the can on the ground. (p. 194)

The above quotation describes the traumatic journey that American workers are forced to endure during The Great Depression.

In chapter ten, Steinbeck further emphasizes that both men and women are deeply disillusioned and lose their faith in the cause. They are described

as being more ruined by the strike than by the economic recession itself. He writes:

An apathy had fallen on the men. They sat staring in front of them. They seemed not to have the energy to talk, and among them the bedraggled, discontented women sat. they were listless and stale. They gnawed thoughtfully at their meat, and when it as finished, wiped their hands on their clothes. The air is full of their discontent (p. 180).

The author describes this social unrest as a war where many innocent people lose their lives only because they ask for their rights and want a better life for their families. At the end, the conflict remains woefully unresolved and the only looser in this fight is the working class.

Social Class Antagonism and Ideological Conflict During the 1930s

The issue of social class that characterized the 1930s and its relation with the ideological conflict of the era has an explicit manifestation in Steinbeck's novels, especially *In Dubious Battle*. Class division in the American society, which was the result of Capitalism, had its impact mainly on the social situation of the farm workers and their families. The latter, who plunged in an endless poverty, adopted ideologies that opposed the capitalist one to protect their rights. In the novel, Steinbeck refers to the wide gap between the working class and the ruling one and the struggle that resulted from it. He shows also how the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl had intensified the ideological conflict between the two classes.

As it is afore-mentioned, *In Dubious Battle* stands for a historical novel, vacant from any ideological preference. It aims rather to make the reader aware of the damaging effects that an economic crisis can have on society. Steinbeck, then, reports through his novel what statistics, economists and historians could not tell. Indeed, he uses his artistic power to report facts

about the humiliating life thousands of families had experienced during the period of The Great Depression, and their adoption of whatever means possible to keep a living and endure their difficulties.

Correspondingly, the plot and the setting of the novel give us more details about the exact period of time and place in America Steinbeck describes. Alternatively, the characters, though they are fictional, they actually represent millions of other migrant families who had suffered from the depression. Indeed, in order to investigate a specific issue among others that had marked the 1930s, Steinbeck opts for this exact choice of the characters that are migrants. Moreover, though he takes no ideological side and he does not want to spread any ideological view, it is noticeable that he is sympathizing with the oppressed workers. In *The Harvest Gypsies*, he writes about the farmers that they are “resourceful and intelligent Americans who have gone, through the hell of the drought have seen their lands wither away; and this, to a man who has owned his land, is a curious and terrible pain” (Steinbeck, 1936: 22). Here, he demonstrates the terrible effects of The Dust Bowl on the farmers’ properties as well as their psychological state.

One of the major questions that Steinbeck rises in his novel is how the economic crisis of the 1930s framed the structure of the American society which was divided into two fractions: the bourgeoisie, “the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of production and employers of wage labor” (Ching, 1975: 43), and the proletariat, “the class of modern wage laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor power in order to live.” (Ibid.). His aim is, in fact, to show how this crisis widened the existing gap between the rich and the poor, a thing which resulted in a violent reaction by the latter in a form of revolt, or a series of strikes.

In Dubious Battle stands also for a strike novel, which is concerned with the unprivileged migrant farmers' bad living conditions once in California and their struggle with the big farm organizations to live a decent life. It demonstrates the zenith of their sufferings which is reached when their wages are cut. Reading the author's description of the workers' struggle, we notice their Communist inclination. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that the major part of their suffering is caused by the opposing ideology of Capitalism, which puts power and wealth in the hands of the upper class. On the other hand, their struggle is led by Communist leaders, whose aim is to end the Capitalist system and install the Communist one. The latter aims especially to create a classless society, eliminate the economic inequality that reigns in the latter and more importantly to put an end to the political power that is concentrated in the hands of this minor class of Capitalists.

Throughout *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck provides the reader with a vivid image of the two classes that compose the American society during the Great Depression, giving a distinct concern for the contending working class. In fact, through the characters and the setting of the novel, the author focuses mainly on the life of the working class and their sufferings. He recounts the daily troubles that the migratory apple orchard workers and their families face in Torgas valley. He also depicts the repressive living conditions to which they are submitted. He stresses the point that these migrant farmers have little opportunity to live a dignified life in the camps called "Hoovervilles". In this regard, he writes: "Along the farther side were three dirty white tents...In the clearing itself there were perhaps fifty men, some sleeping on the ground in sausage rolls of blankets, while a number sat around the little fire in the middle of the flat cleared place" (p. 56). This

passage stands for a visual image of the pitiless and hard times that the working class is going through in the promised Eden place, California.

Opposingly, there are episodes in the novel that show how the upper class has little concern for the workers' suffering and focuses only on its own interests. Sympathizing with the poor, Steinbeck bears the class of the entrepreneurs the responsibility of making their situation harsher. He shows how employers always try to get cheap labor in place of more expensive one by hiring old people instead of young ones, because their situation obliges them to accept any work with any wage. This is illustrated by the character of old Dan who, at his old age, refuses charity and decides to sustain himself by himself by going to work. In his words to Jim, he says: "I'm a top-faller... They'd say, 'Dan, come get your soup,' and I'd sop my bread in my soup and suck the soup out of it. By Christ, I'd jump out of an apple tree and break my neck before I'd take charity" (p. 75). This quotation describes man's daily struggle to improve his devastating situation and cope with the lack of legal protection, health care, and nutrition. It depicts how the American farmer is not given the chance to get some dignified life even at an advanced age, because the law, which is in the hands of the upper class, has little concern for the lower class. Such kind of passages are used by Steinbeck to justify the workers' revolutionary reaction against the economic and political situation of their country. They, in fact, emphasize that the situation is beyond bearing.

All along the novel, Steinbeck focuses on the economic and the political conflicts between the oppressor landowners and the oppressed farmers in America. In his analysis of these conflicts, he tries to discern their causes and effects, especially on the American farmers. Following the life of this class in society, he finds that the conflicts are caused by the economic depression of

the period as well as the natural phenomenon of the Dust Bowl. They are intensified, however, by the political oppression of the landowners, who submitted them to unemployment and difficult working conditions. In fact, the group of the migrant characters in the novel represents the countless number of Americans who have been subject to an extensive expropriation of their lands and who went westward in search of work during the years of The Dust Bowl and The Great Depression.

Chapter six of the novel focuses on the worst working conditions and their cumulative negative effects on the workers. In an episode where a farmer, Old Dan, falls from a tree because of a broken ladder, Steinbeck reveals the fact that farmers suffer from insecurity and the lack of good working conditions. In this sense, he writes: “Behind him he heard a splintering crash and a sullen thump. Old Dan lay on his back on the ground under the tree. His open eyes looked stunned. His face was blue pale under the white stubble. Two rungs were stripped out of the ladder” (p. 104). These words show how workers suffer even at their old age to secure a living.

Furthermore, Steinbeck draws his readers’ attention to the fact that the ruling class keeps on accumulating profits as much as possible by shrinking the laborers’ wages and stealing their hard work in order to gain more political empowerment and maintain its dominance. In fact, he always shows how landowners are trying to save on labor costs by reducing the number of the workers they pay or lowering their pay. In chapter four of the novel, there is evidence that the large farmers cut the wages, when the author says that they pay their laborers “fifteen cents, *fifteen lousy cents!*” (p. 57). Here, the author finds no means to express his sympathy with the working class without resorting to the Communist Marxian view about the Bourgeoisie. In his words, Karl Marx puts it that “each step in the

development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class” (Marx and Engels, 1848: 15).

Along with his depiction of the farmers’ misery, Steinbeck cannot overlook the way the Bourgeois class exploits them and tries always to widen the gap that exists between the two classes. Simultaneously, he refers to the internal contradictions that exist within the social framework, emphasizing that the rich live a peaceful life by keeping prices high and wages low, while the poor struggle to keep a living. In the novel, Steinbeck shows how the large farmers bring up the prices of the consumer goods from food to clothing in order to make profits and more importantly to maintain their position at the top of the social pyramid. In this context, Steinbeck writes: “Women work all day, men work all day; and the owner charges three extra cents for a can of beans because the men are too damn tired to go into town for groceries” (p. 77). The landowners are, then, depicted as being greedy and pitiless, because all they look for is their own interests. Opposingly, the working class sells its time and labor force for the benefit of this upper class. In *Das Capital*, Marx explains the reason behind the workers’ poverty, stating that

workers are exploited by factory owners and don’t own the product of their labor, making them little better than machines. The factory owners and other capitalists hold all the power because they control the means of production , allowing them to mass vast fortunes while the workers fall deeper into poverty (Wheeler, 2017).

In the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* entitled “Bourgeois and Proletarians”, Marx and Engels state that the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat “stand in constant opposition to one another” (Marx and Engels, 1848: 1). Steinbeck, in *In Dubious Battle*, tends to inform the reader that the

only victim of this fight is the simple worker who burns the candle at both hands to improve his situation, yet his attempt is doomed to failure. In fact, the fate of the proletariat is similar to that of Sisyphus, who has been “condemned to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight.” (Camus, 1955: 88). They are doomed to do “a futile and hopeless labor and there is no more dreadful punishment than that” (Ibid.). In the course of the narrative, the author forces the reader to recognize that within the Capitalist system, society may be compared to a jungle, where survival is only for the fittest or the rich, because the law is put in their hands.

Another reason behind the society’s misbalance is the use of the upper class of its position and power to satisfy its needs and protect its business and wealth. In chapter seven, one can find episodes that show the large farmers’ exercise of force and threat to keep the process of making money and accumulating profits going. In this regard, Steinbeck writes: “Then we kick you off this place in half an hour. Then we blacklist the whole damn bunch of you. You can’t go any place; you can’t get a job any place. We’ll have five hundred deputy sheriffs if we need’em” (p. 135). This passage exposes the upper class’ abusive practices and the workers’ fear to lose their jobs. It also denounces the landowners’ use of power to wield their authority.

Because of Steinbeck’s accurate description of the misbalance that characterized the American society in the decade of the 1930s, *In Dubious Battle* becomes an arena on which great social debates are conducted and stands for a historical rather than fictional document. The novel merely reports what he has experienced with the migrant farmers. In a letter to George Albee about *In Dubious Battle*, he expresses his neutrality over strikes and says: “I’m not interested in strike as means of raising men’s

wages... I wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the thing.” (Steinbeck, in Benson and Loftis, 1980). Indeed, he sets the events of this literary work during a strike of fruit pickers against the apple growers’ exploitation and mistreatment. The plot of the novel is inspired from a real strike of cotton workers against their employers.

Around 1934, he participated in a cotton strike in the San Joaquin valley, and his choice of this event is not fortuitous. His aim was to reveal the dark and the gloomy side of this strike and to criticize the oppressive rules which tended to restrict people’s freedom and cause their suffering. In *In Dubious Battle*, he shows that this strike is the result of long years of disillusionment and despair, and that the workers find in it the only solution to end the capitalists’ practices. Generally, strikes are characterized by violence and have negative impacts on the life of the working class as the employers tend to cut their wages and oppress them violently, the thing that worsen their situation. In the novel, Steinbeck portrays many instances of the impact of strikes on the life of the masses, either at the material or at the physical level.

Despite their suffering, the farmers remain determined to change the oppressive laws and practices exercised against them, because they are disillusioned to the point that they are not afraid of death. They fight without fear against the vigilantes and scarify themselves in order that others live a brighter life. Steinbeck denounces the rigid and the harsh policies that are conducted during the strike. There is an important scene in the novel that shows the brutality that caused the death of a man who is engaged in the strike simply because he believes in the cause and “he wasn’t doin’ no harm to nobody” (p. 231). He simply has hope that this strike will bring a positive change, yet he has been killed without mercy.

Joy had stopped, his eyes wide. His mouth flew open and a jet of blood rolled down his chin, and down his shirt... Joy lifted himself up with his arms, like a lizard, and then dropped again. A little thick river of blood ran down on the crushed rock of the roadbed (p. 168).

Joy's death is a turning point in the workers' cause, because it awakens their consciousness and becomes another reason why they have to keep on fighting. It also reveals the level of cruelty which the landowners and their followers can reach when someone threatens their interests.

Steinbeck, in his novel, is in the side of the workers and finds that they have to act collectively to achieve social reforms. He believes that the union of workers is necessary and it is the only way that can change their actual situation. Yet, he is doubtful about strikes because, in his view, they do not always bring positive changes, and workers are the only victims in the field of this "dubious battle", as the title of the book suggests. Simultaneously, he tends to warn the ruling class that the contending class represents the majority of the population. So, though many of them die in their fight against their domination and injustice, there are many others who will continue the fight and take revenge.

Steinbeck's reference to the issue of social class in his novel is, in fact, a way to raise his readers' awareness on the fact that the struggle between the haves and the have-nots is a constant phenomenon. His aim is to show that this class conflict is not one of the outcomes of The Great Depression though the latter widened the gap between the two classes and worsened the fight. A simple example of that is when Burton has a conversation with Jim about the everlasting class warfare:

"There aren't any beginnings," Burton said. "Nor any ends. It seems to me the man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he can't

remember, into a future he can't foresee nor understand. And man has met and defeated every obstacle, every enemy except one. He cannot win over himself. How mankind hates itself" (p. 259).

This means that man can overcome any kind of problems except man like him. This is the nature of mankind. And this echoes Marx's thoughts on this when he maintains that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, 1848: 1).

It is worth mentioning that all the characters of *In Dubious Battle* experience the same type of struggle. In fact, they come together to fight homelessness, starvation, unemployment, and more importantly oppression. Yet, it is noticeable that throughout the novel, we can feel their anger and resentment toward the ruling class, but also their hopelessness about winning these fights. This is well demonstrated in Jim's statement that "all the time at home we were fighting, fighting something- hunger mostly. My old man was fighting the bosses. I was fighting the school. But always we lost. And after a long time I guess it got to be part of our mind-stuff that we always would lose (p. 30). The passage emphasizes the fact that social protest and man's struggle to attain social mobility and live a decent life never finds end under the Capitalist system, because the oppressed class has never achieved its aim.

Conclusion

In *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck gives a vivid image about the life of the working class in the United States during the years of the Great Depression by emphasizing their daily suffering to make a living. As in all his fiction, he sympathizes with this class and believes that they are the victims of a number of factors that hindered their life during a decade of social and economic unrest. At the first level, he bears the ruling class the responsibility of the

their sufferings and believes that if the workers do not react collectively against the oppressive laws of the capitalist system, their life conditions will continue to go from bad to worse. He admits the fact that the economic and natural phenomena of the period, namely the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, worsened their situation, but he believes that the worker has not to bear alone the consequences of the crisis. So, dealing with their problems, he associates their suffering with the imbalance in the social class system that prevails in the USA and the conflicting ideologies of the decade of the 1930s.

Considering the ideological conflict, Steinbeck finds himself obliged to express his being against the Capitalist practices of the Bourgeois class, which oppressed the workers. He also falls in suggesting solutions by resorting to the Communist Marxian ideology. Yet, he emphasizes the point that the workers are also victims of the Communist leaders who use them as a tool to overthrow Capitalism. The title of the book “in dubious battle” is indicative of this fact. So, he does not miss the point to remind his public that he is not praising one ideology over another in his works. He just reports the facts he observes while he infiltrates in the migrant camps. More importantly, he admits the Marxian view that the class conflict will not find its end and he alludes to this fact in several passages in his novel. In his view, the conflict is rather due to the imbalance in the social structure in his country than the economic crises of the 1930s.

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