

INTRODUCTION

American literature has offered many facets to world literature and covered various themes and aspects such as adventures, religion, philosophy, slavery, ... However, no one would dispute that Steinbeck's œuvre in general and his The Grapes of Wrath in particular, have explored quite a new field that American Literature had not dealt with so clearly before. That field is the lower class people's social conditions

The Grapes of Wrath was chiefly situated in California, one of the strongholds of capitalism in the world. Being born there, in the rich Salinas valley, Steinbeck was an eyewitness of the injustices imposed on the laboring class. His attention was not drawn by local laborers' conditions but by the migrants who came from faraway states like Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma,... He concentrated on a twelve-person-family-the Joads-who, like other families, were chased from their farms by banks and took the way to California where the same banks and their accomplices were to exploit them.

The heart of the novel is the excesses of capitalism in a very disastrous economic crisis, namely the 1929-1939 depression. John Steinbeck was angered by the rich men and banks that took advantage of the situation to enrich themselves to the poor people's detriment.

His anti-capitalistic sentiments were also motivated by the indifference and negative involvement of local authorities and police to the owners' profit. As everyone was touched by the crisis, the owners offered them money and in return, they promised to help or to shut their eyes to the owners' misdeeds.

The Grapes of Wrath also displayed the situation of the owners' victims. It showed how a few of them attempted to resist the owners' Machiavellian methods, and how many of them fell into the owners' trap. But generally speaking, Steinbeck sided with the migrants and personally got involved in their struggle for better labor conditions.

Steinbeck's last but not least form of struggle was The Grapes of Wrath which both conveyed the laborers' wrath and provoked the owners' wrath after its publication. For people who witnessed or endured those injustices in California, the novel was more reality than fiction, the reason why it is now read not only for entertainment but chiefly as a source of information about the Great Depression. Steinbeck used his journalistic talents to transform reality into fiction without distorting that reality. As the truth does not always please, that reality aroused the animosity of the owners and administrative authorities who saw The Grapes of Wrath as mere communist propaganda. Of course it earned much fame to Steinbeck among the laborers who

considered Steinbeck as their spokesman and his novel as their manifesto.

However, it would be incorrect to consider The Grapes of Wrath only as an anti-capitalistic novel. It is also a psychological document in which people's promises are rarely respected, provoking certain behaviors on either side: inhumane behavior on the owners' side and humanity on the migrants'.

Also, it is vital to identify the kind of capitalism that Steinbeck attacked. He denounced uncontrolled, savage, amoral and inhumane capitalism, those who applied it and those who supported or tolerated it. Steinbeck was himself a capitalist for he owned big ranches, and at the same time helped his unlucky fellow men.

The form of capitalism that he combated is the one that entitled the owners to do whatever they wanted to enrich themselves, including killing or ill-treating poor people.

The aim of this thesis is to identify and then study the causes of Steinbeck's wrath against harsh capitalism, the main factors responsible for that kind of system and finally the psychological consequences to which that system led.

First we will look into dispossession of poor farmers in Oklahoma, the responsibilities of banks in that affair, the abortive resistance by the

dispossessed and their going to California motivated by deceptive and fallacious handbills.

Second, we will focus on the exploitation of men by men which appeared under many forms namely the owners' unfairness, disproportionate salaries and the give-and-take-back principle.

Third, we will concentrate on the strategies that the owners laid down to keep their privileges. They include harsh police repression as a response to any attempt at protest, intimidation and the divide-and-rule policy.

Fourth, we will attach particular attention to the migrants in California, their attempts at revolt which always failed, their attempts at organization as well as the exasperation into which they were plunged by the owners' incessant harassment.

Finally we will carry out an inquiry into the behaviors of the rich owners and the poor migrants which resulted from harsh capitalism. First the owners' inhumanity and the migrants mutual help will be studied. Then, the owners' sadism and the migrants' solidarity will be considered. To finish with, the owners' egoism and the migrants' spirit of sharing will be analyzed.

CHAPTER I

POOR FARMERS DISPOSSESSED BY RICH OWNERS

John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, a novel of social protest par excellence, displayed the author's bitterness towards all the institutions responsible for poor farmers' suffering. This "realistic novelist of the depression era"¹ started with banks and other big commercial companies chasing poor farmers from their land to safeguard and increase their interests. This resulted from the misinterpretation of capitalism which is defined as "the type of economy in which capital is privately owned and may be used by the owners as they wish in attempting to make profits from their economic enterprises".² This definition creates confusion, especially with the phrase "as they wish... to make profit" which is vague and ambiguous. Taking advantage of that, the banks did as they wished and chased the poor farmers off their lands to make profit.

Deeply hurt by those capitalistic and sadistic practices of the banks, Steinbeck found no other means to attack them but with his pen. With striking symbolism and obvious hatred against those

¹ Claude Edmonde Magny, L'Age du Roman Américain (Paris: Seuil; 1984), p.179 " ... romancier réaliste de la dépression era"

² Encyclopedia Americana 5, (Danbury: Grolier Inc, 1988) p.599

banks, he gave a picture of the latter in the opening chapters of The Grapes of Wrath.

This chapter will endeavor to point out the banks' arrogance and responsibilities in dispossessing poor farmers. Then we will concentrate on the attempts at resistance which were overwhelmed by the banks' power. Finally we will have a close look at the handbills calling the dispossessed to leave their land and go massively to California.

I.1. The Banks

After the savage wind that had swept almost all the farms in Oklahoma, the poor farmers wondered how they would survive with their destroyed crops. Instead of having someone to assist them, they saw experts inspecting the land on behalf of the banks. These experts finally told the unfortunate farmers, with much authority and sadism, that they were to be "expropriated by banks because, to be profitable in a capitalistic system, cotton cultivation must be highly industrialized ..." ³

In their attempt to explain what was happening, the banks' envoys, who described the banks as "the monsters", declined any responsibility in that shameful action. They insisted that the bank or

³ Claude Edmonde Magny, L'Age du Roman Américain, p.184

"...expropriés par les banques parce que, pour être rentable en système capitaliste, la culture du coton doit être hautement industrialisée ..."

the company needed, wanted, insisted " as though the bank or the company were a monster, with thought and feeling ... These last [envoys] would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and monsters all at the same time. Some of the owner men were a little proud to be slaves to such cold and powerful monsters" ⁴

Obviously, the last part of the above quotation conveys Steinbeck's own judgement about banks and those he calls their slaves. The latter had the orders to execute blindly, without checking their morality. Besides, they had no interest in questioning those orders because the better and the more quickly they executed them the more they gained. Apart from that, they recognized that " the monster was stronger than they were"⁵.

Moreover, Steinbeck struck another blow against the banks, with the aim of ridiculing them. The owners who represented the banks and who were chasing the poor farmers pretended to have no control over the banks. The farmers wondered how the men who created the banks could not stop that action and, above all, how they hurriedly claimed their innocence in a situation whose initiators they were. The owner men responded:

⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, (London: Panbook, 1975), P. 36.

⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 37

We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man...The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it... It's the monster. Men made it, but can't control it."⁶

The above shows Steinbeck's opposition to the owners' irony and sadism. The owners who already possessed much land, knew better than anybody, that they were enriching themselves to the detriment of the poor families whose children were starving, and whose crops had been destroyed by the stampede. The dispossessed poor could not understand "an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't like a man...That's the monster"⁷.

Likewise, on the world scale, where individuals are replaced by countries, the same system has been imposed by rich countries. The latter kept accumulating more riches than needed and forgot less lucky countries. In an article entitled "The Business of Genocide", the Methodist Recorder says:

The world economy is today a huge casino ... The situation has reached such extremes that the assets of the three wealthiest persons in the world amount to the gross domestic product of the 48 poorest countries combined. ... The poor countries should not be blamed for this tragedy.

⁶ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, pp.38-39

*They neither conquered nor plundered entire continents for centuries. They did not establish colonialism.*⁸

Doubtless, the term "monster" as used by Steinbeck, refers to those banks and rich owners who, instead of helping the poor, dispossess them and claim no responsibility .

The fact of blaming their shameful action on other people reminds the reader of Machiavelli's The Prince, where it is written: "The princes put the responsibility for their disagreeable actions on the backs of others and reserve for themselves the responsibility for the agreeable ones"⁹.

The depression is alluded to for the first time in The Grapes of Wrath under a form full of imagery. When the banks envoys were justifying their action, they explained that "the monster is sick, something's happened to it"¹⁰. This "sickness" or that "something" is certainly the economic crisis the known as the Great Depression that occurred in the United States during the 1930s.

The crisis openly broke out on October 24, 1929, the day which remains known as "Black Thursday" among businessmen for the market has suffered

⁷ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 38

⁸ Methodist Recorder (London: Thur. March, 28, 2002), p.2

⁹ Nicolas Michiavelli, Le Prince ("Les princes doivent mettre sur le dos des autres les besognes désagréable et se réserver à eux mêmes les agréables.").

¹⁰ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 38

unprecedented losses. The Hoover Administration which had proved incapable of facing the previous small crises minimized this one saying that " the recession ... is purely a technical reaction and is not due to any general decline in business conditions".¹¹

The same situation had occurred many times before, namely in 1907 and in 1920-1921, and had had the same consequences. Concerning the beginning of the 1907 depression, Jack London wrote in Burning Daylight that:

Money was becoming rare. This shortage which had started in many great banks of the East, spread to local banks which recovered their loans".¹²

Recovering loans in such a crisis implies harsh measures on the debtors' part such as auctioning their creditors's belongings.

In his other novels written around the same period (1930s), Steinbeck made allusion to banks as a major threat to poor farmers' stability and tranquility. To illustrate this, one may consider The Red Pony (1933), in which the Tiflins, a family of Californian farmers, were under constant threats from the Bank of Italy. Those threats appear when Mr Carl Tiflin told Billy Buck:

¹¹ The Annals of America, Vol. 15. 1929-1939 : The Great Depression (Chicago : Encyclopédia Britannica, Inc., 1976) p. 32

¹² Jack London, Radieuse Aurore (Paris : Union Générale d'Éditions, 1973), p.363, "L'argent devenait rare. Cette pénurie ayant commencé dans plusieurs grandes banques de l'Est, elle s'étendit sur les banques locales qui firent recouvrer leurs créances"

Listen Billy...I'm having a hard time keeping this ranch out of the Bank of Italy without taking on anybody else to feed. ¹³

The above infers that a little crisis would plunge the Tiflins into a similar situation as the farmers of Oklahoma.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning this comparison full of symbolism, which sums up Steinbeck's judgements vis-à-vis the banks. The owner men explained very arrogantly to their victims that the banks' "life" was of more worth than the farmers'. They said:

... Those creatures [banks and companies] don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat interest on money. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so.¹⁴

The logical deduction is that common people, like the poor farmers of Oklahoma, may die if their death serves the interest of the banks. It is also sadistic on the part of the owners, to say that banks would die if they had no profits just the way men would do if they had no food. They were aware that they were depriving poor men of their only source of food, which means that they were willingly and knowingly pushing them to death to save their banks.

¹³ John Steinbeck, The Red Pony, (Dallas: Off set Paperback Mfrs, Inc, 1966), pp133-4.

¹⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.37

Therefore, one may conclude that John Steinbeck intended to show that owners' salvation resided in farmers' starvation.

Very unfortunately, the dispossessed farmers who were promised a paradise in California, found rather a "hell" where banks and cruel owners were masters. "The cultural scene in California in the 1930s particularly in Salinas Valley ... differed from that of rural areas elsewhere because the California farms were large collectives, ... owned by big operators and banks, and employing hundreds of workers, many of them migrants"¹⁵.

The banks which were responsible for their being dispossessed were also to be responsible for their starvation in California.

Paradoxically, when Steinbeck was a boy his mother "hoped that her boy would grow up to be a banker"¹⁶.

An African reader interested in Zimbabwe will realize that the controversial land reform in that country is rather the reverse of the Oklahoman farmers' dispossession. Unlike the Oklahoman farmers who were abandoned by everybody, including the Government, Zimbabwe's poor blacks are assisted and encouraged by the Government in their bloody raids against rich white people's farms. As an illustration, The Guardian Weekly says:

¹⁵ Paul McCarthy, John Steinbeck, (N.Y: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1980), p.46

¹⁶ Paul McCarthy, John Steinbeck, p.4

The violence is concentrated in the Chinhoyi area ... where 23 white farmers have been charged over clashes with land invaders ... they had gone to the defence of one of their number who was besieged ... the Government accused them of attacking defenceless blacks, and the ruling ZANU-PF unleashed its militants against farms in the area. ...Some of those who fled their farms ... spent the night in the bush because the police prevented them driving to Harare. ¹⁷

From the foregoing, it would appear that John Steinbeck took the part of the poor, who were unjustly being dispossessed by sadistic, capitalistic and arrogant banks. With much machiavellianism, the latter sent the poor to a destination where they were to exploit them. Steinbeck, who was angered by those poor people's conditions, used his pen with much talent to write "strong attacks on those considered responsible for such conditions" ¹⁸. The number one responsible was the banks. However, the poor farmers attempted to resist before being overwhelmed by the banks, as the following shows.

I.2. Attempts at Resistance

Any normal man under serious threat of being dispossessed attempts to resist with the hope of

¹⁷ *The Guardian Weekly* (London: Thur . Aug 16. Wed. Aug 22, 2001) p.4

¹⁸ Paul McCarthy, *John Steinbeck*, p.16

overcoming the threat. The latter may be launched and supported by very powerful forces, able to crush any resistance all at once. This was the case in The Grapes of Wrath where Oklahoman poor farmers' resistance was overwhelmed before being organized.

To start with, banks' envoys, who had not managed to convince farmers to leave their land peacefully, brought in tractors. It was not easy to persuade the determined farmers who believed in their natural rights to own that land. They were convinced that "Those who live and work on the land, who pay for it with their blood, sweat and toil own the land"¹⁹ .

The above appeared clearly in the farmers' response after the banks' envoys had explained their orders were to clear up the land or lose their jobs. They were also calling the farmers to go on relief or to go to California. The farmers answered:

*...but it is our land. We measured it
and broke it up. We were born on it,
and we got killed on it, died on it.
...That's what makes it ours-being born
on it, working it, dying on it. That
makes ownership, not a paper with
numbers on it.*²⁰

This passage conveys Steinbeck's opinion about the issue of ownership. He wants to make the

¹⁹ Paul McCarthy, John Steinbeck, p.76

²⁰ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p..38

reader realize the absurdity of chasing people from where they have been for generations. Not only chasing them, but above all, proposing no compensation and sending them to live on relief.

To make it work rapidly and efficiently, tractors invaded the land. Money corrupted and enslaved tractor drivers who zealously started their macabre job, claiming to execute their masters' orders. As Steinbeck wrote about one driver, money "had some how got into the driver's hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him-goggled his mind, muzzled his speech..."²¹

Even though The Grapes of Wrath was written in a different period, in a different context and for a different purpose, it makes the reader think of Civil Disobedience, where Henry David Thoreau wrote :

*It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have the right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right...law never made men a whit more just.*²²

The above quotation sheds light on the attitude of the drivers who blindly obeyed orders-comparable to laws in the quotation.

Realizing the banks' determination and that the tractors were moving to their houses, the farmers

²¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, pp.40-42

²² Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience (NY:Bantam Book, Inc., 1962), p. 86

decided to resist with the means at their disposal. One of them cried:

*Grampa killed Indians, pa killed snakes for the land. Maybe we can kill banks-they 're worse than Indians and snakes. Maybe we got to fight to keep our land like pa and Grampa did.*²³

Here is a summary of Steinbeck's sentiment vis-à-vis the banks. The comparison with Indians and the snakes is very significant. Being worse than Indians and snakes which were the worst obstacles to the settlers, means having no sense of what is right or wrong. Generally neither Indians nor snakes took or take the initiative to attack peaceful people. But the banks did with the aim of enriching themselves. Steinbeck ridiculed the banks whose attitude had become unbearable

After that, the farmers' threat became more direct. After a tractor driver had told a certain Joe David to leave his house before it collapsed on him, the man responded:

I built it [my house] with my hands. Straightened old nails to put the sheathing on. Rafters are wired to the stringers with baling wire. It's mine. I built it. You bump it down-I'll be in the

²³John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 39

*window with a rifle. You even come too close and I'll pot you like a rabbit.*²⁴

When the driver argued that he was just a slave to the "monster", the man realized that the driver was not the right person to be killed. Then he changed his mind and said:

*Well, there is a president of the bank. There is a board of directors. I'll fill up the magazine of the rifle and go into the bank... We've got a bad thing made by men... that's something we can change.*²⁵

The last sentence of the above quotation is, doubtless, Steinbeck's own conclusion. The banks, which normally do a noble job, became bad to the extent of depriving farmers of their land and sending them to exile in their own country. That situation had to be changed.

Unfortunately, it was not the poor farmers who would have the power to change it. A few old hunting guns could not, in any case, resist the powerful invasion

As it appears in The Grapes of Wrath the farmers' attempts at resistance failed. consequently, their houses were ruthlessly destroyed as the following passage shows:

²⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.43

²⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.44

*The iron guard bit into the house corner, crumbled the wall, and wrenched the little house from its foundation so that it fell sideways, crushed like a bug... The tractor cut a straight line on...The tenant man stared after it, his rifle in his hand. His wife was beside him, and the quiet children behind. And all of them stared after the tractor.*²⁶

In this passage, Steinbeck pointed out banks' ruthlessness and machiavellianism on the one hand, and his sympathy with the powerless farmers who finally stepped out of the tractors' way to let them destroy their houses, on the other hand. They had preferred to renounce resistance because, not only could it not prevent banks from taking the land but also it would result in useless bloodshed. Instead of being both dispossessed and "slaughtered", which was possible, they preferred only the former situation and went away.

In another novel , The Moon is Down (1942), Steinbeck also emphasized oppressed people's resistance. Although it is about a different country -Norway-and written under different circumstances - World War II- it points out some aspects of Norwegian resistance quite comparable to that of the Oklahoma farmers.

Describing the insecure climate generated by that resistance, Steinbeck wrote:

²⁶ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.44

*And there was death in the air, hovering and waiting. Accidents happened on the railway which clung to the mountains and connected the little town with the rest of the nation... No train could move unless the tracks were first inspected.*²⁷

The only difference between the two situations is that the Norwegians' resistance was backed by the Allies. In the case of the hungry Oklahoman farmers, they had in front of them an overwhelming force to face with only the hunting rifles which they held.

In the same period, Langston Hughes dedicated one of his poems -"One More 'S' in the USA" (1934)- to workers' resistance against the banks' capitalistic attitudes. Contrary to Steinbeck, Langston Hughes was overtly motivated by communistic convictions. He wrote:

*Put one more S in the USA
To make it Soviet ...
Oh, the bankers they all are planning
For another great big war.
To make them rich from the workers' dead ,
That's all that war is for
So if you don't want to see bullets holding sway
Then come on, all you workers
And join our fight today*²⁸.

²⁷ John Steinbeck, *The Moon Is Down* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1966), pp.73-74

²⁸ Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co, Publishers, Inc. 1983), pp. 205-6

The same cruel methods were used in Africa during the colonial period. Poor peasants used to be chased from the land they had lived on for generations, just because the capitalistic colonizers needed it. Alice Walker's The Color Purple offers a good illustration, especially in the letter Nettie wrote to her sister from Olinka, an African village. That village was being destroyed for a road had to be traced there. The school, the church and all the huts and crops that were on the proposed roadpath were leveled. The chief of that village was told that the whole territory belonged to a rubber manufacturer in England. The villagers had to pay rent for it as well as a water tax to the new owner. Like the Oklahoman farmers, the Olinka attempted to resist the capitalistic and imperialistic colonizers' invasion before being overwhelmed. Alice Walker wrote:

Of course the Olinka were up in arms.

But the roadbuilders were literally up

In arms. They had guns ...with orders to

*Shoot*²⁹

To end with, one realizes that Steinbeck's aim was first to point out and, above all, to denounce the banks' ruthlessness in the pursuit of their interests. Then, by making the unfortunate farmers, reason, hesitate and finally abandon their project of resistance, he scorned the banks which,

²⁹ Alice Walker, The Color Purple, (London : Women's Press, 2000), pp.143-144.

unlike the farmers, took no time to think about the disaster that their action would generate. Perhaps if they had, reason would have prevailed over greed, which one may also call uncontrolled capitalism.

All this leads the reader to believe that Steinbeck was anti-capitalistic to some extent. On the one hand, his The Grapes of Wrath has been qualified by scholars as "an epic protest (and, doubtless simplistic)...against capitalistic society.." ³⁰, and on the other hand it " has been praised by the left as a triumph of proletarian writing..." ³¹

The farmers quickly left their lands not only because of the overwhelming force of the banks, but also because of the deceptive promises vehicled by fallacious handbills as the coming section shows.

I.3. Handbills Announce Unlimited Work in the West

In its first pages, The Grapes of Wrath seriously attacked the abuse of power on the part of greedy and sadistic banks. Apart from force, they also used trickery through deceptive handbills calling the dispossessed to go massively to California, where they would find plenty of jobs.

³⁰ Claude Edmonde Magny, L'Age du Roman Américain, p.180 "...une protestation épique (et sans doute un peu simpliste)...contre la société capitaliste..."

³¹ Robert De Mott, Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath (1938-1941), (NY:Viking Penguin Inc, 1989) P.XXIII

The first allusion to a paradisaical California was made by one of the owners who was discouraging the farmers from resisting. To the farmers who wondered how they would survive and where they would go, he answered:

Maybe you can go on relief. Why don't you go west to California ? There's work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick orange. Why, there's always some kind of crop to work in. Why don't you go there? ³²

Very possibly, this flattering statement and others similar to it hastened the giving up of the project of resistance. Farmers could not provoke bloodshed while there was a paradise awaiting them, where there were jobs in plenty, and where it never gets cold.

On hearing that and having no knowledge about California and about the opportunities it offered, the dispossessed loaded their trucks and headed to California. They had no other choice for tractors were already harassing them.

It seems very likely that the owners of California were in league with those of Oklahoma. Each side needed the cooperation of the other: to have the land easily, the owners of Oklahoma needed fallacious promises coming from California. To have a large and cheap labor force, Californian owners

³² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.39

needed Oklahoman migrants, ready to work for any amount of money, however meagre it may be.

In addition, oral statements were reinforced by handbills, scattered all around. Freshly released from prison, Tom Joad was informed by Muley Graves, a resistant who never left his land, that all the Joads, after seeing a handbill, were to go to California. He said:

*... your brother Noah ... says they're aiming to go in about two weeks. John got his notice he got to go off.*³³

When he finally rejoined his family at his uncle John's, he found everybody selling his stuff and saving a few dollars. They sold almost all their belongings at very low prices, in order not to lose time, and hoping to start anew in California. They joyfully said:

*Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land-in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over*³⁴

Deceived by the handbills, Mrs Joad, also called Ma, became the most optimistic about their future in California. About the handbills, Ma told Tom:

Tom I hope things is all right in California...Seems too nice, kinda. I seen the

³³ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.52

³⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.95

*handbills fellas pass out, an' how much work they is, an' high wages an' all; an' I seen in the paper how they want folks to come an' pick grapes an' oranges an' peaches. That'd be nice work, Tom...*³⁵

The result of the handbills was the one expected by their initiators: having hundreds and hundreds of thousands of cheap farm laborers. To reach their goal, machiavellian owners used all the means, all of them being either harsh or dishonest.

Moreover, the tractor-and-handbill system worked, for "the dispossessed ,the migrants, flowed into California, two hundred and fifty thousand, and three hundred thousand. Behind them new tractors were going on the land and the tenants were being forced off. And new waves were on the way, new waves of the dispossessed and the homeless..."³⁶

One comes to the conclusion that John Steinbeck sympathized with the unfortunate Oklahoman farmers who were the victims of harsh capitalism. Without being openly a communist, for he "was regarded by communists in the 1930s as 'politically unreliable' "³⁷, Steinbeck denounced certain aspects of capitalism, which sustained the superiority of capital-money and profit- over human dignity.

³⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.97

³⁶ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wath, p.248³⁶ Paul Mc Carthy , John Steinbeck, p. 49

³⁷ Paul Mc Carthy , John Steinbeck, p. 49

Those most responsible for that situation were the banks and commercial companies which hastened to chase farmers, sending them to live on relief and, above all, encouraging them to go to California where they would be exploited. The vigor with which Steinbeck denounced that situation, with the aim of combating economic injustices and obtaining social equality, earned The Grapes of Wrath the status of a social document, beside that of fiction .It is so qualified because it "set a standard for social consciousness in American Literature".³⁸

As for the farmers' attempt at resistance, Steinbeck's obvious preoccupation was to display farmers' natural right to own and defend their land, their only source of income, against billionaire capitalists ready to do anything to increase their capital.

Finally, Steinbeck attacked the owners' trickery consisting in scattering in handbills, which facilitated a rapid evacuation of the land, and which attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants to California. Instead of finding a paradisaical California announced by the handbills, they found themselves in "California's corrupt promised land"³⁹ where they were to be inhumanely exploited by other men as the following chapter will demonstrate.

³⁸ William Rose Benet, The Reader's Encyclopedia, (NY: Thomas Y Crowell Co, 1955), p. 232

³⁹ Robert DeMott, Working Days: The journal of the Grapes of Wrath (1938-1941), p. XXIII

CHAPTER II EXPLOITATION OF MAN BY MAN

When the Okies -those migrating to California-, arrived in California, they found the opposite of what the handbills had made them dream of. It was infernal to live in California despite its beauty .

Instead of having well-paid jobs, they found unfair owners who would exploit them, paying them disproportionately to the completed work, and taking back the little and hardly gained money through their expensive sales in camps.

Then, they had to face another disagreeable phenomenon of owners calling for more workers than needed, with the aim of cutting wages. Unfortunately, they had to suffer all that powerlessly for hunger was psychologically and physically weakening them on the one hand, and the owners had taken action aimed at mastering them, on the other hand.

This chapter will first concentrate on owners' unfairness towards the poor okies working in their farms. Then it will analyze the owners' trickery consisting in calling in more workers than needed, in order to lower salaries. Finally, it will study the owners' principle of paying lower salaries and taking them back immediately.

II.1.Owners' Unfairness

Californian owners, who were presumably in league with their Oklahoman counterparts, welcomed the okies with much hatred. As they had used up all their money during their long and difficult journey, they practically had nothing to pay for food. Therefore, Californian shop owners and bankers had nothing to gain from them. For that reason, they hated them as Steinbeck wrote:

The townmen, little bankers hated okies because there was nothing to gain from them. They had nothing and the laboring people hated okies because a hungry man must work, and if he must work, if he has to work, the wage payer automatically gives him less for his work, and then no one can get more.⁴⁰

From this, the okies realized that the owners' logic was different from theirs. Instead of assisting the needy people they wanted to gain from them. That was their first disillusionment.

The above passage confirmed what Steinbeck had written a few years before, in Tortilla Flat (1935), about a certain businessman called Torelli. He used to repeat arrogantly to the poor paisanos that he had nothing to do with moneyless people. Steinbeck described him :

..but Torelli was not friendly toward men who had neither money nor barterable property, ...⁴¹

After their first disillusionment, the okies had to find jobs. They had neglected the warnings of those returning home from California. The latter had described its unfairness but were not able to destroy the wrong image that handbills had made in their mind. One of them told the Joads:

You ain't gonna get no steady work, gonna scrabble for your dinner ever' day. An' you gonna do her with people lookin'mean at you. Pick Cotton, an' you gonna be sure the scales ain't honest. ⁴²

In addition, they had witnessed businessmen's unfairness on their way, where all goods were sold for very high prices. Businessmen took advantage of the migrants' situation and made excessive profits out of them. Steinbeck attacked them too. As Paul McCarthy wrote, he "brilliantly describes reactions of anonymous small businessmen who, to profit from sales of car parts or food, cannot be lenient. They must manipulate prices and costs."⁴³

Certainly, those migrants thought that all those unfair practices could not occur in the paradisaical California. To their surprise,

⁴⁰ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p.248

⁴¹ John Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat*, (London: Penguin Books, 1987) p.100

⁴² John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 218

⁴³ Paul Mc Carthy, *John Steinbeck*, p. 79

California was a champion in unfair practices. They were worse because the okies were either to work under difficult conditions or to starve.

Such conditions resulted from a situation where there were two separate classes: The first comprised the powerful owners who dominated and the second one the powerless and poor people who were dominated and exploited. Steinbeck's position vis-à-vis that situation was clearly in favor of the second group as he stated himself:

*I am actively opposed to any man or group who...is able to dominate the lives of workers.*⁴⁴

In making them starve, the owners pushed them to work for very low wages, which would go more and more downward. This aspect of unfairness will be dealt with in more detail in the next section.

Beside the very low wages, the owners always tried to gain as much as possible without giving, or giving as little as possible. It was the case in a farm, when Tom's peaches were not counted, because some were allegedly bruised. However, they were not thrown away. They were rather kept and Tom was not paid proportionately to the good peaches.

Furthermore, the scales in cotton farms were most of the time crooked to the workers' detriment.

⁴⁴ Robert DeMott, Working Days :The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, p XXXIV

About the scale man, one worker shouted: "His scales is fixed... the scales is crooked".⁴⁵

Not only were the scales crooked, but also the marking of the weight was unfair. For that reason, vigilant workers would warn their companions against any cheating about the marking. One of them told another:

*Got our own book. Mark in the weight. Got to. If they know you're markin', then they don't cheat. But God he'p ya if ya don't keep your own weight.*⁴⁶

Noticing that they were being unfairly treated, the okies found a smart response. Convinced that the scale would indicate a wrong weight, cotton pickers packed some rocks in their sacks beneath cotton. Then the outcome would be balanced. One worker asked his fellow why he was putting rocks in the sack, and the latter answered:

*Well, hell. Why not? I am jus' balancin' the crooked scales.*⁴⁷

Very interestingly, the scale man would always accuse the pickers of packing rock, some times wrongly. He himself knew that his scale was fixed in advance. This paradox is one of the characteristics of uncontrolled capitalism which Steinbeck combatted. How can a dishonest man preach honesty to people?

⁴⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 431

⁴⁶ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 431

⁴⁷ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 432

Two decades before Steinbeck Jack London had dealt with the same issue. In Burning Daylight he wrote:

The band of robbers wants the exploited to be honest and respect money. ⁴⁸

Presumably like Steinbeck, Jack London was rather for the exploited robbing the exploiters. This would be more understandable than the reverse. Describing the situation of the early 1900s, he wrote:

It was interesting to rob the robbers than to rob the poor and stupid labourer. ⁴⁹

In addition to that, eight years after the publication of The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck came back to rich men's unfairness towards poor people in The Pearl (1947). Kino the Indian ,who had found "the pearl of the world" which would normally earn him a huge fortune, was faced with unfair merchants. Taking advantage of his poverty and ignorance, they wanted to offer a very low price, far below the real price. Here is the story:

...It was known in the early morning...that Kino was going to sell his pearl that day ... there was only one pearl buyer with many hands, and the men who sat in their offices and waited for Kino knew

⁴⁸ Jack London "Radieuse Aurore", p. 329 "La bande de voleurs veut que les exploités soient honnêtes et respectent l'argent"

⁴⁹ Jack London "Radieuse Aurore", p.202

"Il était plus intéressant de voler le voleur plutôt que de voler le pauvre ouvrier imbécile"

*what price they would offer, how high they would bid, and what method each one would use.. there was excitement among the pearl buyers.. and if it be a man's function to break down a price, then he must take joy and satisfaction in breaking it as far down as possible..the best and happiest pearl buyer was he who bought for the lowest prices.*⁵⁰

The reader may wonder how such unfairness and injustice may occur in 20th century USA, a country known for its values in matters of human dignity. As The Grapes of Wrath confirmed, "among developed societies...America is the wealthiest-and the most unjust".⁵¹

John Steinbeck displayed his concern about the owners' attitude, which pushes the reader to wonder what the administrative authorities did to protect the exploited men. In this particular case, Henry D. Thoreau's opinion that "that government is best that governs not at all"⁵² was not to be applied. It is the duty of the government to protect all the citizens.

Instead of having support from the government, the workers powerlessly continued to depend on the owners' will. As the next section will show, their salaries would become lower and lower as

⁵⁰ John Steinbeck, The Pearl, pp. 47-48

⁵¹ André Maillard, Le Marché Inhumain et Comment le Dompter (Paris:L'Harmattan, 1988), p. 15 "Parmi les sociétés avancées...L'Amérique est la plus riche- et la plus injuste"

⁵² Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, p. 85

the capitalistic owners called in more workers than needed.

II.2. More Workers, Lower Salaries

The first thing that the owners assured themselves about was that the okies were starving. Under those circumstances, the sadistic owners were sure to impose wages of their convenience. On the other side the poor okies had no other choice but wait and see what their masters would decide.

To the okies's detriment, owners called for many more laborers, with the sole aim of increasing their capital. The formula was simple even though egoistic: a larger number of workers would quickly complete the job and, at the same time lower the wages. Normally, as André Maillard precised : "a boss will give a man a salary corresponding to the growth of the profit that he can bring."⁵³

It was the opposite in Californian farms, because the more the owners gained the less the workers earned. All this resulted from the greed and sadism of frantic owners who had lost any sense of humanity. They could have called in the needed number of workers who would earn fair wages and keep the owners' profits increasing. This would have been acceptable and fair for all.

⁵³ André Maillard , Le Marché Inhumain et Comment le Dompter, p. 27
 "un patron n'accordera à un homme que le salaire correspondant à l'augmentation de profit qu'il peut apporter"

Unfortunately, those money -hungry owners were determined to increase their profit by lowering wages. Handbills helped very much, for people massively continued to flow into Californian farms. The result was that there were far more men than needed. Steinbeck described that situation:

Three hundred thousand in California and more coming. And in California the roads were full of frantic people running like ants to pull, to push, to lift, to work. For every man- load to lift, five pairs of arms extended to lift it; for every stomachful of food available, five mouths.⁵⁴

In the beginning, those feeling that the wages were unfair abandoned their jobs, which would be immediately taken by hungrier ones. Then, when everybody became hungry, the owners started their policy of lowering their workers' wages more and more. To shed more light on this, let us consider Jim Casy' s case in a farm where workers were being paid less than promised. He and his companions who protested were being hunted by police. At the same time the Joads came to that farm, attracted by comparatively high wages. To warn Tom against the farm owners' trickery, Casy said:

We came to work there. They says it's gonna be fi' cents. They was a hell of a lot of us. We got there an' they says they're payin' two an' a half

⁵⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 252

*cents. A fella can't even eat on that, an' if he got kids-So we says we won't take it.*⁵⁵

After a certain time, the okies became more vigilant. They could no longer allow themselves to be seduced by the owners' sweet tongue. Their trickery of promising high wages which would lower the day after could not work the way it worked in the beginning.

Very concerned by this unjust situation which actually existed, John Steinbeck would distribute an Educational Bulletin to the okies. The bulletin opened the okies' eyes about their rights and warned them against capitalistic owners' trickery.

The bulletin said:

1. Demand to see his [labor contractor's] LICENSE or his BOND receipt. The state compels a labor contractor to have a bond and a license...

*2.DO NOT accept his verbal offer, or his say so , of a job some place else. DEMAND that he write you an ORDER to go to the other job, and DEMAND that he include in the ORDER a statement that he WILL PUT YOU TO WORK on your arrival there ...*⁵⁶

⁵⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 405

⁵⁶ Robert DeMott, *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath (1936-1941)*, four pages before p.71(no page number).

It is clear that this bulletin was aimed at helping the okies, even if it offered no concrete alternative. Refusing a job meant starving, and a starving man will always struggle to survive. Moreover, as there was no organized movement to mobilize all the workers, there would always be the hungriest to accept any job, whatever the wages.

However, it is doubtless that the Bulletin opened some okies' eyes. Some would require guarantees before taking the way to the farm. It was the case for a certain Floyd who surprised a labor contractor, asking for serious guarantees. Before his intervention, many okies had already been taken into the trap. Floyd said:

*I'll go, mister. You 're a contractor, an' you got a licence. You jus' show your licence, an' then you give us an order to go to work, an' where, an' when, an' how much we'll get, an' you sign that, an' we'll all go.*⁵⁷

The only response of the indignant man was that he had to run his business his own way, meaning respecting no rule but making profit at all costs.

The above reminds the reader of Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men (1937), where the first rule on the ranch was to keep silent in front of injustices. On their arrival, George and Lennie were told:

⁵⁷ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, pp. 278-9

*A guy on a ranch don't never listen nor he don't ast no question.*⁵⁸

Those who protested or denounced the owners' injustices were generally but wrongly called "red agitators", referring to communists, the number one enemy of capitalism. A "Red" normally means " a political radical or revolutionary, a communist."⁵⁹

As for Californian owners, as one of them - Mr Hines-explained to his laborers, a red meant "any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we're paying twenty - five".⁶⁰

Every time that there was a protest, protestors would be called communists and hunted by police. In this case indeed , protestors' claims resembled communistic ideals. The latter emphasized the liberation of human beings who were being exploited by other human beings. Disproportionate wages were one form of capitalistic exploitation. As Reverend Osterreicher affirmed , "communism -whatever its diverse forms of expression today- is primarily a movement designed to liberate man from his exploitation by man".⁶¹

One realizes that workers were not politically motivated. Their claims were very elementary and limited just to their salaries. Of

⁵⁸ John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p 26

⁵⁹ David B. Gurdlnik. *Webster's New World Dictionary of American Language, 2nd College Edition*. (NY: Simon and Schuster, no date) P. 1189

⁶⁰ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 315

course, the owners had interest in calling then communists who, at that time, were believed to be diabolical. However, it may not be denied that there were some communists propagandists who intended to make trouble in Californian farms for political purposes.

Also, John Steinbeck who was in constant contact with the migrants had some communistic ideals, without being a communist .As one of his biographers wrote:

Steinbeck learned much.. from fugitive labor organizers, Irish and Italian communists whose training was in the field.. and also, about this time, from a communist district supervisor.. Steinbeck himself was not a communist .⁶²

Jack London wrote about the same phenomenon of salaries going more and more downward in California. In Burning Daylight (1910) his capitalistic hero, Elam Harnish, decided arbitrarily to reduce his workers' wages, arguing that there was a serious crisis. The protestors would go away. He told them:

I am short of money, all those who work for me must be short too...It is the crisis presently !The dirty crisis! And you must bear it as well as me! There are ten thousand jobless laborers in

⁶¹ Richard Wurmbrand, Karl Marx, 6^e ed. (Paris: Mediaspaul, no date), P. 8 "Le communisme quelque soit actuellement ses diverses formes d'expression –est à l'origine un mouvement destiné à libérer l'homme de l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme".

⁶² Paul Mc Carthy, John Steinbeck, p. 47

*Oakland now , and six thousand in San Francisco.
Reduced salaries for everybody! Put up with it or
go away* ⁶³

In such situations, the owners' strategy was to unite their force in order to have the same measures in all the farms. Dissatisfied workers would have no better place to go to. As André Maillard confirmed, "first of all, economic actors have the faculty to seek how to reinforce their position through coalitions".⁶⁴

It is within that framework that Californian farm owners united their forces to impose actions to be taken and respected in all the farms. Cutting wages was among their decisions as it appears in The Grapes of Wrath, when a certain Thomas reduced his workers' pay from thirty cents an hour to twenty five cents. He told his workers that it was imposed by the Farmers' Association. He said:

*Did you ever hear of the Farmers' Association ?
...well, I belong to it. We had a meeting last
night. Now do you know who runs the Farmers '
Association? I'll tell you. The Bank of the West
... So last night the member from the bank told me,
he said : " you're paying thirty cents an hour.*

⁶³ Jack London, Radiouse Aurore , p. 366 "Je suis à court d'argent, il faut que tous ceux qui travaillent pour moi soient aussi à court...C'est la crise en ce moment .La sale crise !Et vous devez la supporter tout comme moi. Il y a dix mille ouvriers sans travail à Oakland en ce moment et six mille à sans Francisco. Appointements réduit pour tous le monde. Arrangez vous de cela ou partez"

⁶⁴ André Maillard, Le Marché Inhumain et Comment le Dompter, p 34 "D'abord les acteurs économiques ont la faculté de chercher à renforcer leur position en coalisant".

You' d better cut it down to twenty-five.. the wage is twenty-five now".⁶⁵

From the foregoing, one comes to the conclusion that the owners who unfairly treated the okies, refusing them the wages they deserved, were motivated by excessive greed, which may also be called harsh capitalism.

Without being a communist, but rather a writer who criticized the injustices of his times, Steinbeck attacked those capitalistic practices, which had gone beyond the acceptable limits. His position created him enemies among the owners, who qualified The Grapes of Wrath as mere "communist propaganda".⁶⁶

He proved that in a capitalistic society, money calls money, that much money calls much money, generally to the detriment of poor people. The rich men of California would exploit their poor compatriots who expected from them salaries equal to their work. On that point, Steinbeck joined Henry David Thoreau who wrote:

Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue.. and it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it.⁶⁷

One way of dishonestly obtaining money was unjustly lowering the wages. The other one, as the

⁶⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 312

⁶⁶ Paul McCarthy, John Steinbeck, p. 66

⁶⁷ Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, p. 95

next section will demonstrate, was giving a little money to workers and taking it back thereafter.

II.3. Give-And-Take-Back Principle

In their machiavellian way of thinking and running business, the owners could neglect no means allowing them to increase their capital. Ready to do anything liable to help them achieve that goal, they invented a new method, which would seem to be a form of charity to an ill-informed observer.

They knew very well that they were paying insufficient wages, and at the same time they opened stores in the camps, selling their goods for exorbitant prices. The whole trickery may be summed up as follows: "Then such a farmer really became a storekeeper, and kept a store. He paid the men, and sold them food and took the money back".⁶⁸ In a normal situation, prices would be adapted to the salaries or vice-versa. But in California, it was the opposite. The gap between salaries and prices was growing bigger and bigger to the workers' detriment. One worker commented on that situation saying:

*The great owners were glad and they sent more handbills to bring more people in. And wages went down and prices stayed up. And pretty soon now we'll have serfs again.*⁶⁹

⁶⁸ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 301

⁶⁹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 301

What is astonishing is that the administrative authorities who were supposed to keep a vigilant eye on that issue, remained indifferent. On the one side they had to see to it that salaries were not unjustly cut down, and on the other side, they had to maintain the balance between prices and salaries. As Maurice Flamant reminds us:

*It is the role of the state to fix the judicial framework as well as the institutional practices in which economic activities are carried out.*⁷⁰

Perhaps one may say that either the authorities were in league with the owners or they were applying the irresponsible laissez-faire policy based on voluntary means. President Hoover was criticized for his fear to spend enough money on public work in order to restore prosperity. The Annals of America Vol 15 summed up the criticisms about Hoover's feverish handling of the depression as follows:

*Through 1931 Hoover ... took little exceptional executive action. He furthermore vetoed or emasculated anti-depression legislation, all of which he opposed because it was expensive or expanded the role of the Federal Government".*⁷¹

⁷⁰ Maurice Flamant, Le Libéralisme Contemporain (Paris: PUF,1988), p.16 "Il revient encore à l'Etat de fixer le cadre juridique ainsi que les pratiques institutionnelles dans lesquelles se déroulent les activités économiques"

⁷¹ The Annals of America, p.93

Realizing that all the okies were not able to pay cash for their basic needs and pretending to help them, the owners instituted a system of credit. This was rather a way of "enslaving" people in the long run, because wages would keep lowering while prices would keep increasing. Therefore, after a certain time, the creditor would find himself in the impossibility to pay or would be compelled to work only to pay back his debts. The case of the Joads who asked if they could be paid in advance to allow them to buy food, is illustrative. They were told:

*well, no, not money right off. But you can get credit at the store what you got coming.*⁷²

Obviously, the farm owners who were also store owners did not want the okies to take their money elsewhere. Also, they refused them the possibility to look for stores where prices would be affordable.

Later in that same camp, Tom Joad who was not satisfied with the food, asked his mother to bring more food. Ma answered that that meal had cost the one dollar they had worked for all that day long. Tom concluded:

*They charge extry out here. We got to go in town when we can*⁷³.

⁷² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, P.391.

⁷³ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.401

Tom said "when we can" because, most of the time, the owners would not let them bring their money outside. It seems really very cruel both to fix low salaries to workers and to impose on them what to buy, where, when and how much to buy it for. As in previous cases, the okies who could have no control over the situation went peaceably where the owners pushed them to.

The same situation had been alluded to in Of Mice and Men (1937), where Steinbeck pointed out the ranch workers' situation. Their low wages were justified by their free lodging and food. The one to draw profit from it was the ranch owner. Complaining about that situation, George—one of the workers—said:

*An' I ain't so bright neither, or I wouldn't be buckin' barley for my fifty and found.*⁷⁴

Desirous to gain the maximum possible from the poor workers, the owners did not stop inventing new methods. For instance, they would announce jobs and call for laborers without precising the kind of material they would need. On their arrival, they would compel them to buy sacks in which they would pack cotton. Those who were unable to pay cash were always given sacks on credit.

On one farm, the contractor sold sacks to workers, pretending not to understand why workers did

⁷⁴ John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men, p.40.

not bring their own sacks, which he had not announced. He told them:

*Cost ya a dollar, the bag. Take it out o'your first hunderd and fifty. Eighty cents a hunderd first time over the field-Ninty cents second time over. Get your bag there. One dollar. 'F you ain't got the buck, we'll take it out of your first hunderd and fifty. That's fair, and you know it.*⁷⁵

The contractor hastened to say that it was fair because he knew precisely that it was unfair. The sacks cost the salary of a day. Then, how would workers eat if they had first to pay for the bags which they could have bought elsewhere for lower prices? Finally, that attitude confirmed Karl Marx's opinion that "what leads them [the exploited masses] to impoverishment ...is capitalism."⁷⁶

It is clear that John Steinbeck conveyed his virulent message to greedy capitalists who later gave themselves the right to be the masters of other people's destiny, lowering unjustly their salaries, and keeping prices high. They were excessively but dishonestly gaining from the diminished salaries coming back to them through expensive sales.

⁷⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 430.

⁷⁶ Richard Wurmbrand, *Karl Marx*, p. 7 "ce qui les [les masses exploitées] achemine vers l'appauvrissement...c'est le capitalisme"

All the above unfair practices led John Steinbeck to declare angrily on the Voice of America in 1952:

*I was filled.. with certain angers.. at people who were doing injustices to other people..*⁷⁷

Those injustices included owners' unfairness on the farms, their cruel policy of calling large numbers of workers with the aim of cutting salaries, and the give-and-take-back principle.

The authorities whom the novel indirectly accused of indifference or complicity displayed their indignation when The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939. As Paul McCarthy puts it:

*Governors and other high state officials in the two states [Oklahoma and California] ..tried to make clear to the public that many things in the novel were simply not true.*⁷⁸

To maintain their privileges, the owners adopted a number of strategies which will be studied in the coming chapter.

⁷⁷ Robert DeMott, Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath (1938-1941), p. XXXVIII

⁷⁸ Paul McCarthy, John Steinbeck, P 66

CHAPTER III OWNERS' STRATEGIES TO SAFEGUARD THEIR PRIVILEGES

Apart from calling in more workers than needed, cutting down workers' salaries and taking them back, the owners adopted a number of strategies aimed at protecting their interests. In taking them they never took into account the moral character that should go with them. Their preoccupation was safeguarding their own interests, whatever the cost.

It is for that reason that they preferred to spend their money buying arms, paying militia men and spies and corrupting policemen, in order to have their farms protected from the hungry okies. What appears illogical on the part of the owners, is that that same money could have been used in bettering the workers' conditions, which would have constituted the best security for the farms.

This chapter will first deal with the harsh police repression against the workers any time that the latter protested or intended to protest. Then it will focus on the intimidating and provocative actions taken by policemen and the owners to dissuade the workers from any attempt at revolt .Finally, we will concentrate on the divide-and-rule policy which the owners applied to have control over their workers.

III.1. Harsh Police Repression

John Steinbeck portrayed the police as being a very negative institution. Throughout The Grapes of Wrath, policemen appear not as security men and people ready to help, which is their ordinary role, but as arrogant and sadistic trouble makers. This was summed up by Casy's statement when he told Tom:

*I tol' you-Cops cause more trouble than they stop.*⁷⁹

Policemen appeared for the first time in the novel when the Joads were still on the way to California .They had stopped to rest and would resume their journey the day after. Instead of helping and orientating them, a policeman passing by gratuitously rebuked them. About this policeman, Ma told Tom:

*Tom, this here policeman-he called us-okies. He says: "we don' t want you goddam okies settlin' down"...Says he's gonna run us in if we're here to-morrow.*⁸⁰

Nothing was reproached to them, but they had simply to go. This could not be called personal nastiness but rather a concerted plan, because the same attitude would reappear later in Californian farms. The evidence that irrefutably confirms that

⁷⁹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath,p.406

⁸⁰ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 229

the plan was concerted in advance appeared in one Californian Deputy Sheriff's statement. While in a camp of okies, he told his men:

Give 'me somepin to think about .Got to keep 'em in line or Christ only knows what they'll do! Why, Jesus, they' re as dangerous niggers in the South! If they ever get together there ain't nothin' that'll stop them...Rattlesnakes! Don't take chances with 'em, an' if they argue, shoot first...Treat 'em rough. Scare'em".⁸¹

The strategy consisted in keeping the okies "in line "-traced by the owners—and to shoot when the okies argued .It seems very ridiculous when a deputy sheriff appeals to his men to violate the laws they are expected to apply. The above attitude doubtlessly confirms that police were corrupted by the owners who used them to achieve their egoistic goals.

The same attitude was alluded to in The Moon is Down, when German soldiers who were losing control over the situation said:

We must shoot people if necessary⁸²

In the same vein as Steinbeck, Jack London shed more light on the relationship between rich capitalists on the one hand and political men and police on the other hand. He wrote:

⁸¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 251

⁸² John Steinbeck, The Moon is Down, p. 62

*Even though each robber strives hard to rob another , the band remains well organized. It almost manages both the world and politics starting from the village politician up to the senator. It makes laws that give it the privilege to rob and uses it with the help of police, the army and justice.*⁸³

The above makes the reader believe that the owners were sure that police would execute their macabre job without any difficulty coming from the administrative authorities. Justices would also shut their eyes to law violations they are supposed to sanction.

The okies themselves knew very well that the owners and police were working hand in hand, and that if police unjustly killed somebody no one would ask what happened. Here is the answer that Tom Joad received when he said that he would resist any unjustified police attack. His fellows said:

*You're nuts... they'll pick you right off. You got no name, no property. They'll find you in a ditch, with the blood dried on your mouth an' your nose. Be one little line in the paper-know what it'll say? "Vagrant foun' dead". An' that's jus' suicide. Be bull-simple".*⁸⁴

⁸³ Jack London, Radieuse Aurore, p.202 "Bien chaque voleur s'ingénie à en voler un autre, la bande reste bien organisée. Elle dirige à peu près et le monde et la politique depuis le politicien du village jusqu'au sénateur. Elle fait des lois qui lui donnent le privilège de voler et l'exerce par l'intermédiaire de la police, de l'armée, de la justice"

⁸⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, pp 262-263

All those who tried, in any way, to protest or to argue against policemen were either beaten or jailed. However, some okies who could no longer bear that situation argued with and even struck the policeman who was trying to get his pistol ready. At that time, the more serious resistance or protest was the harsher police repression was. When other policemen came to rescue their fellows, they shot directly into the okies'tents, wounding one lady, and arrested Jim Casey who had sacrificed himself for the others. Later, the policemen came back and burnt the camp. The news was related by a capitalistic newspaper as follows:

*Citizens, angered at red agitators, burn squatters' camp. Last night a band of citizens, infuriated at the agitation going on in a local squatters' camp burnt the tents to the ground and warned agitators to get out of the country*⁸⁵.

The newspaper talked of citizens chasing squatters who obviously were not citizens, and never alluded to the role of police. It is because both police and newspapers were corrupt. As far as the latter are concerned, one may analyze their attitude, taking into account the situation they were in. During the depression, only big owners had money, and having money meant having power. Then capitalism deviated and imposed new behaviors on individuals. Explaining capitalism in general , Max Weber wrote:

⁸⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p 312

*It [capitalism] imposes on the individual... norms of its economic activity. The laborer who cannot or does not want to conform to them is thrown away and loses his job.*⁸⁶

Under such circumstances, newsmen and policemen had no choice. Owners paid well and at all the levels of the administration. Therefore, their impunity was assured.

To illustrate the policemen's harsh attitudes at that time, let us consider a case of one businessman, John D. Rockefeller (1920) who promised a pay of one million dollars a year to any man having certain qualities. These were:

*He [the man] must be able to overpass all moral constraints with almost childish indifference ... [not having] ... the least scruple and [be] ready to kill thousands of victims without saying a word*⁸⁷.

Very clearly, the policemen in The Grapes of Wrath had the required qualities to work for greedy rich men. They would kill workers and say that they were "simple vagrants". They would burn the okies' camps and blame it on the so-called infuriated citizens chasing agitators.

⁸⁶ Max Weber, L'Ethique Protestante et l'Esprit du Capitalisme (Paris : Flammarion , 2000), p.94 " Il (capitalisme) impose à l'individu ... les normes de son activité économique ... l'ouvrier qui ne peut ou ne veut pas s'adapter à elle est jeté à la rue et perd son travail"

⁸⁷ Robert C. Solomon and Kristine R. Hanson, La Morale en Affaires: Clé de la Réussite (Paris : Nouveaux Horizons, 1989) p.17 "Elle [la personne] doit savoir passer au-dessus de toutes les contraintes morales avec une indifférence presque enfantine ... [n'avoir] ... pas le moindre scrupule et [être] prête à abattre des milliers de victimes sans broncher"

In addition to the above, one may point out that those scenes of police ill-treating the okies were inspired by many strikes brutally crushed by policemen, and which Steinbeck covered as a journalist. One of them took place in the Salinas Valley, but the most striking remains the Gastonia strike in North Carolina in the early 1930s. That strike resulted from the workers who were demanding their bosses increase their wages. The owners called policemen and militiamen to crush the strike. Joseph G. Rayback related the scene:

[The] militia permitted a masked mob to destroy strike headquarters and police to invade the strikers' tent colony. A raid resulted in the death of four people. In spite of repression the strikers made some gains .⁸⁸

To conclude, police repression against poor okies was definitely motivated by their intention to serve the owners, not by laws. Their harshness illustrated once more how far the owners were ready to go in order to protect and increase their capital.

Very interestingly, John Steinbeck gave a more acceptable and logical alternative through one okie's mouth. The latter said:

...and the money that might have gone to wages went for blacklists, for drilling.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Joseph G. Rayback, A History of American Labor (N.Y: Mac Millan Publishing Co, Inc. 1966) p.316

⁸⁹ Joseph Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, P. 301

Unfortunately, the owners found that repression constituted the best means, even though it cost a lot of money.

The question that will always come back to the reader's mind is to know the incentives of the authorities' indifference. One part of the answer is that they were corrupt, and the other is that "even there where law prevails, it seems unable to stop the strong ones' domination"⁹⁰

The two parts of the answer were summarized in the beginning of the novel, and it was perhaps on purpose that Steinbeck opened the novel with it. One of the banks' envoys in Oklahoma calmly said:

*The monster isn't a man but can make men do what it wants.*⁹¹

Before using open and brutal repression, the owners discouraged the okies from protesting. Among other methods, they intimidated and provoked the okies as the next section will endeavor to show.

III.2. Intimidation and Provocation

In the beginning, the okies agreed to work for the proposed salaries without protesting. But as the latter would go more and more downward, the okies

⁹⁰ André Maillard, Le Marché Inhumain et Comment le Dompter, p.10 "même là où le droit règne , il semble incapable d'arrêter la domination des forts..."

⁹¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.39

started to display their discontent and their intention to revolt.

The owners who knew very well that hunger would necessarily lead to anger elaborated plans and strategies that would allow them to control the situation. First, they would send their agents and spies inside the camps to intimidate the okies and localize the so-called agitators. Much attention was attached to intimidation and provocation, and huge sums of money were spent for that purpose. About this Steinbeck wrote:

...and every effort of the great owners was directed to repression. The money was spent for arms, for gas to protect the great holdings, and spies were sent to catch the murmurings of revolt so that it might be stamped out ... only means to destroy revolt were considered, while the causes of revolt went on.⁹²

Through the last sentence of this quotation, Steinbeck gave a very good piece of advice to the owners. They feared revolt, and instead of dealing with its causes they concentrated on how to crush it. At the same time, beside the working conditions which were getting worse and worse, the owners sent spies and policemen to make trouble in the camps.

⁹² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.253

Obviously they were inspired by Machiavelli's principles one of which was: "It is much safer to make oneself feared than loved".⁹³

It is true that the owners themselves and their association feared the hungry okies. For that reason, the intimidators were sent among the okies to prevent the situation from getting out of hand. That fear appeared in the policemen's comment when some okies were digging the land belonging to the owners. One of the policemen said:

*Did you see his face when we kicked them turnips out? Why, he'd killa soon's he'd look at him. We got to keep these here people down or they'll take the country. They'll take the country. Outlanders, foreigners.*⁹⁴

The first who were targeted were the leaders of the okies, called red agitators by the owners. The latter were convinced that when protest leaders were neutralized, the remaining okies would not dare protest any more. One okie revealed this situation to Tom Joad who had freshly arrived in California :

*Look if the folks get together, they's a leader-got to be fella that does the talkin'. Well, first time this fella opens his mouth they grab' im an' stick' im in jail. An' if they' is another leader pops up, why, they stick' im in jail.*⁹⁵

⁹³ Nicolas Machiavelli, *Le Prince*, p.82 "Il est beaucoup plus sûr de se faire craindre qu'aimer"

⁹⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 250

⁹⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 261

The above shows how the owners denied the right of speech and of association to their compatriots, which should be unthinkable in a country like the United States. This also reminds the reader of the history of labor unions, and how the employers initially feared them very much to the extent of not wishing their existence. Maurice Flamant explained:

... For a long time, it had been out of the question to seek an agreement: employers' decisions imposed themselves on the salaried employees without further ado. That explains why the employers, the "bosses", were initially hostile to labor unions. They saw in them irreconcilable enemies.⁹⁶

This justifies all the efforts that the owners made to prevent the laborers from getting together. If they were allowed to do so, they would unite and massively take concerted actions till their demands were granted. In the same vein the churches which had not precised their position took a firm stand in favor of laborers' rights. In its statement issued on Labor Day 1931, The Federal Council of Churches advocated " the right of employees and employers alike to organize for collective bargaining and social action ... [the] recognition and maintenance

⁹⁶ Maurice Flamant, Le Libéralisme Contemporain, p. 89 "...longtemps en effet, il n'avait guère été question de rechercher un accord: les décisions des employeurs s'imposaient aux salariés sans autres formes de procès. Cela explique que les employeurs, les patrons, aient d'abord été hostiles aux syndicats. Ils voyaient des ennemis irréconciliables"

of the rights and responsibilities of free speech and free assembly".⁹⁷

While analyzing the owners's intimidation, one remembers that Steinbeck wrote about it again in The Moon is Down (1942). To have control over the rebellious Norwegians, German soldiers would intimidate and frighten them. For instance, they warned the mayor against any other assassination of German soldiers by Norwegians saying:

*...understand this, please: we will shoot five, ten, a hundred for one.*⁹⁸

Exactly like in The Grapes of Wrath, they concentrated their attention on the mayor, hoping that the population would be frightened and peacefully follow the oppressors. As violence persisted, the Germans reinforced their threat against the leaders -the mayor and doctor Winter-whom they took hostage. Colonel Lanser warned them for the last time:

*My orders are clear. Eleven o'clock was the deadline. I have taken hostages. If there is violence, the hostages will be executed.*⁹⁹

This illustrates that imperialism and capitalism use the same methods to maintain control over their victims.

⁹⁷The Annals of America , p.134

⁹⁸ John Steinbeck, The Moon is Down, p. 72

⁹⁹ John Steinbeck, The Moon is Down, p. 140

Also, John Steinbeck himself was to be harassed after the publication of The Grapes of Wrath. The intimidation he described was applied against him by those he attacked in the novel. He said:

After the publication of The Grapes of Wrath, landowners promised to do everything possible to tell the public that:... Grapes of Wrath... cannot be accepted as fact, and vicious rumors and threats of reprisals are circulated by large land-owners and banks. The latest is a rumor... that the okies hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them.¹⁰⁰

Like in The Moon is Down the more fame the novel gained the more serious the threats became. From simple threats based on rumors, the owners went further and intended to physically eliminate Steinbeck. When he realized it he said:

I have made powerful enemies with The Grapes. They will not kill me I think , but they will destroy me when and if they can.¹⁰¹

Apart from intimidation, the owners would provoke the okies to push them to react brutally and draw police attention. As policemen were not neutral, they would react in favor of the owners. The policemen themselves took many initiatives to please the owners. The most striking example which confirms,

¹⁰⁰ Robert De Mott, Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath (1938-1941), p. XXXVII

¹⁰¹ Robert De Mott, Working Days, p. 106

without any ambiguity, that provocation was part of the owners' plan is the plot against the government camp. In that camp, the migrants could organize themselves, elect leaders, and hold meetings. Above all that, no policeman could get into it without a warrant. All this constituted an unbearable danger to the owners, because all the okies would flock there and abandon the farms.

For that reason, the owners decided to put an end to that situation before it was too late. Here is the secret that one of them—a kind gentleman named Thomas—revealed to his laborers, among whom Tom. He said:

The association don't like the government camps. Can't get a deputy in there. The people make their own laws, I hear, and you can't arrest a man without a warrant. Now if there was a big fight and maybe shooting—a bunch of deputies could go in and clean out the camp.. There 's going to be a fight in the camp Saturday night. And there's going to be deputies ready to go in.¹⁰²

Certainly, the owners had taken enough time to think about the easiest way to destroy the camp

¹⁰² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 313

where people were treated "like humans". They found that sending into the camp their agents with the mission to provoke trouble would put the police in the obligation to intervene in the name of public order. Mr Thomas also revealed why the camp would be invaded by police:

Those folks in the camp are getting used to being treated like humans. When they go back to the squatters' camps they'll be hard to handle.¹⁰³

As the okies were warned and as they were obviously smarter than the owners, they organized themselves, emphasizing a peaceful handling of the owners' provocation. On that Saturday night, the vigilant watchmen peacefully neutralized and brought out the spies before they could provoke any fight. The policemen who were awaiting a signal coming from inside the camp to assault were disappointed.

The above okies' tactic exactly corresponds to Harvey Mackay's advice to laborers in case they are unjustly assaulted by their bosses. Referring to such bosses as bullies he wrote:

Bullies do their thing when... they're in a position of advantage or authority, and when they think they've found someone who won't fight back. The best way to fight back is to choose your own

¹⁰³ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 313

*time and your own battle field, but not submit to the bully's.*¹⁰⁴

As a matter of fact, the owners' fear was well-founded. The okies who left the government camps would contaminate others. They would for instance ask if the squatters' camp had hot water. Such attitudes increased the owners' hatred vis-à-vis government camps. Hearing one okie asking for hot water, one guard said:

*It's them gov'ment camps...I bet that fella been in a gov'ment camp. We ain't gonna have no peace till we wipe them camps out. They'll be wantin' clean sheets..*¹⁰⁵

That guard confirmed the owners' sadism. In order to have peace, which meant to get richer, the owners had to dehumanize their laborers.

Furthermore, while he was still writing The Grapes of Wrath in 1938, Steinbeck, who was frequently in the okies' camps witnessing their conditions, wrote a letter to his literary agent, Elisabeth Otis, in which he denounced the owners' provocations. The owners were sabotaging the government relief program for the migrants. He wrote:

The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers

¹⁰⁴ Harvey Mackay, Beware The Naked Man Who Offers You His Shirt (NY: William Morrow and co, Inc. 1990), p.45

¹⁰⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 399

*sabotaging the thing all along the line.. They think that if those people are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities, they will organize. I am pretty mad about it.*¹⁰⁶

As it was impossible for them to attack the camps under the federal government' s protection, the owners attempted to provoke a situation that would allegedly jeopardize public order. In that case police would have good reasons to intervene and destroy the camps.

The above reasoning leads the reader to wonder why the owners kept doing their harmful action against defenceless workers. The owners were conscious that for their strategies to be efficient, they had to annihilate the okies both physically and psychologically. On the physical grounds, police repression, intimidation, provocation and starvation did the job. On the psychological ones, the owners endeavored to divide the okies, creating divergence in their view and handling of the situation. The coming section will be dedicated to the latter aspect.

III.3.Divide- And-Rule Policy

The owners quickly realized that their harsh methods should be combined with non-violent ones. These consisted in creating opposition among the

¹⁰⁶ Robert De Mott, Working Days, P.XXXVIII

workers. The divide-and-rule policy worked, for after a certain time, each okie started considering his own situation without caring about his fellows.

The result that the owners expected was that the neediest okies would work for low salaries without protesting, pushing at the same time the most rebellious to revise their position.

While John Steinbeck was describing the poor Oklahoman farmers' dispossession, he pointed out how the owners managed to divide people using money. The following excerpt from the dialog between the tenants and the tractor driver will shed more light on money dividing former friends. The tenants told the driver:

-Why, you're Joe Davis' boy!... What do you do this kind of work for against your own people?

-Three dollars a day...I got a wife and kids. We got to eat. Three dollars a day and it comes every day.

-That is right ... But for your three dollars a day fifteen or twenty families can't eat at all..

-Can' t think of that. Got to think of my own kids.¹⁰⁷

The tractor driver's attitude reveals that some people agreed to play the owners' game against their fellows.

In addition, for the owners, salaries constituted a good instrument of division among the

¹⁰⁷ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.42

laborers. They kept lowering, yet there were always people ready to work for the proposed salaries. The principle was that the hungriest ones, who were the ones to be ready to work for the lowest wages, were the ones to be hired. This created many divisions among the laborers who obviously had not discovered the owners' trap. Steinbeck described this trap through a young okie's reflection to Tom:

S'pose you got a job a work, an' there's jus' one fella wants the job. You got pay 'im what he asts... S'pose theys a hunderd men wants that job. S' pose them men got kids, an' them kids is hungry...S' pose a nickel' ll buy at leas' somepin for them kids. An ' you got a hunderd men. Jus' offer' em a nickel-why, they'll kill each other fightin' for that nickel.¹⁰⁸

The owners set up the trap and pushed the laborers to play the game themselves. Among the okies, the problem was no longer the owners or police harassment, but their own fellow okies massively flocking into the farms and causing pay cuts.

The new situation was to the owners' advantage, for the low wages were not proposed by the owners any more, but by the okies themselves. That situation was summed up as follows:

¹⁰⁸ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.260

*When there was work for a man, ten men fought for it-fought with a low wage. If that fella'll work for thirty cents, I'll work for twenty-five.*¹⁰⁹

Such workers were warmly welcomed and congratulated by their bosses who never lounged around. They continued to target the leaders, calling the common okies to dissociate themselves from the red agitators. Some would listen to them and others would keep their position.

Even in modern times big corporations still use the divide-and-rule policy to hinder their workers' strikes. The Morning Star offered a good example in England recently:

*National Union of Journalists general secretary Jeremy Dear called at the weekend for trade unions to withdraw advertising from The Guardian to show solidarity with striking workers. Workers ... have been on strike over low pay ... management has been paying double wages to strikebreakers.*¹¹⁰

The owners' campaign resulted in a situation where there were always people ready to work under whatever conditions, and others always reluctant. One contractor campaigning to divide the okies told them:

*You fellas don't want to listen to these goddamn reds. Trouble-makers-they'll get you in trouble. Now I can use all of you in Tulare County.*¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.300

¹¹⁰ Morning Star, (London: Mon Apr. 29, 2002), p.4

¹¹¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.280

Furthermore, as the above quotation shows, creating confusion in the okies' mind contributed a lot to dividing the okies. The owners made them believe that the problem was their own leaders- the trouble -makers-who dissuaded them from working while they were hungry. After some time, they forgot the real problem, which was to work under inhumane conditions.

The owners' congratulations to the "co-operative" okies make the reader remember one aspect of Karl Marx's denunciation of capitalism. Henri Lefebvre affirmed:

... he [the laborer] was one of the "deserving" poor, a brave and honest laborer ", when he accepted without protesting the restricted limits of its [of capitalism] activity.¹¹²

The same policy of dividing in order to rule was applied by the imperialistic Germans in Norway. As The Moon is Down (1942) shows, food distributors took into account people's obedience to the oppressor. This strategy divided the Norwegians into two camps: those who resisted and those who obeyed. Steinbeck related:

The food supply was controlled-issued to the obedient and withheld from the disobedient-so

¹¹² Henri Lefebvre, Le Marxisme(Paris : PUF ,1948) p. 53
« ...Il[le travailleur] était un pauvre méritant, un brave et honnête travailleur, lorsqu'il acceptait sans protestations les limites étroites de son [du capitalisme] activité. »

*that the whole population turned coldly obedient.*¹¹³

The above reveals once more the closeness between capitalistic methods and imperialistic ones. It also points out Steinbeck's concern about the owners' unfair and dishonest methods, be they violent or non-violent.

Very astonishingly, Tom Joad, who had all the time sided with the protestors, himself fell into the owners' trap. When his old friend Jim Casy asked him to call all the workers, starting with his family, to join the revolt he was leading, he answered as if he were himself an owner. He said:

*They won't ...Pa wouldn't do it ...We was outa food ...To-night we had meat. Not much, but we had it. Think Pa's gonna give up his meat on account a other fellas? An' Rosasharn oughta get milk. Think Ma's gonna wanta starve that baby jus' cause a bunch a fellas is yellin' outside a gate?*¹¹⁴

The day after, Tom realized that Jim Casy was right. The pay was cut to the extent that Ma was no longer able to buy meat.

It would appear clearly that the owners' strategies worked, even though they were unfair and immoral. It also appears that the owners'

¹¹³ John Steinbeck, The Moon is Down, p.74

¹¹⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.406

preoccupation was not the morality of their methods, but the growth of their capital

This was confirmed by an American businessman who was responding to a Swiss banker's comment that Americans are obsessed by economic growth. The businessman simply said:

*It is by growth that we are judged here.*¹¹⁵

It is inferred that neither morality nor humanity, nor legality are taken into account. Only the means to increase one's capital are considered in an uncontrolled capitalistic system. This is what The Grapes of Wrath is all about, especially when it denounces harsh police repression, intimidation, provocations and the machiavellian divide-and-rule policy. The latter were the owners' favorite strategies.

The defenceless but smart okies who were frequently the victims of police misdeeds, kept their heads up till the time the owners' trap caught many of them. At that time, each okie would look after himself to his fellows' detriment if necessary.

However, not all the okies lounged around. As the coming chapter will show, some kept attempting to revolt and organize themselves despite their exasperation.

¹¹⁵ François Hetman, Les Secrets des Géants Américains (Paris : Seuil, 1969), p. 112 « c'est à la croissance qu'on nous juge ici »

CHAPTER IV: THE MIGRANTS

The migrants, also called okies, who had been chased by greedy capitalists from Oklahoman farms, and who were being exploited by the same capitalists in California, reacted differently to their exploitation. Some fell into their oppressors' trap, others desperately played the owners' game because they found no alternative, and others kept struggling for their dignity.

The latter group's response to the owners' strategies was to set up their own strategies to counter the owners'. The number one strategy was a strong organization based on democracy, humanitarianism and discipline.

The second one was to organize revolts, even though divisions among the okies would not let them succeed. They only had the merit of making people aware of their misery and of the injustice of which they were victims.

Logically, the owners' strategies would always overwhelm the okies', for the former had money and power to support theirs. Moreover, they would invade their opponents' side to create troubles and divisions which weakened it and led to its exasperation.

This chapter will first point out how the okies managed to organize themselves in the camps,

despite the owners' pressure. Then it will analyze the attempts at revolt which were the outcome of the owners' relentless and ruthless measures. Finally, it will focus on the okies' exasperation which resulted from the overwhelmingness of the owners' harshness.

IV.1. Attempts at Organization

Before laying down their strategies, the owners assured themselves that the okies could never get together for fear they would think of their misery and react. This had started in their home states where agents and handbills had harassed them asking them to hurry up, and giving them no time to think about their destination. On their way to California too, policemen would not let them sit together for a while.

When they squatted in the camps, a new method was invented to prevent them from organizing themselves. Apart from intimidation, the owners would keep the okies moving from one camp to another, using the trickery of "lower salaries here and higher salaries there". One okie explained it to Tom saying:

I tell ya I don' know. Some say they don' want us to vote; keep us movin' so we can' vote. An' some says so we can't get on relief. An' some says if we set in one place we' d get organized..¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.259

During the very rare occasions that the okies had to talk about their situation, they would think about how to react to the owners' injustice. Of course there was always the threat of being arrested for the one who would appear as a leader. While seeking the way to counter the rise of prices which coincided with the cutting-down of salaries, Tom proposed to other okies a peaceful boycott which required a strict organization which the okies were not entitled to have. Tom proposed:

Well, s' pose them people got together an' says, "let' em[peaches] rot" wouldn' be long'fore the price went up, by God ¹¹⁷

That boycott would be efficient. But who would run the risk of leading it? Who among the okies could hold out against police repression? The answer is only a few. That proves that the owners had targeted a vital point by keeping the migrants headless and unorganized.

However, the migrants managed to set up a democratic, fair and humanitarian organization in the government camp. This camp was the only sign symbolizing government's attention to the okies' plight.

Initially, such camps were designed to provide food relief, medical care and humane, clean, democratic living conditions to the migrants. The

¹¹⁷ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 261

Federal Emergency Relief Program was initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt- "the great humanitarian"¹¹⁸ - in 1933. That program instituted camps which were supposed to be protected by the Federal Government against excessive capitalism. In the laborers' mind, President Roosevelt appeared as a savior because, unlike his predecessor Hubert Hoover, social issues capped his agenda. About this Joseph G. Rayback wrote:

*During his campaign, moreover , Roosevelt listened sympathetically to labor leaders who related to him the sorry plight of various labor elements, and he promised privately and publicly to do what he could to relieve distress and improve labor conditions.*¹¹⁹

A similar program in favor of the homeless was recently announced by President George W. Bush in November 2001. This seems surprising for a Republican President to put among his priorities the underprivileged sections of the population in an atmosphere of terrorism, almost at the same level as economic and military issues. Simultaneously with his anti-terror campaign and other executive measures to sustain the economy " Mr Bush announced \$ 1 billion in aid for the homeless and urged Americans to give

¹¹⁸ John G. Rayback, A History of American Labor, p.322

¹¹⁹ John G. Rayback, A History of American Labor, p.321

to charities that have experienced a drop in donations since September 11".¹²⁰

The Grapes of Wrath described the situations of the late 1930s and allude to those camps as well as to the hatred they generated in the owners' mind. Being familiar with those camps which he frequently visited, John Steinbeck endeavored to point out their democratic character. On Friday June 24, 1930 he wrote in his diary:

Well today's work is to indicate the curious democracy of the larger group...I must get this down convincingly. The squatting men, the standing women and children..¹²¹

In emphasizing democracy in the camps, Steinbeck intended to ridicule the unfair, unjust and irresponsible system that prevailed outside them. The camps were depicted as an oasis of democracy in a desert of brutality and greed. The following excerpt from the dialog between Tom and a government camp watchman clearly revealed the democratic character of those camps. The watchman said:

*-Works pretty nice. There' s five sanitary units. Each one elects a central committee man. Now that committee makes laws. What they say goes.
-S'pose they get tough..*

¹²⁰ International Herald Tribune, (Paris :Wedn, Nov. 21, 2001), p.3.

¹²¹ Robert DeMott, Working Days : The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, pp.33-34

-Well you can vote' em out just' as quick as you vote'em in.¹²²

On humanitarian grounds, the democratically elected leaders would allow the squatters to pay for their lodging with work. To Tom who wondered how they would have one dollar every week to pay for their lodging, the guard responded:

Well, the camp site costs a dollar a week, but you can work it out, carrying garbage, keeping the camp clean-stuff like that.¹²³

More interestingly, the squatters of the government camp used to laugh at their fellows in other camps who looked out only for themselves, while in the government camps they used to take care of their hungry fellows. For instance, they would raise funds which the central committee could use to assist the hungry fellows. It never pleased the owners to see the have-nots assisting other have-nots, while they themselves would prefer throwing rotting potatoes into the river rather than giving them to the okies.

One day the ladies in charge of social welfare in the central committee rebuked a certain Mrs Joyce whose children used to eat green grapes for she had no money to feed them with properly. Here is the dialog between them and Mrs Joyce. The ladies said:

¹²² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 304

¹²³ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 303

-The camp got twenty dollars' credit there. You git yourselves fi' dollars' who worth. An' you kin pay it back to the central committee when you git work.

-We ain't never took no charity ...

-This ain't charity ... we had all that out

-S'pose we can't never pay?...

-You 'll pay if you can .if you can't, that ain't none of our business ..you ain't got the right to let your girls git hungry in this here camp.¹²⁴

As far as security is concerned, the migrants in the government camp had their own police, and California police could not get in it without a warrant. Moreover, as chapter III, section 2 showed, their organization allowed them to peacefully foil the owners' plan.

Another sign proving that everything was organized and well planned in the government camp is that the squatters would have time for collective pleasures, prayers and story-telling.

However, one may wonder why those camps were called government camps while no relief assistance coming from the government was ever alluded to. This may be explained by the fact that government officials had been corrupted by the greedy capitalists on the one hand, and by the indifference vis-à-vis social issues that President Hoover had

¹²⁴ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 335

cultivated on the other hand. About the latter aspect Josephine C. Brown wrote:

*... the Public Assistance Law was passed in 1937. Among a majority of these early officials the characteristic attitude was indifference . They took paupers for granted. Their general objective appeared to be to conserve the public funds by keeping relief expenditures to the lowest possible figure.*¹²⁵

The above pushes the reader to believe that in addition to the capitalist owners, the Federal Government was among Steinbeck's target for its indifference or even its complicity.

Also, the squatters' methods and efforts to organize themselves, which had some communistic characteristics, may lead the reader to conclude that communist agents had indeed infiltrated the camps. The squatters' behavior corresponded to the one recommended by Karl Marx to exploited laborers. Henri Lefebvre wrote:

*As an exploited and oppressed laborer, the proletarian individual needs but patience and resignation... That individual needs courage and a sense of responsibility, of enthusiasm...*¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Josephine C Brown, Public Relief 1929-1939 (NY ; Henry Holt and Co ; Inc., 1940) p.15

¹²⁶ Henri Lefebvre, Le Marxisme, p.54 « En tant que travailleur exploité et opprimé, l'individu prolétarien n'a besoin que de patience et de résignation...Cet individu a besoin de courage, de sens de responsabilités, d'enthousiasme... »

From the foregoing, one comes to the conclusion that the okies managed to organize themselves in the government camp, despite the owners' opposition. They proved more democratic, more humanitarian and fairer than the owners.

It also appeared that those camps were government camps only by name, for the squatters had to stand on their own feet. Unfortunately, those squatters who had freedom of speech and association never thought of struggling to better labor conditions on the farms. It was rather those who remained in ordinary camps and whose working conditions had become unbearable, who attempted to revolt as the following section will demonstrate.

IV.2. Attempts at Revolt

The okies as a whole failed to unite and take concerted action against the owners. However, as the owners' measures became harsher, small organized groups emerged and organized strikes or even revolts.

In denouncing the causes that led to strikes and revolts, like all the other classic modern novelists, Steinbeck "saw it as ...[his] first responsibility to expose the hypocrisies... and to crusade for higher sanctity of spirit that could be

achieved only through facing the usually unpleasant truth of the way things actually were..."¹²⁷

To any attempt at revolt, the owners would respond with brutal repression combined with the divide-and-rule policy. Despite that, some okies kept believing that strikes, revolts or even armed rebellion would be the best solution. One evening, an excited man told his fellows:

*Whyn' t twenty of us take a piece of lan' ? We got guns. Take it an'say: "put us off if you can". Whyn't we do that?"*¹²⁸

But one of his fellows reminded him that they would be shot like rats.

During the 1930s many armed revolts occurred. They multiplied as the Depression worsened and as the owners' measures became stricter. Thousands and thousands of laborers went on strike for their demands about salaries and working conditions were not granted. In the face of the ruthless and corrupt police and armed militia, the strikers could do nothing but defend themselves with their guns, which they were authorized to hold like any other American citizen.

The situation between the laborers and the owners became so tense that people believed that

¹²⁷ John W. Albridge, The American Novel and the Way We Live Now(Oxford :Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 136

¹²⁸ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.250

there was going to be another civil war. Thomas R. Brooks commented on it saying:

*It had seemed for a moment that America was close to a new civil war.*¹²⁹

The revolts described in The Grapes of Wrath were among hundreds of others that took place during the same period. Of course they were not as bloody as some of the others that lasted months and were crushed with armoured vehicles and heavy artillery.

The origin of all those revolts was the same: the owners' refusal to treat their employees as humans, or, in other words, the owners' excessive capitalistic thirst. Their pig-headedness resulted in a situation where revolts were no longer avoidable. In her analysis of the obstacles to the companies' prosperity, Laura A. Liswood summed up the owners' worst mistake which is "listening but not hearing; looking but not seeing".¹³⁰

As it appears in The Grapes of Wrath, the owners would listen to their laborers only to see who was their leader and neutralize him, not to know their demands and grant them, which confirms the above assertion.

The most serious revolt in The Grapes of Wrath was certainly the one led by Jim Casy over very low salaries. After explaining to Tom the causes of

¹²⁹ Thomas R. Brooks, Le Travail et la Lutte : Histoire du Mouvement Ouvrier Américain (Paris : Nouveaux Horizons, 1983), p. 134 « Il sembla un moment que l'Amérique fût au bord d'une nouvelle guerre civile »

¹³⁰ Laura A. Liswood, Serving Them Right (NY : Harper and Row Publishers, 1990) , p.35

the strike, Casy told him how it was brutally crushed:

We tried to camp together, an' they druv us like pigs. Scattered us. Beat the hell outa fellas. Druv us like pigs...We can't las' much longer. Some people ain' t et for two days¹³¹

That revolt led to the tragic death of its leader and to the serious injury of Tom who, nevertheless, had refused to join the movement. The death or injury of strikers-referred to as vagrants by the owners-was seen as a positive thing. If all the vagrants could be killed, there would be no trouble any more. As one of the okies explained, a vagrant was "anybody a cop don't like".¹³²

At that time, the owners' who had chosen repression rather than dialog, were themselves afraid that the hungry okies would one day revolt. To prevent that from happening, they had made friends and allies at all levels, in local and national administration, in the army, in police, in churches,... The latter allowed for instance the United States Steel Corporation to overcome the September 22, 1929, strike of over 300,000 workers, with the help of Pennsylvania police and militia. Thomas R. Brooks shed some light on the reason for that victory:

¹³¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 405

¹³² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.353

*The United States Steel Corporation was too powerful to be defeated by 300,000 laborers. It had too many ...allies in other companies, a too big support of local and national authorities, a too strong influence on institutions like the press and churches..*¹³³

The same was true in The Grapes of Wrath where authorities either had their hand in the owners' unjust actions or saw them with an indifferent eye.

This kind of corruption which overtly appeared during the 1930s recently re-appeared in a more sophisticated form. In February 2002, Democrats raised suspicions about Enron Corporation, "a major contributor of campaign funding to United States President George W. Bush. The move was prompted by a request from Democrats who suspect that private-sector groups heavily influenced the White House energy plan".¹³⁴ Of course, if that was true it would not have the same disastrous consequences as in the 1930s.

The question why huge sums of money were used for repressive and destructive actions while they could appease partly or wholly the laborers' anger, remains in the reader's mind. That money was used to pay spies and to corrupt policemen as well as

¹³³ Thomas R. Brooks, Le Labeur et la Lutte, p.117 « L' United States Steel Corporation était trop puissant pour être vaincue par 300.000 ouvriers. Elle disposait de trop...d'alliés dans les autres entreprises, d'un trop grand soutien des autorités locales et nationales, d'une trop forte influence sur des institutions telles que la presse et les églises. »

¹³⁴ Morning Star, (London : Sat. Febr. 23, 2002), p.2

the authorities. In 1936, a senatorial report about that phenomenon revealed the following:

*For the single year 1936, American industry had had to spend at least 80 million dollars to pay its anti-labor unions spies and agents.*¹³⁵

Despite the huge means that the owners used against the okies, Steinbeck remained convinced that "repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed"¹³⁶ As repression would grow harsher and harsher, the "grapes of wrath" would grow riper and riper and ferment. It is at the stage of fermentation that strikes and revolts would break out.

One notices that the okies' attempt to revolt totally failed for a number of reasons: the movement was not backed by many laborers; the police and militia were strong enough to overwhelm any attempt at revolt; finally, the owners had made allies everywhere to prevent the okies from having support from outside. The above methods are typically capitalistic in the sense that all the means-good and bad-were used to safeguard and increase the owners' capital.

On his side however, Steinbeck managed to carry out his noble mission as a writer which was to "set up his time as nearly as he can understand it

¹³⁵ Thomas R. Brooks, Le Labeur et la Lutte, p.134 « pour la seule année 1936, l'industrie américaine avait dû dépenser au moins 80 millions de dollars pour rémunérer ses espions et ses agents anti-syndicaux »

¹³⁶ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.253

and serve as the watch-dog of society...to stigmatize its faults.¹³⁷

As the two sides in conflict had unequal forces, the owners logically won over the okies and pushed them into exasperation as the coming section will illustrate.

IV.3.Exasperation

The owners' strategies finally annihilated the okies both physically and psychologically. Weakened by the very long journey from their home states and by hunger, harassed by police and militia, forced to work for low salaries to survive and seeing no light at the end of the tunnel, the migrants yielded to hopelessness and exasperation.

As a consequence, they would act without reasoning, knowing that their action would lead to a disastrous end. The first sign of exasperation in The Grapes of Wrath appeared when a deputy sheriff was beaten nearly to death by Floyd, Tom and Casy. They all knew that beating a deputy sheriff meant drawing all the policemen's fury on the okies particularly for Tom because, in doing so, he broke the parole on which he had been released from jail.

¹³⁷George McMichael et al., Concise Anthology of American Literature 2nd Ed.(NY :Macmillan Publishing Co, 1985), p. 1793

To avenge their colleague who was then motionless, the policemen together with local people burnt the whole camp after shooting into the crowd.

That disaster resulted from a dispute between the deputy sheriff and Floyd about working for low salaries. Floyd kept arguing, which was another sign of exasperation and a kind of suicide, provoking the policeman's annoyance. Steinbeck described the scene:

He [the deputy sheriff] reached a large hand up and took hold of Floyd's left arm. Floyd spun and swung with one movement. His fist splashed into the large face, ... the deputy staggered and Tom put out his foot for him to trip over. The deputy fell heavily and rolled, reaching for his gun ... Suddenly from the group of men, the Reverend Casy stepped. He kicked the deputy in the neck and then stood back as the heavy man crumpled into unconsciousness.¹³⁸

The whole affair was in the owners' favor because, this time, the origin was not them but the okies' assault against a policeman. It is sure that if Floyd and his companions had not given way to hopelessness, nothing would have happened.

However, Floyd's reaction is understandable and excusable for he was in a desperate psychological situation, intentionally created by the owners to

¹³⁸ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 281

obtain the results like the one that followed the deputy's beating.

Furthermore, in the beginning the okies had the choice between well-paid jobs and under-paid ones. But, as exasperation conquered them, they would do any job provided that it offered some money, however little it might be. Later on, they would cut down the salaries in the owners' stead. This proves that the okies were already psychologically annihilated.

In addition, some okies, tired of hopelessly looking for well-paid jobs, would regret having refused some jobs that could have brought a little money, and which they were no longer able to find. After a whole day without finding a good job, Pa and Uncle John bitterly realized that they should have taken the one that offered 20 cents an hour. Pa told Uncle John:

We would of took her ... We ain't had no job. We sure would a took her, but they was them guys in there , an' the way they looked, we was scairt to take her ¹³⁹

This confirms that the owners' strategies to push the okies into exasperation had worked. During the Great Depression, the phenomenon of laborers regretting having refused jobs was common. Many of them were optimistic, hoping that the economic

¹³⁹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 358

situation would be better in a short time. To their disappointment, it was to be the opposite, which pushed them to look for the already refused jobs, with little chance to find them. Robert E. Lucas Jr, one of the best specialists of the Great Depression illustrated the above:

Many... advertized jobs[were]refused because the offered salary seemed miserable. Nevertheless, three months later, one would like to get the same jobs ...¹⁴⁰

While analyzing this, the attention of a Central African reader or any other interested in today's Central African Republic, will be drawn by the similarity between the okies' under-employment and the one of many skilled CAR citizens. In that country which seems to be in perpetual economic depression for more than a decade, qualified people, especially those graduating from the University of Bangui, content themselves with small businesses or under-paid jobs, such as becoming security guards or watchmen.

To come back to the Great Depression, the hopeless okies would start quarrelling among themselves for nothing, which was another sign of exasperation and nervousity. Astonishingly, Tom himself who had proved to be psychologically strong, yielded to nervousity when one young okie gently asked

¹⁴⁰ Arjo Klamer, *Entretien avec des Economistes Américains*(Paris: Seuil, 1988), p.64..."beaucoup...d'offres d'emploi [ont été] refusées parce que le salaire offert paraissait minable. Or, ces offres, trois mois plus tard, on aurait bien voulu les rattraper"

him if he was looking for a job. To this very normal question, Tom nervously responded:

*Lookin' for work?...So you're lookin' for work.
What ya think ever' body else is lookin' for?
Di'monds? What do you think I wore my ass down to
a mub lookin for?*¹⁴¹

Instead of encouraging one another and informing one another about where to find good jobs, the okies would rather exchange provoking words.

Even the solidarity that marked the relationships among the okies had vanished. Each one had to look after himself, to his companions' detriment if necessary. Nobody would inform others about where to find a good job for fear they would reduce his chance of getting it. The most striking lack of solidarity resulting from exasperation appeared in the closing pages of The Grapes of Wrath. On top of the owners' injustice, there were floods. In their endeavor to block water from invading their car-boxes which served as houses and in which Rosasharn was about to give birth, Pa and uncle John asked for their neighbors' help. One of the neighbors replied saying:

*It ain't our baby. We kin go.*¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.259

¹⁴² John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 465

After reading and analyzing The Grapes of Wrath, one notices that Steinbeck opened it with a natural catastrophe—the violent winds that swept the Dust Bowl—and closed it with another natural catastrophe—the floods. In between, he described a money-thirsty man's nastiness to the okies who were also the direct victims of the above mentioned natural disasters. The three of them were more than enough to plunge the okies into total exasperation.

In short, the owners managed to keep control over the okies who, even though they attempted and somewhat succeeded in organizing themselves in the government camp, failed to mobilize all the okies against the owners' injustice.

Even the small groups that attempted to revolt failed miserably. That failure was due not only to the lack of solidarity but also to the owners' strategy of corrupting all the people and institutions that could support the okies.

Abandoned by all, including the government, physically weakened by hunger and psychologically annihilated by the divide-and-rule policy and other methods, the okies logically fell into exasperation and pessimism.

Sympathetic to them, Steinbeck saw it as his mission to warn the government and national opinion that American society was pushing a part of its own people to death . as Alan Trachtenberg puts it:

The proper praise of Steinbeck is that he stands forth as the first gifted Anglo writer of this century to grasp the extraordinary resources the nation was losing by excluding migrants,...from its social and cultural mainstream¹⁴³

Before yielding to exasperation, the okies had proved to have more sense of humanity than the capitalistic owners as the following comparative study of both sides' behavior will show.

¹⁴³ Alan Trachtenberg and Benjamin DeMott , America in Literature, Vol II (NY: Wiley and Sons, Inc.1978), p. 1332

CHAPTER V THE OWNERS VERSUS THE POOR

John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath depicted two distinct kinds of people: the rich owners and the poor okies. Each of the two groups had its own sub-groups but there were a number of features common to all the people of each group. Among the owners there were some who were uncompromisingly cruel and others who were somewhat reasonable but powerless. The same was true among the okies who included traitors, stubborn people, selfish people, valiant resisters and even people ready to sacrifice their lives.

What appeared to be common to the owners was their lack of a sense of humanity. Their sole aim was to make their business flourish using machiavellian methods. As for the okies, the common feature was their spirit of solidarity, sharing and help, despite the owners' efforts to divide them.

The aim of this chapter is to study and compare the capitalist owners' behavior to the okies'. For the former, only their attitude vis-à-vis the okies will be taken into account, while for the latter only their interrelationships will be considered.

First we will tackle this subject with the owners' inhumanity compared to the okies' sense of

mutual help. Then we will focus on the comparison between the owners' sadism and the okies' solidarity. Finally, the comparison between the owners' egoism and the okies' spirit of sharing will lead us to the end of this chapter.

V.1. Inhumanity versus Mutual Help

While reading The Grapes of Wrath, the reader has the impression that the more money one earns the more morality and humanity he loses. Particularly when he earns that money dishonestly, he is pushed to safeguard and fructify it dishonestly. During the Great Depression the owners made that principle their golden rule. Steinbeck himself noticed that the thirst for money had changed his own friends. In 1938 he wrote:

*... people I liked changed. Thinking there is money, they want it. And even if they don't want anything, they watch me and they aren't natural any more..*¹⁴⁴

On the other side, The Grapes of Wrath proved that the poorer people get the more charitable they become. On their way to California, the Joads would help the Wilsons repair and drive their broken car, the Wilsons themselves would help the Joads take

¹⁴⁴ Robert DeMott, Working Days, p.6

care of old and ill grandpa till his death. The two families who obviously represented the majority of the okies and who did not know each other before, kept helping each other. The most illustrative scene was when the Joads wanted to assist Mrs Wilson Sairy who was ill while, at the same time, policemen were harassing them, asking them to leave. Mr Wilson told the Joads:

*No.. you been nice to us; you bin kin', but you can't stay here. You got to get on an' get jobs and work. We ain't gonna let you stay...Never had nothin' when you took us up. This aint't none of your business.*¹⁴⁵

This scene is really striking for it shows that the have-nots are the ones willing to help while the haves are the ones to push people into abject poverty and refuse them any relief. The reader may wonder why a poor man is ready to help while a rich one remains indifferent to his fellows' suffering. The answer is that excessive money leads to uncontrolled capitalism, corrupts and destroys one's sense of humanity and charity. In his philosophical reasoning on that point, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

*The best thing a man can do for his culture when he is rich is to endeavor to carry out those schemes which he entertained when he was poor.*¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p; 231

¹⁴⁶ Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, P.95

Instead of the above the owners would rather worsen the okies' situation. Their indifference would have been better than their negative involvement.

The owners would prefer dumping rotting potatoes into the river rather than giving them to the okies to appease their hunger. Steinbeck described that awful situation:

*Burn coffee for fuel in the ships. Burn corn to keep warm, ...Dump potatoes in the river and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out. Slaughter the pigs and burn them out. Slaughter the pigs and bury them, and let the putrescence drip down into the earth.*¹⁴⁷

It goes beyond human understanding to see a man knowingly and willingly prefer to burn or throw food into water while other men are starving. That was not the owners' business for they wanted men ready to play their game, respecting their one-handedly fixed rules. As the okies were reluctant to play that unjust game, the owners had to make them starve. Finally, their cruel methods proved efficient.

Very interestingly, in Tortilla Flat, Steinbeck showed that people may be poor and lack enough morality but never lose their humanitarian spirit. The poor but kind-hearted paisanos who lived

¹⁴⁷ John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 369

on robbery and swindling took risks to raid a hotel to relieve a very poor family's hunger. After a visit to that family, Jesus Maria convinced other paisanos to do something. Steinbeck reported their dialog:

-The children shall not starve, they cried. It shall be our trust.

-We live in luxury , Pilon said.

-We shall give of our substance, Danny agreed. And if they needed a house, they could live here.

-Tomorrow we shall start, Pablo exclaimed. ... Fish they collected. The vegetable of patch of the Hotel Del Monte they raided.. Big Joe stole Mrs Palochico's goat ... Now food began to accumulate in the house of Teresina.. And still the flame of charity burned in the friends.¹⁴⁸

Some years before the publication of The Grapes of Wrath, Jack London, who had witnessed the depressions of the early 1900s, pointed out that business and charity were two incompatible notions. In Burning Daylight, his hero Elam Harnish told his philanthropical secretary:

It is not time to do philanthropy¹⁴⁹

The above makes the reader deduce that at that time as well as during the 1930s, business was one thing and charity was another thing essentially reserved to churches and never to commercial companies. However, many analysts believe that

¹⁴⁸ John Steinbeck, Tortilla Flat, p.151

¹⁴⁹ Jack London, Radiouse Aurore, p. 367 "Ce n'est pas le moment de faire la de la philanthropie"

business can or even should take into account social and humanitarian factors. Otherwise, it would not benefit society but only a small fraction of it. One of those analysts advocated morality and ethics in business saying:

One should take into account human effects beyond economic and financial results and balance his own earnings according to others' losses ¹⁵⁰

A wrong analysis of The Grapes of Wrath, may lead the reader to conclude that Steinbeck was discouraging people from doing business and becoming rich owners. His intentions were far from that. He himself owned vast ranches and had such huge wealth that he could announce it to his friends with pride. One day he wrote.

*We are rich as riches go. We have money enough to keep us for many years. We have this pleasant ranch which is everything one could desire ...We have comfort and beauty ...*¹⁵¹

Unlike other owners and convinced that a man is not an island, Steinbeck engaged in charitable and humanitarian actions in favor of the okies. Apart from campaigning for more humane working conditions and drawing government's attention on that issue

¹⁵⁰ Robert C. Solomon and Kristine R. Hanson, La Morale en Affaires, p. 46 "On doit prendre en compte les effets humains au-delà des résultats économiques et financières et pondérer ses propres gains en fonctions des pertes des autres.

¹⁵¹ Robert DeMott, Working Days, P.105

through his writings, Steinbeck "agreed to head a committee to gather funds for field workers' organizations..."¹⁵² In doing this, Steinbeck expected no material benefit. He rather created enemies among the owners who shut their eyes before the paradox of "hunger and destitution existing in a country with huge agricultural surpluses"¹⁵³

As a conclusion, one notices that on the one hand, excessive money corrupts and makes one lose his humane sentiments while on the other hand, poverty reinforces one's sense of humanity towards other humans.

John Steinbeck proved that in many cases poverty makes people stand together while excessive capitalism makes one more and more sadistic towards poor people as the following will show.

V.2. Sadism versus Solidarity

The opening pages of The Grapes of Wrath revealed one of the main characteristics of each of the two groups—the owners and the poor people. While the owners were taking pleasure in seeing tractors demolish houses in Oklahoma, the poor farmers were endeavoring to stand together and resist. But as both sides' forces were unequal, the owners easily overwhelmed the farmers.

¹⁵² Robert DeMott, Working Days, P.44-45

¹⁵³ Josephine C. Brown, Public Relief 1929-1939, p.254

Those farmers who were then to be called okies as they migrated westward, showed solidarity on the way to California and in the camps. Nevertheless, as their situation was to become unbearable, many of them would start looking only after themselves.

Solidarity, which appeared in The Grapes of Wrath under many forms namely altruism and reciprocal dependence, was summed up by Raymond Chappius.

According to him, solidarity refers to a "generous action in favor of somebody else ...a form of love that unites people when circumstances put them before grave events...a call to more morality in men's and societies' conduct"¹⁵⁴

With the above summary, one cannot hesitate to assert that the okies stood together in most cases, including their attempt at resistance in Oklahoma, their mutual help on the way to California, their attempt at revolt and their exceptional sense of charity in the government camp.

Among them all, Jim Casy's sense of sacrifice is the most illustrative. After Tom, Casy and Floyd had assaulted a deputy sheriff, Casy urged Tom to run away for he had broken his parole. Casy, who had played a lesser part in the assault, presented himself to the police as the aggressor,

¹⁵⁴ Raymond Chappius, La Solidarité: L'Ethique des Relations Humaines (Paris: PUF, 1999), pp. 33-34 "action généreuse mise au service d'autrui...une forme d'amour qui unit les hommes quand les nécessités les placent devant des événements graves... un rappel à plus de moralité dans la conduite des hommes et des sociétés."

knowing that the retaliation would be ruthless. Casy told Tom:

You got to git out ... you go down in the willas an' wait. He didn't see me kick'im, but he seen you stick out your foot...They'll fingerprint you. You broke parole. They'll send you back...[then to Al].Get out ...Go on, get out to the tent. You don't know nothin'...somebody got to take the blame. I got no kids. They'll jus' put me in jail... If you mess in this your whole fambly, all your folks, gonna get in trouble.¹⁵⁵

Even though he had renounced preaching, Jim Casy had not lost his goodness, and his sense of sacrifice for others' good reminds the reader of Jesus Christ's sacrifice. One may even affirm that it was not by accident that Steinbeck chose the first and last names starting respectively with J and C.

The okies' solidarity became stronger in the government camp where assaulting one okie meant assaulting the whole camp. One okie illustrated this saying:

I'll tell ya. It's 'cause we're all a-workin' together. Deputy can't pick on one fella in this camp. He's pickin' on the whole darn camp. An'he don't dare. All we got to do is give a yell an' they's two hundred men out ...Jus' stick together.

¹⁵⁵ Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, pp. 281-282

*They aint' raisin' hell with no two hundred men.*¹⁵⁶

On the other side, the amoral capitalist owners did not seem to know that solidarity is a "moral obligation that incites everybody to be responsible for himself and for others"¹⁵⁷. If they were moral, their huge profits would have been used to offer reasonable salaries, and rotting potatoes would have been given to the starving okies.

The owners' lack of sympathy and solidarity with the okies reached considerable proportions, and finally resulted in sadism, which refers to "the infliction of pain for the purpose of pleasure"¹⁵⁸. Was it not sadistic on the owners' part to watch a spectacle of guards preventing the okies from fishing out potatoes from the river? It seemed to be particularly pleasant for the owners not only to make the okies starve and see them get skinnier and skinnier, but also to see the same skinny people fight against well-paid and healthy guards over rotting potatoes.

Those sadistic practices were very common and tolerated during the Great Depression. Some uncompromising anti-capitalist activists go further and qualify capitalism as a sadistic system. One of them advocated a democratic capitalism and made the following criticism:

¹⁵⁶ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p.378

¹⁵⁷ Chappius, *La Solidarité*, p 7 "Obligation morale qui chacun à être responsable de lui-même et des autres".

¹⁵⁸ *Encyclopedia Americana* 24, (Danbury:Grolier Inc. , 1988), p.85

*One of the astonishing characteristics of our age is that ideas, even false and unworkable ideas which are no longer believed in by their official guardians, rule affairs of men and run roughshod over stubborn facts. Ideas of enormous destructiveness, cruelty and impracticability retain the allegiance of elites that benefit from them.*¹⁵⁹

The fact of benefitting from someone else's starvation or taking pleasure in someone else's misfortune is, doubtless, sadistic. Above all, it is doubly sadistic to congratulate yourself for the misfortune you yourself have caused to your fellowmen, which was true for Californian owners.

More sadistic was the owners' effort to inculcate their hatred and sadism into their innocent children. The latter would despise and laugh at their fathers' victims at school. Their joy and pleasure were generated by their fellows' ragged clothes, their old shoes and their skinny bodies. The okies' children finally deserted schools for the owners' children had chased any taste for school from their minds.

Like the other points that Steinbeck both opened and closed his novel with, sadism too appeared both in the opening and in the closing pages. In the beginning, the owners found the destruction of the farmers' houses very pleasant. In the end, the okies

¹⁵⁹ Michael Novak, The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism, p. 20.

chased by floods did not arouse solidarity but rather animosity. Also their march on the streets offered a spectacular scene that the owners could enjoy through the windows of their comfortable palaces. As usual, the owners 'accomplices-the policemen-were involved not in assisting the disaster victims, but in harassing them. Steinbeck, related:

And in little towns pity for the sodden men changed to anger, and anger at the hungry people changed to fear of them..then the hungry men crowded the alleys behind the stores to beg for bread, to beg for rotting vegetables, to steal when they could..The sheriffs swore in new deputies and ordered new rifles, and the comfortable people in tight houses felt pity at first, and then distaste, and finally hatred for the migrant people.¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, the theme of solidarity being on the poor people's side and sadism on the rich people's is recurrent in Steinbeck's oeuvre. The Pearl, in which Indians were considered as non-humans, is a good example. While on their side Indians showed solidarity with Kino whose son had been bitten by a scorpion, the rich doctor to whom he ran for help responded with much arrogance and sadism. Here is an excerpt from the dialog between the doctor and his Indian servant. The latter said:

¹⁶⁰ Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, pp. 458-459

-It is little Indian with a baby. He says a scorpion stung it..

-Have I nothing better to do than cure insect bites for "little Indians?" I am a doctor, not a veterinary ...Has he any money...?

-No they never have money ...

-See if he has any money ...¹⁶¹

At that time money gave someone the human status and poverty withdrew it. In his philosophical analysis of the human soul's needs, Henry David Thoreau indirectly pointed at money as one of the worst enemies of man. The poor okies'sense of virtue and the rich owners'vice-ridden attitudes confirm Thoreau's reasoning that "superfluous wealth can buy superfluties. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul".¹⁶²

From the foregoing, it would appear that The Grapes of Wrath portrayed the psychological consequences of uncontrolled capitalism both on rich and poor people. That capitalism pushed the former into sadism toward their victims who, on their side, endeavored to stick together.

In 1960, Steinbeck who was then 58, visited his home region which he had left twenty years before. The more humane California that he found inspired him to make the following statement:

¹⁶¹ Steinbeck, The Pearl, p 17

¹⁶² Henry David Thoreau, Walden (NY: New American Library, Inc. , 1960), p.218

*The place of my origin had changed and having gone away I had not changed with it.*¹⁶³

Among other psychological consequences were the owners' egoism and the okies' spirit of sharing as the following shows.

V.3. Egoism versus the Spirit of Sharing

The phenomenon of one getting more and more egoistic as his wealth grows is very common even in ordinary life. On the other side too, the opposite phenomenon of a poor man having a spirit of sharing toward his poorer fellows is frequent, even though astonishing.

The Grapes of Wrath offered a good illustration of the above with the owners exclusively seeking their own profits and the poor okies being ready to share with the neediest among them. However, some analysts affirm that when the okies were still in their home states where they were small owners, they were individualistic. Then, when the bigger owners chased them they moved " from home to homelessness, from individualism to collective awareness, from selfishness to communal love, from 'I' to 'We' " ¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶³ John Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, (NY: Bantam Books, Inc 1963) p.204

¹⁶⁴ De Mott, Working Days, p.XXIII

Their journey to California was the first opportunity for them to share the few things they had. The example of the Joads and the Wilsons, two families from two different states, remains among the best. The Joads knew that their money and provisions were far from being enough for the remaining way and for their first days in California. Yet, Pa gave some money and food to Mr Wilson whose wife was ill and who was a stranger some days before. Steinbeck described Pa's spirit of sharing:

Pa took out his purse and dug two crushed bills from it. He went to Wilson and held them out. " We want you should take this, an'" - he pointed to the pork and potatoes- " an' that" ¹⁶⁵.

Pa's altruism may be seen as excessive for he had good reasons to save his money and provisions without being egoistic. First, the journey ahead was still long, second, the family was big (11 people) , third, Rose of Sharon was pregnant and needed particular care and finally, the situation in California was uncertain. Despite all that, Pa persisted in his humanitarian action to Mr Wilson who even attempted to refuse. Also, the reader notices that none of the Joads protested against Pa's action, but rather Ma forced Mr Wilson to accept the offer.

The most touching scene displaying the okies' spirit of sharing remains Rose of Sharon's

¹⁶⁵ Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.233

gesture to a dying old okie during the flood. After leaving their already inundated car-box, some of the Joads went to a remote and abandoned barn which floods had not invaded. There they found an old man and his son. That boy took his father's blanket to Rose of Sharon who was in a critical situation due to miscarriage. What his father needed was food and not a blanket which would rather be useful to Rose of Sharon. Seeing that the man's need was but something to appease his hunger, Rose of Sharon offered him her own milk. Steinbeck related:

*For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still... She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes ... He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to" she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There". Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She ... smiled mysteriously.*¹⁶⁶

Unlike the owners who could bury pigs and dump potatoes into the river, Rose of Sharon relieved the man's hunger with her milk. The fact that the very last paragraph of the novel was dedicated to that striking humanitarian action reveals once more Steinbeck's sympathy for the okies.

¹⁶⁶ Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p. 480

The latter did what the government, churches and the owners failed or refused to do.

On their side, the owners kept strengthening their fortress of egoism where "each person seeks to promote his own good".¹⁶⁷ All had to belong to them, even riches they accumulated thanks to other people's toil. Their single goal was to maximize their profits and never think about the poor laborers who made those profits possible. Many anti-capitalist authors point at capitalism as one of the factors responsible for egoism which makes society less responsible and less human toward its own people. One of them wrote:

*... the market puts conscience aside, makes people neglect their responsibilities and dehumanizes! In claiming to demonstrate that the pursuit of personal profits leads to the collective good, it gives rise to egoism and cupidity.*¹⁶⁸

It may be presumed that in the owners' mind , sharing with poor people or engaging in humanitarian actions meant impoverishing oneself for other people's benefit. This may be understood to some extent, but how could they justify their burying pigs and throwing food into the river? That food could never reduce their profits. It would rather have strengthened the okies, allowing them to increase the owners' profits for a well-fed man works

¹⁶⁷ *Encyclopedia Americana* 9, (Danbury : Grolier Inc, 1988), p. 760

¹⁶⁸ Maillard, *Le Marché Inhumain*, p.29 "... le marché met de côté la conscience , il dé-responsabilise et déshumanise! En prétendant démontrer que la poursuite des intérêts particuliers tourne au bien collectif, il lâche la bride à l'égoïsme et à la cupidité".

better than a hungry one. That is rather cruelty and not mere egoism.

Moreover, The Grapes of Wrath, displayed the owners' wish to accumulate more things than needed on the one hand, and their efforts to prevent the okies from having their basic needs on the other hand. Steinbeck illustrated this:

*And while the Californians wanted many things, accumulation, social success, amusement, luxury and a curious banking security, the new barbarians wanted only two things—land and food; and to them the two were one. And whereas the wants of the Californians were nebulous and undefined, the wants of the okies were beside the roads, lying there to be seen and coveted.*¹⁶⁹

All the above leads the reader to conclude that harsh capitalism dehumanizes people for when the latter are haunted by money, all their attention is directed to it, most of the time to the detriment of the weak and poor people.

With The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck succeeded in convincing the reader that during the Great Depression, excessive money controlled its owners and not the reverse. It chased any sense of humanity and charity from them and strongly implanted sadism and egoism in them.

¹⁶⁹ Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, p.248

He then demonstrated that poverty unites people and makes them more charitable. However, this does not infer that Steinbeck is calling people to remain poor and live on relief. He is rather inviting rich people to think about their less lucky fellow men in one way or another, not to complicate or worsen their situation, and above all not to hinder their efforts to vanquish poverty.

Very obviously, Steinbeck is strongly attacking American individualism which originated from the frontier spirit. He advocated a more humane and more socialistic society which would be to him preferable to a totally capitalistic or a totally communistic one.

CONCLUSION

It would appear difficult to find a proper description of The Grapes of Wrath as well as of its author. However, there is no doubt that it is a work of literature for it is chiefly based on fiction even though it was inspired by an actual historical event.

Behind that fiction the reader finds the social situation that prevailed during the 1930s in California which earned The Grapes of Wrath the status of a social novel and its author the appellation of a social writer.

The novel deserves the status of a psychological novel for its endeavor to display each social stratum's way of thinking, acting and reacting.

As its spinal column was the 1929-1939 economic crisis, widely known as the Great Depression, its consequences and a number of proposals to handle it, it would appear logical to qualify it as an "economic" novel.

Moreover, as the novel denounced both the political and administrative institutions' indifference and negative involvement in the handling of the crisis, it deserves the qualification of a "political" novel.

In covering all the above mentioned grounds, John Steinbeck had one precise aim: combating

irresponsible capitalism and all its supporters. He first attacked the banks and their slaves whose role was no longer to assure people's economic prosperity, but to force them out of their land and send them into exile in their own country.

He then displayed his fury against the capitalist owners' unfairness which consisted in arbitrarily cutting salaries. He also expressed his anger against the machiavellian trickery of calling more workers than needed, Steinbeck was embittered by the owners' greed which was illustrated by their taking back the migrants' little and hardly-gained money through exorbitant sales in camps.

Apart from that, the Californian police was among Steinbeck's first targets. What the police were doing was far from their noble mission of keeping order and security. On the contrary, they proved to be the worst trouble-makers with their unjustified and disproportionate repressions and their gratuitous provocations and intimidations.

All this was to be completed with a strongly sustained divide-and-rule campaign carried out by labor contractors, militiamen and spies. The campaign aimed at annihilating the migrants using the migrants themselves.

Very sympathetic to the migrants , Steinbeck tried to portray their tentative attempts at revolt and at organization. Unfortunately, the only response to any attempt at revolt was harsh police repression,

while the one to the attempts at organization was provocation. All these methods added to natural disasters plunged the powerless and hungry migrants into hopelessness.

To make the readers understand his strong stand against uncontrolled capitalism and his feelings for the laboring class, Steinbeck depicted the psychological characters of the two classes. He came out with the conclusion that men created "the monster", that is harsh capitalism, but were not able to control it. It is inferred that it was rather the monster itself which controlled men, which the latter recognized with pride in The Grapes of Wrath. This loss of control over the monster gave rise to inhumanity, sadism and egoism in the owners' minds. On the other side, the poor migrants who had no monster to control or to be slaves to kept their humane sentiments and stuck together in their misfortune.

A wrong analysis of The Grapes of Wrath may lead to the conclusion that Steinbeck was a communist for he pointed at uncontrolled capitalism as the main cause of injustices in society. A close look into that novel and its author's biography rather shows that Steinbeck, who was himself a big owner, meaning a capitalist, advocated a democratic, humane and fair capitalism, where business should respect the limits imposed both by economic legislation and moral or ethical principles.

Steinbeck did not oppose American individualism in the sense of positive and constructive competition. He was rather infuriated by the individualism that pushed some people to consider themselves as the only people worthy to have life, land, luxury and wealth . That negative individualism showed itself in The Grapes of Wrath under forms like egoism and sadism.

Finally, The Grapes of Wrath as a whole conveyed simultaneously moral, political and psychological lessons from which current and future generations, both in America and in the world, will benefit. It clearly showed that men made the monster and that the monster made men mad.

Just like other celebrated champions such as Henry David Thoreau for self-reliance and transcendentalism, Harriet B. Stowe for the slaves' cause, Mark Twain for humor and Hemingway for courage and manliness, history will record John Steinbeck as a champion for better social and labor conditions.

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