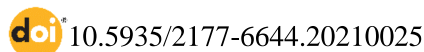
REVISTA TEL
TEMPO, ESPAÇO E LINGUAGEM

'TALKIN' RED, AGITATING TROUBLE': A MARXIST APPROACH TO THE GRAPES OF WRATH


10.5935/2177-6644.20210025

FALANDO VERMELHO, CAUSANDO PROBLEMA': UMA ABORDAGEM MARXISTA EM VINHAS DA IRA

HABLANDO ROJO, EMPEZANDO PROBLEMA: UN ANÁLISIS MARXISTA ACERCA DEL LIBRO VIÑAS DE IRA

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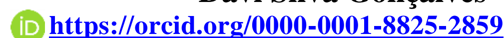
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Abstract: Through a Marxist approach, the purpose of this article is to analyse if and how The grapes of wrath (STEINBECK, 1939) articulates a perspective upon work and workers' alienation. Having said that, while the specific context of this research is the novel itself, the overall context is the Great Depression, the greatest financial crises of U.S.A. history. The relationship between land, men, and capital, as it is developed by the narrative, is brought to the analysis. Taking the literary piece as the product of its culture, but also as producer of a new culture, my aim is to understand if and how a Marxist lens contributes to the reading of The grapes of wrath (STEINBECK, 1939), not as a token of reality, but as a glimpse to possibilities of realities other than that. Indeed, without objectively manifesting any ideological stance regarding the Great Depression, the findings of this research indicate how the narrative of social revolution is built within the story. Tougher and sadder than before, the Joad family is a picture of any proletarian family, living by instinct and accepting their fate only because everything they do in order to fight it never seems to work at all.
Keywords: Marxism. John Steinbeck. The Great Depression.

Resumo: Por um viés marxista, a proposta desse artigo é analisar se e de que maneira o romance Vinhas da ira (STEINBECK, 1939) articula uma perspectiva acerca da alienação do trabalho e do trabalhador. Dito isso, enquanto o contexto específico da pesquisa é o livro em si, seu contexto geral é o da Crise de 1929, a maior crise financeira da história dos Estados Unidos. A relação entre terra, homens e capital, como ela se desenvolve na narrativa, é trazida para a análise. Tomando a produção literária como um produto de sua cultura, mas também produtor de novas culturas, busco compreender se e como uma lente teórica marxista pode contribuir para pensar possibilidades de uma realidade que não aquela retratada no romance. De fato, sem manifestar objetivamente nenhuma posição ideológica acerca da Crise de 1929, meus resultados finais mostram como uma narrativa de revolução social é construída dentro do livro. Mais forte e mais triste do que ao início, a família Joad é o retrato da família proletária, que vive por instinto e aceitando sua condição apenas porque tudo aquilo que faz na tentativa de evita-la nunca parece funcionar.
Palavras-chave: Marxismo. John Steinbeck. Crise de 1929.

Resumen: A través de un enfoque marxista, el propósito de este artículo es analizar si y cómo Viñas de ira (STEINBECK, 1939) articula una perspectiva sobre el trabajo y la alienación de los trabajadores. Dicho esto, si el contexto específico de esta investigación es la novela en sí, el contexto general es la Gran Depresión, la mayor crisis financiera de la historia de los EE. UU. El interés es, entonces, la relación entre tierra, hombres y capital, tal como desarrollada en la narrativa. Concibiendo la obra literaria como producto de su cultura, pero también productora de una nueva cultura, mi objetivo es comprender si y cómo una lente marxista contribuye a la lectura de Viñas de ira (STEINBECK, 1939), no como un ejemplar de la realidad, sino un vislumbre de posibilidades de realidades múltiples. De hecho, sin manifestar objetivamente ninguna postura ideológica con respecto a la Gran Depresión, esta investigación indica cómo la narrativa de la revolución social se construye dentro de la historia. Más dura y triste que antes, la familia Joad es una imagen de toda familia proletaria, que vive por instinto y acepta su destino solo porque todo lo que hacen para luchar contra él no funciona.
Palabras-clave: Marxismo; John Steinbeck; La Gran Depresión.

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> The houses were left vacant on the land, and the land was vacant because of this. Only the tractor sheds of corrugated iron, silver and gleaming, were alive; and they were alive with metal and gasoline and oil, the disks of the plows shining. The tractors had lights shining, for there is no day and night for a tractor and the disks turn the earth in the darkness and they glitter in the daylight. (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939, p. 77)

Introduction

Personifying the machine, this study's epigraph is one of the many moments when the narrator of *The grapes of wrath* (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 77) compare the rural with the urban world, by emphasizing their difference. During the period known as the Great Depression, houses are abandoned by men and women, and so are their lands, now occupied by metal, gasoline, oil. The only beating heart is that of tractors, the only beam of life their lights that shine, day and night. The story of this novel is a story about transition, and about those who suffer during such transition, mainly due to corporate farming. In the words of Basuki (2014, p. 58), "corporate farming threatens small farmers and leads to a socio-economic crisis that alienates the workers". Through a Marxist approach, the purpose of this article is to analyse if and how this narrative articulates a perspective upon workers' alienation.

Set in a crucial period of U.S. history, from 1920 to 1930, the context of *Grapes of wrath* (STEINBECK, 1939) is that of its greatest financial crash, whose apex occurs in 1929. The consequences are that of generalized financial bankruptcy, unemployment, and, inevitably, severe poverty plus homelessness. Having said that, while the specific context of this research is the novel itself, the overall context is the Great Depression. As one could have imagined, there is an explosion of social and political turmoil following such an event; and the seeds for this to happen are set in motion by my object of analysis. "Steinbeck's *The grapes of wrath* stands as a record of the painful experience of the 1930s. By presenting a vivid picture of the social conditions, it is inscribed in what Marxist thinkers such as Gorky and Lukács call as social realism novel" (BASUKI, 2014, p. 59).

Capable of recreating the narrative of migration as a result of such process, my hypothesis is that *The grapes of wrath* (STEINBECK, 1939) might be deemed a sort of a bible of the Great Depression. "More than a million residents of the southwest would become migrants by the end of the decade, the 'dirty Thirties'; and the epic that Steinbeck composed to recount the trek westward was virtually without precedent in its impact" (WHITFIELD, 20008, p. 3). Regardless of its many prizes, the Pulitzer one among them, the novel was not received by every reader and place with jubilation. Inhabitants of most of the regions it describes felt disrespected by Steinbeck's (1939) accounts and their response go from censorship to ceremonial burning, the latter in Kern County.

Besides the aforementioned representations, allusions to sex, religion, and politics have infuriated the conservative population, even though these concern an almost insignificant part of the narrative. However, all efforts to hinder the success of *The grapes of wrath* (STEINBECK, 1939) proved to be useless and, in a short time, the novel travelled overseas, getting to more and more readers. In cahoots with this group of U.S. citizens who felt threatened by the narrative, the F.B.I. was also clearly unhappy about it, having preparing a file of 117 pages about Steinbeck, who became suspicious of communist activities within the country. Luckily for him, “the case for Steinbeck’s radicalism was thin, however, though he had been a member of the League of American Writers, founded in 1935 and sponsored by the Communists” (WHITFIELD, 2008, p. 3). Eventually, as time went by, instead of a communist pamphleteer, he became acknowledged worldwide as a realist writer, nothing more, nothing less.

At least to me, what Steinbeck’s (1939) novel does, and it does with expertise, is to provide a complex gaze to the whole spectrum, without polarizing villains and heroes, evil from saint. Maybe, unconsciously, this characteristic might annoy those who tend to oversimplify the matter of labour, ownership, etc. “Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 21).Caught in something larger than themselves, as the narrator puts it, “some of them hated the mathematics that drove them, and some were afraid, and some worshiped the mathematics because it provided a refuge from thought and from feeling” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 21).

Treating the capital as a living organism and treating people as objects subjugated by it, owners and employee’s choice of verbs associated to the bank draws the narrator’s attention: “The Bank or the Company needs, wants, insists, must have, as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 21). Within the narrative, in many occasions, workers fight workers, destroy homes where they have been welcome, take unfair actions cognisant that they are unfair. Slaves of the machines, their masters, they are also masters of less fortunate slaves. “Some of the owner men were a little proud to be slaves to such cold and powerful masters. The owner men sat in the cars and explained. You know the land is poor. You've scrabbled at it long enough, God knows” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 21). Dealing with the land as if it were any other commercial product, these who Steinbeck’s (1939) narrator call the owner men try to mitigate its value or importance. But people know the land matters: it is their home, their work, and their life which is being taken from them.

In the following page of Steinbeck's novel (1939, p. 22), the narrator continues: "The owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were. A man can hold land if he can just eat and pay taxes; he can do that. Yes, he can do that until his crops fail one day and he has to borrow money from the bank". The bank, however, depicted as a creature, is one that, different from the other living animals, does not breathe air and does not eat food. "They breathe profits; they eat the 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" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 22). Just as people need to sleep, to eat, or to drink water, the capital needs to grow, and grow, and grow a little bit more. If its development is hampered or retarded, it sickens and, eventually, dies. When the narrator says this is a sad thing, he is humanising the capital, while human beings themselves are turned into objects. The capital is always right.

"And at last the owner men came to the point. The tenant system won't work anymore. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop. We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 22). Now an object, if people get sick they can be replaced – there are many unemployed people eager to work in the place of another. But the capital can no longer be replaced. It is the place, every place, it is everywhere and even where it is not, it is ubiquitous. Where the capital is not, it is about to get to. It does not matter the impact in the lives of people or in the land itself, profit must be guaranteed. "Something's happened to the monster. But you'll kill the land with cotton. We know. We've got to take cotton quick before the land dies. Then we'll sell the land" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 22). It is this relationship between land, men, and capital, as it is developed by the narrative of my object of analysis, that this study analyses. Taking the literary piece as the product of its culture, but also as producer of a new culture, my aim is to understand if and how a Marxist lens contributes to the reading of *The grapes of wrath* (STEINBECK, 1939), not as a token of reality, but as a glimpse to possibilities of realities other than that.

Discussion

The introduction to this study already brings the parallel drawn by Steinbeck's (1939) novel between animal and machine, as a metaphor for the mechanisation of farming. That is, however, a constant allusion: "The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 24). If the bank is a monster that feeds on

profit, now the tractors are compared to insects, having the same strength of insects, as proportionate to their size. Merciless, these insects keep on "raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 24). Ignoring hills, gulches, water courses, fences, and houses, machines seem to have a life of their own. The narrator, here, shares with readers how easy it is to forget that, moving this animal, guiding its movements, there needs to be a human driver. "The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 24).

Zoomorphed or, better, robotised, this gloved, goggled, and masked man, sitting in the iron sit, is no longer acknowledged as a human being by the proletarian, who can only see the monstrous insect which is about to take his/her property. "I built it 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 window with a rifle. You even come too close and I'll pot you like a rabbit" (STEINBECK, 2014, p. 26). Eager to protect his home and land, this character here thinks he can fight the tractor, he believes he can maybe stop it. He is warned, nonetheless, that his would never work. "It's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it. And look—suppose you kill me? They'll just hang you, but long before you're hung there'll be another guy on the tractor, and he'll bump the house down" (STEINBECK, 2014, p. 26).

This farmer wants to know who to fight, and he asks the man in the tractor who has given him the orders. The man in the tractor says that the person who has given him the order has also been ordered by another employee, from another company, representing other interests, controlled by a certain business, which, on its turn, is controlled by the bank, etc. It is an infinite circle and it seems impossible to get to the man or woman at the end of it all. "'But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's starving me'. 'I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all. Maybe like you said, the property's doing it. Anyway I told you my orders'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 26). The property, the bank: the capital. The man in the tractor is right, there is no man to be shot, but a system to be questioned. As set forth by Basuki (2014, p. 58), "The banks are synecdoche for the whole economic system".

In another discussion, when the protagonist, Tom Joad, tries to discover why their parents have accepted to give up on their land, the same conundrum emerges. "'It ain't my fault.' 'Well,' I says, 'whose fault is it? I'll go an' I'll nut the fella.' 'It's the Shawnee Lan' an' Cattle Company. I jus'

got orders'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 32). But who is this Shawnee Land and Cattle Company? That is what Tom wants to know. Again, the one who is being attacked wants to know who is the aggressor, so s/he can fight back. But, as it happens before, he leaves the scene without an answer. Companies, enterprises, banks, properties: the enemy is invisible – the invisible hand of the market. But first things first. How does that come to be? In a nutshell, Karl Marx (1956, p. 141) explains that "the result of capitalist mode of production produces capitalist private property". Ownership and capitalist hegemony walk hand in hand. The more capitalism grows, the more owners increase their patrimony, in opposition to the illusion of money as a fairy which generates more and more owners to divide profit with. Division, after all, is not a word akin to the capitalist dictionary.

Of course, besides Tom Joad, there are many other relevant characters in the story. Ma Joad (Tom's mother who, like the father, is not named) is maybe the one whose growth during the narrative is most blatant. Sometime after they leave home, she is questioned by Pa Joad about her mood – because, for the last few days, she has seemed rather vexed and exasperated about everything. "'Ma,' he said, 'you never was like this before!' Her face hardened and her eyes grew cold. 'I never had my house pushed over,' she said. 'I never had my family stuck out on the road. I never had to sell—ever'thing'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 52). Another character that is worth mentioning is Jim Casy, the former preacher who gives up on the church and accompanies the family that leave Oklahoma to try a new life in California.

An interesting moment of the narrative is when there is a clash between these two characters, while they are working on the last chores for the trip. The preacher tells Ma Joad that he is going to salt down the meat, for there is too much for her to do. When he does that, she looks suspiciously at him, as if he had said something preposterous, and hesitates a little bit before replying that this is women's work. "'It's all work,' the preacher replied. 'They's too much of it to split it up to men's or women's work. You got stuff to do. Leave me salt the meat'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 72). It is only after inspecting his first movements with the meat that she accepts to move onto another chore. Now, regarding their "fresh start":

> Maybe we can start again, in the new rich land, in California, where the fruit grows. We'll start over. But you can't start. Only a baby can start. You and me, why, we're all that's been. The anger of a moment, the thousand pictures, that's us. This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us. We can't start again. The bitterness we sold to the junk man, he got it all right, but we have it still. And when the owner men told us to go, that's us; and when the tractor hit the house, that's us until we're dead. To California or any place, everyone a drum major leading a parade of hurts, marching with our bitterness. And some day—the armies of bitterness will all be going the same way. And they'll all walk together, and there'll be a dead terror from it (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 59).

For the adult, there is no fresh start, especially when s/he is giving up on everything for a lucky guess, looking for something s/he does not even know if it exists. This, indeed, is precisely why Grampa resists so much on moving away. For the person who lives on the land, the land is him/her. Even though they get almost no money for everything they sell before the trip, all of them know that there is no price for the land: even the fair price would not be fair. They are not moving away: they are being forced out. “And the men in the seat were tired and angry and sad, for they had got eighteen dollars for every movable thing from the farm: the horses, the wagon, the implements, and all the furniture from the house. Eighteen dollars” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 65).

The narrator repeats the number: eighteen dollars, which, today, taking inflation into account, would be something around two hundred and twenty dollars. As the bank takes Joad’s house and land, they just sell everything: their furniture, their tools, their animals, and get this amount as payment. Asking for more money, the buyer gets annoyed and says he will not buy it anymore, and then they accept to get two dollars less. With the number of people travelling from Oklahoma to California, for the buyer, it was the greatest moment for business: and that is what this people meant to him: an opportunity at making business. “They knew the team and the wagon were worth much more. They knew the buyer man would get much more, but they didn't know how to do it” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 65). These are farmers we are talking about, not salesmen, not business dealers, not entrepreneurs.

It is also relevant, thus, to pinpoint here the narrator’s description of this kind of people, which happens when the Joads need to buy a new tire for their truck. “When I hear a business man talkin' about service, I wonder who's gettin' screwed” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 81). Simplistic as it is, this is a rather clever point. In capitalist enterprises and deals, people have naturalised the fact that some must lie to get what they want, and that when business is done, someone is always being deceived.“Fella in business got to lie an' cheat, but he calls it somepin else. That's what's important. You go steal that tire an' you're a thief, but he tried to steal your four dollars for a busted tire. They call that sound business” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 81). After that, this same character complains about the situation wherein the U.S.A finds itself as a country. “Ever' person I talked to is on the move for a damn good reason. But what's the country comin' to? That's what I wanta know. What's it comin' to? Fella can't make a livin' no more. Folks can't make a livin' farmin'. I ask you, what's it comin' to?” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 84), talking to the Joads, this man does not realise that, in a way, he is actually talking about the Joads. “Fella wants to trade his shoes so he can git a hunderd miles on. I can't figure her [the country] out.” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 84)

When Casy tries to reply what the country is coming to, he confesses his impression is that it never comes to nothing: people never come to nothing. “Seems to me we don't never come to nothin'. Always on the way. Always goin' and goin'. Why don't folks think about that? They's movement now. People moving. We know why, an' we know how. Movin' 'cause they got to. That's why folks always move” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 85). Indeed, throughout the narrative, from its beginning, readers do not feel allowed to ask why the family is moving. Why do not they stay and fight for their rights? This option does not exist: they are moving because they need to. “A single family moved from the land. Pa borrowed money from the bank, and now the bank wants the land. The land company, that’s the bank when it has land, wants tractors, not families on the land” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 101).

Rhetorically asking if the tractor could be considered essentially bad, the narrator problematizes such issue. “If this tractor were ours it would be good, not mine, but ours. If our tractor turned the long furrows of our land, it would be good. Not my land, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 101). The problem, then, is not that the tractor touches the land, but that it possesses the land. The tractor belongs to those who have money to buy it, and, then, to conquer the land of the poor proletariat. According to the narrator, the tractor does two things: “it turns the land and turns us off the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people are driven, intimidated, hurt by both. We must think about this” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 101). Brought to the analogy, the tank enhances the impression that what the tractor symbolises is a world where war is about to start. Hence, another pervasive analogy:

> The great owners, striking at the immediate thing, the widening government, the growing labor unity; striking at new taxes, at plans; not knowing these things are results, not causes. Results, not causes; results, not causes. The causes lie deep and simple, the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times; muscles and mind aching to grow, to work, to create, multiplied a million times. The last clear definite function of man, muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need, this is man. To build a wall, to build a house, a dam, and in the wall and house and dam to put something of Manself, and to Manself take back something of the wall, the house, the dam; to take hard muscles from the lifting, to take the clear lines and form from conceiving. For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments. This you may say of man—when theories change and crash, when schools, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, painfully, mistakenly sometimes. Having stepped forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back. This you may say and know it and know it. This you may know when the bombs plummet out of the black planes on the market place, when prisoners are stuck like pigs, when the crushed bodies drain filthily in the dust. You may know it in this way. If the step were not being taken, if the stumbling-forward ache were not alive, the

> bombs would not fall, the throats would not be cut. Fear the time when the bombs stop falling while the bombers live—for every bomb is proof that the spirit has not died. And fear the time when the strikes stop while the great owners live—for every little beaten strike is proof that the step is being taken. And this you can know—fear the time when Manself will not suffer and die for a concept, for this one quality is the foundation of Manself, and this one quality is man, distinctive in the universe (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 100).

With dexterity, the narrator puts into question the idea that the capital brings peace, showing how, growingly, it actually configures something contrary to peace. Workers are not passionate about concepts; they do not care about philosophical stances towards the financial system. But workers know they are exerting themselves, plugging away and, regardless, their wages are not enough for them to feed their family. They know it became difficult for a family to keep its land, but a single person seems to be buying acres and acres. Gradually, then, workers understand economics, which stands for “the base on which the superstructure of social, political, ideological realities is built” (TYSON, 2006, p. 54). Eventually, workers get to the obvious conclusion that what they see, within and around such superstructure, actually should not be as it is.

The problem, the narrator explains, is when workers realise that they are not alone: that, like a man who cannot feed his family, many other men are going through the same situation. “This is the zygote. For here ‘I lost my land’ is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate: ‘We lost *our* land.’ The danger is here, for two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 102). The sense of community, when ‘I’ turns into ‘we’, constitutes union, and uniting angry and hungry workers is not good for the government. It is not by chance that it takes time for this insight to occur. “The quality of owning freezes you forever into ‘I,’ and cuts you off forever from the ‘we’” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 102). After Casy is arrested and killed, protecting the Joad family, Tom has to hide in a forest given his involvement in the incident. Therein, he cannot stop thinking of his friend, and tells his mother about this time when Casy went to the wilderness to find his own soul. “He foun’ he didn’ have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain’t no good, ‘cause his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ‘less it was with the rest, an’ was whole” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 288).

This motive appears recurrently during the narrative and, more than once, Casy implies he felt the need to leave church because of all the individuality involved with it. His spirituality does not fit there any longer: his god is one that touches everything and every soul. As alone as Casy has been for a considerable amount of his life, Tom gets to the same conclusion. “I know now a fella ain't no good alone” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 288). On the other side, taking those who do not want to contemplate the omnipresence of social bonds into account, these become immobile people, paralysed within the selfish spectrum of their individuality. For the former, when starvation,

unemployment, and migration put people together, however, things might finally begin to change. “A half-million people moving over the country; a million more, restive to move; ten million more feeling the first nervousness. And tractors turning the multiple furrows in the vacant land” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 102). At the same time, the fact that the capital is so much concentrated in the hands of so few people also causes some commotion:

> Pa asked slowly, “Ain't, ain't it nice out there at all?” “Sure, nice to look at, but you can't have none of it. They's a grove of yella oranges, an' a guy with a gun that got the right to kill you if you touch one. They's a fella, newspaper fella near the coast, got a million acres” Casy looked up quickly, “Million acres? What in the worl’ can he do with a million acres?” “I dunno. He jus’ got it. Runs a few cattle. Got guards ever'place to keep folks out. Rides aroun’ in a bullet-proof car. I seen pitchers of him. Fat, sof’ fella with little mean eyes an' a mouth like a ass-hole’. Scairt he’s gonna die. Got a million acres an’ scairt of dyin’.” Casy demanded, “What in hell can he do with a million acres? What's he want a million acres for?” The man took his whitening, puckering hands out of the water and spread them, and he tightened his lower lip and bent his head down to one shoulder. “I dunno,” he said. “Guess he's crazy” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 139).

It is difficult for Casy and the Joads to understand why a man would have a million acres, because, for them, this man would, himself, have to work on a land of such size. The idea of a farmer who does not participate in the process of farming is new to them, even though it has become an all-encompassing reality. “It came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 158). It gets to a point where the farmer cannot see the beginning or the end of his/her farm, s/he does not know where the frontiers are, s/he needs people who control everything s/he owns. “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. And after a while he did not pay the men at all, and saved bookkeeping” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 158). The farmer pays workers with meals, on credit, paying bad wages and selling expensive food. “A man might work and feed himself and when the work was done, might find that he owed money to the company. And the owners not only did not work the farms any more, many of them had never seen the farms they owned” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 158).

In the competition between farmers, “those who were not good shopkeepers lost their land to good shopkeepers” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 157). At this point, everyone had to learn how to be a business person. “No matter how clever, how loving a man might be with earth and growing things, he could not survive if he were not also a good shopkeeper” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 157). Fewer owners, larger farms: and the rural world becomes a monopoly of “free” markets. “Owners imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves: Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos.

They live on rice and beans, the business men said. They don't need much" (STEINBECK, 1939, p 157). Animalised, migrants suffer with wages worse than those which are paid to poor U.S. workers. Their animalisation goes to the point that people no longer introduce themselves, for they are all unemployed peasants looking for work. However, this draws Tom's attention. "Tom said, 'Seems funny. I've et your food, an' I ain't tol' you my name, nor you ain't mentioned yours. I'm Tom Joad'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 199).

Just as Tom says his name, the old man he is talking to looks funny at him and smiles a little. Then, he replies. "'You ain't been out here long?' 'Hell, no! Jus' a couple days.' 'I knowed it. Funny, you git outa the habit a mentionin' your name. They's so goddamn many. Jist fellas. Well, sir, I'm Timothy Wallace, an' this here's my boy Wilkie'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 199). Too many people, too many names, and, as they come and go, these peasants just call one another "fellows". If, on the one hand, this has to do with their animalisation, on the other it reinforces the sense of community: the sense that they are all the same thing, the same person, the same suffering – the migrant. But, if Timothy Wallace and Wilkie see humanity in the Joads, and invites them home for a meal although they not even know them, against these characters there is the opposing group: those who think poor people are less people, closer to beasts. "Why, look how they live. Why, look what they eat. And, if they get funny, deport them. And all the time the farms grew larger and the owners fewer. And there were pitifully few farmers on the land any more" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 157).

Farmers, therefore, become the ultimate business people. Speaking of which, when the family goes to a shop in order to by the tools required to fix their car, the owner is not there. When asked how much the merchandise would cost them, they are surprised by the answer they get from the employee. "Well, sir, I jus' dunno. If the boss was here, he'd go to a parts book an' he'd find out how much is a new one, an' while you was workin', he'd be findin' out how bad you're hung up, an' how much jack ya got" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 102). After all these steps, then his boss would make a price which could go from three to eight dollars. "'Figgers how bad ya need it. I seen him git more for a ring gear than he give for the whole car.' 'Yeah! But how much am I gonna give you for this here?' ''Bout a buck, I guess'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 122). Luckily for the Joads, they can get a fairer price because the owner of the shop is absent. Buying with few money, and selling for much, these are the successful business men: those who are the best deceivers:

> Timothy said angrily, "No, we ain't got no car. We sol' our car. Had to. Run outa food, run outa ever'thing. Couldn' git no job. Fellas come aroun' ever' week, buyin' cars. Come aroun', an' if you're hungry, why, they'll buy your car. An' if you're hungry enough, they don't hafta pay nothin' for it. An', we was hungry enough. Give us ten dollars for her." He spat into the road. Wilkie said quietly, "I was in Bakersfiel' las' week. I seen her, a-settin' in

> a use'-car lot, settin' right there, an' seventy-five dollars was the sign on her." "We had to," Timothy said. "It was either us let 'em steal our car or us steal somepin from them. We ain't had to steal yet, but, goddamn it, we been close!" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 200).

In another occasion, the family meets another character, who the narrator calls 'the ragged man'. No one likes him very much, especially because he makes fun of their going to California. "'You goin' out there, oh, Christ!' The giggling started again. 'You goin' out an' get good wages, oh, Christ!' He stopped and said slyly, 'Pickin' oranges maybe? Gonna pick peaches?' Pa's tone was dignified. "'e gonna take what they got. They got lots a stuff to work in'" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127). After Pa Joad says that, in California, they have many opportunities for people to work, the ragged man bursts out laughing and Tom asks him what is so funny about that. "Me, I'm comin' back. I been there" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127). Why would anyone return from paradise? At this point, the family begins to suspect that, in California, life would not be as according to their imagination as they thought. The ragged man explains:"This fella wants eight hunderd men. So he prints up five thousand of them things an' maybe twenty thousan' people sees 'em. An' maybe two-three thousan' folks gets movin' account a this here han'bill. Folks that's crazy with worry" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127).

Pa Joad does not get why would anyone do something like that, but the ragged man keeps on explaining. "Maybe he needs two hundred men, so he talks to five hundred, an' they tell other folks, an' when you get to the place, they's a thousan' men. This here fella says, 'I'm payin' twenty cents an hour.' An' maybe half a the men walk off" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127). Still, five hundred men would be there, the ones in the worst situation, would accept such wages, for they would accept anything."The more fellas he can get, an' the hungrier, less he's gonna pay. An' he'll get a fella with kids if he can, 'cause, hell, I says I wasn't gonna fret ya"(STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127). Then, the ragged man feels bad for all these people whose hopes he is extinguishing, so he gives them some advice when they find someone saying s/he has a job opportunity. "Ast him to write down what he's gonna pay. Ast him that. I tell you men you're gonna get fooled if you don't" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127).

Even though people listen attentively to what this man has to say, not many believe in his words. They cannot, can they? These are people who need to believe in order to keep going. Therefore, they conclude the ragged man is but a "troublemaker", this invisible foe who likes to start revolts and conflicts, with no reason, throughout the whole country. "I tried to tell you folks, somepin it took me a year to find out. Took two kids dead, took my wife dead to show me. But I can't tell you. I should of knew that. Nobody couldn't tell me, neither" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 127).

The ragged man is rather aware that this is the sort of thing people need to live in order to believe in. Within the Joads family, maybe Tom is the first one to suspect on utopian views on California. "This here's a murder country. This here's the bones of a country. Wonder if we'll ever get in a place where folks can live 'thout fightin' hard scrabble an' rocks" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 138). While driving, he speaks of these pictures he has seen, of white houses with a nice porch, where the family could pick up some oranges of their own. "'Get to thinkin' they ain't no such country.' 'I seen pitchers like that.' Pa said, 'Wait till we get to California. You'll see nice country then.' 'Jesus Christ, Pa! This here *is* California' (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 138). California is this idyllic destiny; as soon as we get there, things must be nice. The problem is that, eventually, the family does get to the place. As the narrative develops, this word, "family", gets to a much broader dimension than the one we are used to:

> The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and they took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward; and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water. And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had all come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country. Thus it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good. And when the sun went down, perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there. In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream. And it might be that a sick child threw despair into the hearts of twenty families, of a hundred people; that a birth there in a tent kept a hundred people quiet and awestruck through the night and filled a hundred people with the birth-joy in the morning. A family which the night before had been lost and fearful might search its goods to find a present for a new baby. In the evening, sitting about the fires, the twenty were one. They grew to be units of the camps, units of the evenings and the nights. A guitar unwrapped from a blanket and tuned—and the songs, which were all of the people, were sung in the nights. Men sang the words, and women hummed the tunes. Every night a world created, complete with furniture, friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 131).

Migration changes people, and creates a new paradigm of friends and enemies in the world. "The hostility changed them, welded them, united them, hostility that made the little towns group and arm as though to repel an invader, squads with pick handles, clerks and storekeepers with shotguns, guarding the world against their own people" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 192). Multiplying on the highways, soon panic surfaces in the West of the country, due to the process of migration and swollen by fear, prejudice, and ignorance. "Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry. Men who had never wanted anything very

much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 193). Certain of their own goodness, and without no direct threat coming from the migrants, people treat them as rivals, as invaders who are coming to steal their job, their land, and their dignity. "These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They're degenerate, sexual maniacs. Those goddamned Okies are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 193). The Okies are the Other, and, because they are poor, they are guilty for having no sense of property rights. Eventually, when prejudice shows its obnoxious face, everything just blends together. "They bring disease, they're filthy. We can't have them in the schools. They're strangers. How'd you like to have your sister go out with one of 'em?" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 193)

While travelling, the Joads make many friends and learn that, even though the official law and institutions such as the police and the government are there only to make things worse for them, there are still people they can believe in. "Families learned what rights must be observed […] and the families learned, although no one told them, what rights are monstrous and must be destroyed" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 132). This community that is gradually born from the union of people who are all in a situation of deprivation, is the universal kinship that working class consciousness is eager to guide us to. "The awareness of proletariat class will point to universal kinship. This universal kinship is the embryo for class struggle" (BASUKI, 2014, p. 59). Cognisant of their power, together, the working class may realise that this single person owning one million acres of land is not simply wrong or unfair, but he is also weak. The bourgeoisie breathes for it stops proletarians from getting together and fighting back until they get to a classless society – the California of Marxist thinkers. "The classless society or this utopia is the source of their spirit to give a huge challenge for the oppressor" (BASUKI, 2014, p. 60).

Economic supremacy means political supremacy: the laws of official institutions, for the characters of the novel, do not represent them, but they represent the capital. This supremacy is what "enables the bourgeoisie as the governing class to force society to accept its own ideology as the dominant one" (BASUKI, 2014, p. 60). However, the narrator of the novel also brings up the inherent contradictions of the capital, whose existence depends on cyclic crises. "The great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 161). With the land falling into fewer hands, the number of homeless and unemployed people was growing. "And when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history:

repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 161). Instead of investing in the care, housing, and feeding of minorities, the state spent money to arm the owners, protect private property, and suppress rebellions. “The changing economy was ignored, plans for the change ignored; and only means to destroy revolt were considered, while the causes of revolt went on” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 161).

As highlighted by Basuki (2014, p. 60), “Steinbeck then portrays how this economic contradiction between the capitalists and proletariat creates the conditions for the organization of proletariat leading them to become aware of their suffering and the need for revolutionary action”. In this clash between capitalists and proletariat, soulless machines, hungry for profit, are made the enemy of the weak bodies of humanity, hungry for food. “Families scampered on the highways, looking for crumbs from the great holdings, lusting after the land beside the roads. The great owners formed associations for protection and they met to discuss ways to intimidate, to kill, to gas” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 162). Choking seeds of uprisings, getting rid of troublemakers, owners’ nightmares is about the emergence of a leader: a single person capable of bringing consciousness to the three hundred thousand people who are hungry and miserable. “If they ever know themselves, the land will be theirs and all the gas, all the rifles in the world won't stop them. And the great owners, who had become through their holdings both more and less than men, ran to their destruction” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 162).

Previously, as to illustrate his/her insight, the narrator describes (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 159) how this process of knowing oneself takes place for the proletarian: “A homeless hungry man, driving with his wife beside him and his thin children in the back seat, looks at the fallow fields which might produce food but not profit, and that man knows how a fallow field is a sin and the unused land a crime against the thin children”. As this homeless and hungry man, with wife and children to feed, drives along the roads, temptation grows within his soul. He thinks of him using that land, which is not his, to produce food and to live and to enjoy. He knows how to work the land; he just does not have it. “And in the south he saw the golden oranges hanging on the trees; and guards with shotguns patrolling the lines so a man might not pick an orange for a thin child, oranges to be dumped if the price was low” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 159). The homeless hungry man knows it is not right to steal land, but he questions righteousness when what is right is to let fruits rot instead of giving them for a starving child.

For this character invented by a narrator, who only needs an example, there is no work, and for many other characters there shall be no work. In a certain way, to have a job becomes a

privilege. Tom Joad does not know that yet, when he gets to California and tells a young man that he is looking for work. “The young man paused in fitting the brace to the valve slot. He looked in amazement at Tom. ‘Lookin' for work?’ he said. ‘So you're lookin’ for work. What ya think ever’body else is lookin’ for? Di'monds?’” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 165). Compared to diamonds, readers understand how work has become a precious item for these people. Here, Tom learns that people are getting paid almost nothing to work for whole days, children and women included. “Know what they was payin’ las’ job I had? Fifteen cents an hour. Ten hours for a dollar an’ a half, an’ ya can't stay on the place. Got to burn gasoline getting’ there.’ He was panting with anger, and his eyes blazed with hate” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 165). Printing endless handbills, these foxy owners were able to make their farms flood with people looking for work. “‘You can print a hell of a lot of han’bills with what ya save payin’ fifteen cents an hour for fiel’ work.’ Tom said, ‘That's stinkin’.’The young man laughed harshly. ‘You stay out here a little while, an’ if you smell any roses, you come let me smell, too’” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 166). Unfortunately, the Joads eventually find out that there are no roses or diamonds in California.

Tired of that situation, Tom starts asking workers why they refuse to fight for what is right, and even suggest that workers go on a strike, letting all the fruit rot. At this point, he realises companies, aware of this risk, had the police at their side. When people are seen getting together, the leader of the movement is found and sent to jail, as to send a message. “An’ if they’s another leader pops up, why, they stick *‘im* in jail.’ Tom said, ‘Well, a fella eats in jail anyways.’ ‘His kids don’t. How’d you like to be in an’ your kids starvin’ to death?” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 167). Using fear as a mechanism, employers are able to maintain peace by the sort of threat that pervades the air of the farms. “So we take what we can get, huh, or we starve; an' if we yelp we starve” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 168). Tom concludes, and, when he poses that he is afraid he would not take this, this worker tells him what may happen if he does not. “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 all. You’ll see a lot of them little lines, ‘Vagrant foun’ dead” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 168). For the capital, there is no sympathy for life. Workers produce value, but have none of their own.

However, among them, this wronged people cannot help feeling such sympathy – even when it would be good for them if they did not. Readers learn that when Ma Joad shares her desperation as children appear at her door while she is cooking lunch for the family. Besides not having much food, the Joads are a large family to be fed. Regardless, she finds a way to diminish everyone’s

portion so there would be some for these kids. “They did not talk, did not fight or argue; but there was a quiet intentness in all of them, a wooden fierceness. Ma turned her back so she couldn’t see. ‘We can't do that no more,’ she said. ‘We got to eat alone’” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 175). Unfortunately, the only way to sort out this situation, is if the family ate alone, hidden from the poverty surrounding them. Just like everyone else, Ma feels there is nothing else that could be done; after all, she cannot change that political situation. “The class which owns the means of production and economic power usurps political power as well” (BASUKI, 2014, p. 60). Politics and ideology, even though not overtly addressed, emerge in every page of this book. To my reading, the definition of the word “reds” is one of the most inspiring of these moments.

> "Well, I was there. They wasn't no agitators. What they call reds. What the hell is these reds anyways?" Timothy scraped a little hill level in the bottom of the ditch. The sun made his white bristle beard shine. "They's a lot of fellas wanta know what reds is." He laughed. "One of our boys foun' out." He patted the piled earth gently with his shovel. "Fella named Hines, got 'bout thirty thousand acres, peaches and grapes—got a cannery an' a winery. Well, he's all a time talkin' about 'them goddamn reds.' 'Goddamn reds is drivin' the country to ruin,' he says, an' 'We got to drive these here red bastards out.' Well, they were a young fella jus' come out west here, an' he's listenin' one day. He kinda scratched his head an' he says, 'Mr. Hines, I ain't been here long. What is these goddamn reds?' Well, sir, Hines says, 'A red is any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we're payin' twenty-five!' Well, this young fella he thinks about her, an' he scratches his head, an' he says, 'Well, Jesus, Mr. Hines. I ain't a son-of-a-bitch, but if that's what a red is, why, I want thirty cents an hour. Ever'body does. Hell, Mr. Hines, we're all reds.'" Timothy drove his shovel along the ditch bottom, and the solid earth shone where the shovel cut it. Tom laughed. "Me too, I guess" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 203).

The crime of being “red” is the crime of knowing what is right and saying “no” to the unfair decisions of employers or government. When one listens to the definition of this “problem” and stops to think of it, it is impossible not to think that everyone should be “red”. One of the characters that we get to know in California is Floyd; and, as he attempts to organise people to fight for better conditions, his destiny is like that of any agitator. “‘Ever see this guy before, Joe?’ The deputy asked, ‘Which one?’ ‘This fella.’ The contractor pointed to Floyd. ‘What'd he do?’ The deputy smiled at Floyd. ‘He's talkin’ red, agitating trouble.’ ‘Hm-m-m’” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 179). There needs to be no law-breaking, no felony: if someone is “talking red”, police *modus operandi* is to take him/her away. “‘Ever see 'im before?’ the contractor insisted. ‘Hmm, seems like I have. Las’ week when that used-car lot was busted into. Seems like I seen this fella hangin’ aroun’. Yep! I’d swear it’s the same fella’” (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 179). Police officers feel they have been granted with the right to simply invent a previous misconduct, and the problem is solved. Naturally, the number of prisoners increases, as poverty increases, as most of the country become homeless and unemployed

Throughout the U.S.A., "they splashed out through the water, to the towns, to the country stores, to the relief offices, to beg for food, to cringe and beg for food, to beg for relief, to try to steal, to lie. And under the begging, and under the cringing, a hopeless anger began to smoulder" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 298). Sad people become hungry, hungry people become angry and, eventually, nice calm families see themselves forced to turn to desperate means. "Then sheriffs swore in deputies in droves, and orders were rushed for rifles, for tear gas, for ammunition. Then the hungry men crowded the alleys behind the stores to beg for bread, to beg for rotting vegetables, to steal when they could". (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 298). Illness magnifies, but there is no medicine for the poor and for the hungry: no doctor can cure them, there is nothing there amenable to heal. "Frantic men pounded on the doors of the doctors; and the doctors were busy. And sad men left word at country stores for the coroner to send a car. The coroners were not too busy. The coroners' wagons backed up through the mud and took out the dead" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 298). Taking out the dead, the capital keeps murdering: and so, on and on, the circle game goes.

Final remarks

According to Basuki (2014, p. 60), *The grapes of wrath* (STEINBECK, 1939) can be understood as "a book of epic dimensions in both its topic and the universal thought of socialism. It unites his concerns for the exploited poor migrant workers in California with the showing problem of the poverty of the human spirit". Indeed, without objectively manifesting any ideological stance regarding the Great Depression, the findings of this research indicate how the narrative of social revolution is built within the story. Still in the words of Basuki (2014, p. 59), "the work of art is the part of social revolution where it is applied to spread proletarian ideology". With the reference to communism being the word "red" or "reds", and the capital never called by this name, the novel calls for a proletarian ideology. Moreover, its focus on community and union may also be taken as an attempt at contributing to the spreading of such ideology. As a piece of art read overseas, one could say the book does serve this purpose. "Ever'thing we do seems to me is aimed right at goin' on. Seems that way to me. Even getting' hungry even bein' sick; some die, but the rest is tougher. Jus' try to live the day, jus' the day" (STEINBECK, 1939, p. 292). When Ma Joad says that to Pa Joad, readers get the ultimate idea of proletariat enveloping the narrative.

Now, I finish this analysis with my endeavour to answer to Whitfield's (2008, p. 4) question: "But exactly what had history done to the Joads? How should history instruct the rest of us about their suffering?" As the narrative develops, characters grow displeased with the fact that,

notwithstanding their efforts, the situation of their family never really improves, even when it seems it shall. Optimistic at the beginning, after all they want to work and, seemingly, this eagerness sounds enough, the reality impinges upon them. Eventually, deprivation, hunger, death, and fear take the Joads, but they keep on surviving, even though now completely destitute of great expectations for their future. Tougher and sadder than before, the Joad family is a picture of any proletarian family, living by instinct and accepting their fate only because everything they do in order to fight it never seems to work at all. “Beforeand after the most intense phase of the Cold War, *The Grapes of Wrath* quickly became a vessel through which the cry of the oppressed might be expressed and amplified” (WHITFIELD, 2008, p. 13). In a nutshell, this is indeed a good summary for the novel: an expression and amplification for the cry of the oppressed.

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Recebido em: *04 de agosto de 2021.*

Aprovado em: *17 de outubro de 2021.*