

JOHN STEINBECK'S PHALANX THEORY

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In 1933 Steinbeck wrote an essay entitled "Argument of Phalanx"¹ in which he discusses the relationship between the individual and the group. His theory is that there is a difference between the individual on his own and as part of a group. Since the group is a unit often "with a drive, an intent, an end, a method, a reaction which in no way resembles the same things possessed by the men who make [it] up."² Steinbeck defined such groups as "greater beasts" controlling "[their] unit-men with an iron discipline."³ The essay was influenced by the period when it was written. The world was going through great changes, with the rise in Italy, Germany, and Japan of totalitarian governments which subordinated the individual to the State; industrial unionism and the growth of large cities furthermore encouraged mass movements. The "Argument of Phalanx," a brief social and psychological study of behavior, was in a sense a reflection of the social atmosphere of the 30s.

In *Dubious Battle*⁴, which Steinbeck wrote in 1934, shows his theory in fictional form. The writer had originally intended to

write a first person narrative from the point of view of a communist labor organizer. The idea sprung from his meetings with two union leaders who were hiding in the Monterey area after helping with a strike in California's San Joaquin Valley, as told by Jackson Benson in Steinbeck's biography.⁵ The material, which involved conflicts between groups of men—the apple pickers, the farmers, and the union leaders—was perfect for an application of his phalanx theory. True to fictional form, however, the geography, facts and characters in *In Dubious Battle* are, in the writer's own words, "a composite"⁶ of the different strikes and union officials he had witnessed and met in the California in the first half of the thirties.

Steinbeck's main interest in writing his novel, however, was to make some observations about man's behavior both as an individual and as part of a group, a theme which is repeated in some other of his novels, such as *Tortilla Flat*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*. The ideal group formation, in the writer's view, is one in which the members act as individuals and at the same time contribute creatively to the formation of a harmoniously integrated whole. One of Steinbeck's recurrent symbol which expresses his concept of an ideal group formation is the communal meal, as it encompasses positive characteristics such as participation, unity among men, and sharing. Eating together, partaking a meal has always had, from primitive times, a religious meaning which stresses communion among individuals of a social group, as Freud noted in

his study of the totem meal in **Totem and Taboo**:

To eat and drink with someone was at the same time a symbol and a confirmation of social community and of the assumption of mutual obligation; the sacrificial eating gave direct expression to the fact that the god and his worshipers are communicants, thus confirming all their other relation. ⁷

In Steinbeck's novels the symbol functions as an ideal model for a phalanx which is not totalizing or overbearing. The numerous meals and references to food in **In Dubious Battle** show what happens when the atmosphere of table fellowship does not prevail in the relationships within a group; it contrasts the also numerous meals in the three novels mentioned before, which symbolize the integration of the three groups there portrayed. In **In Dubious Battle**, characterized by relationships that often lack individual human concern, there is little room for the kind of meal that brings men closer. This article will show the correlation between the kinds of meals the characters in the novel have and the essence and eventual failure of their phalanx.

The purpose of the Party leaders Jim Nolan and Mac, the main characters in **In Dubious Battle**, is to establish enduring political principles among a group of striking apple pickers in the Torgas Valley, California. Ironically, however, it is the very insistence on a closed system of rules that makes their phalanx experience

practically fail. The goals in *In Dubious Battle* are very definite, but the leaders impose them on the workers instead of encouraging creative participation. Because there is manipulation rather than communion, self interest instead of individual human concern, the phalanx Jim and Mac "deliver" (as they deliver Lisa's baby on their first night with the workers) fails as a united group. As if to stress this isolation of people and objectives, the meals in the novel lack companionship.

In this novel Steinbeck presents imagery of food and a number of meals not to express camaraderie or brotherhood, but often to show how the absence of these feelings affect the relationship among men. As Frederick Joseph Koloc points out in his study of *In Dubious Battle*, in this novel *hunger* takes the place of *celebration*, as there is nothing to celebrate.⁸ Here, more than in any other work, Steinbeck used his phalanx theory as the basic structure for plot and character development. The phalanx of striking apple-pickers, indirectly commanded by Mac and Jim, two Party members who come to the Torgas Valley from town, is an example of a destroying force, a term the writer uses in his "Argument of Phalanx" and which Richard Astro defines as groups that "devour [man's] individuality."⁹ The strikers listen to the orders and gradually assume the group's character. They are "devoured" by both the farm owners and the Party members, the two forces which, in fact, fight in the background. The meals presented in this novel illustrate

these tensions existing among the groups, as well as their isolation, stressing at the same time the difference between devouring and being devoured.

The first meal in *In Dubious Battle* is at the Party's quarters, where the five members—Harry, Dick, Jim, Joy, and Mac—eat corn beef. The way they eat their dinner reflects their emotional separation from each other: "*Each man retired to his cot to eat*" (17). The physical separation of the Party members shows that, contrary to table tradition, none of their meals promote intimate union among the participants. The Party is their main interest, not each other, so there is no need for a ritualistic consolidation.

This same interest for the Party itself and not for the strikers is what will be clear in Jim and Mac's relationship with these men. Earlier on in the novel Mac tells Jim: "*Our job's just to push along our little baby strike, if we can*" (28). In their vision, a successful strike is the most important thing, since their loyalty is to the Party, rather than to the workers.

An important aspect, however, must be taken into consideration when discussing the differences between the two characters and the strikers: Jim and Mac's hunger is of a different kind from the workers', as Koloc shows in his dissertation. He points out that "*Mac and Jim have a double hunger, a literal hunger for edible food and a personal, emotional hunger for the action their work provides.*"¹⁰ In Jim's own words, he "was hungry" for the tranquillity the commu-

nists he had met in prison had. Mac, similarly, felt a similar hunger the time he spent out of action:

*I took a leave and went into the woods in Canada.
Say, in a couple of days I came running out of there.
I wanted trouble, I was hungry for a mess... (298)*

This difference separates them from the group whose hunger is basically physical, although the workers have ideas of their own too and cannot be merely treated as "men with stomachs," as Doc, the camp doctor, observes. He sees that Mac overlooks the possibility of these men only being commanded by their hunger:

You practical men always lead practical men with stomachs. And something always gets out of hand, they don't follow the rules of common sense, and you practical men either deny, or refuse to think about it. And when someone wonders what it is that makes a man with a stomach something more than your rule allows, why you howl "Dreamer, mystic, metaphysician." (133)

Significantly, Mac's answer to Doc shows how he can only see the men as pieces on a chessboard which are moved about for the good of the cause: "We've a job to do," Mac insisted. "We've got no time to mess around with high-falutin ideas." (Ibid) Mac, in fact, looks down on the workers, and fails to understand them as individuals like himself or Jim:

This bunch of bums isn't keyed up. I hope to Christ something happens to make 'em mad before long. This is going to fizzle out if something don't happen (145).

This difference, again, can be traced to the fact that Jim and Mac do not arise as natural leaders from the apple-picker community: they are strangers who force their way into a group of workers but who never really become part of it. Furthermore, unlike the workers, who have a closer relationship to the land, the two leaders come together from town and can only understand the strike rationally. This strangeness is reflected in the separate meals the Party leaders have.

The relationship between food and group discussed in the article "Ethnic foodways in America: Symbol and Performance of Identity" is pertinent to the function of food in *In Dubious Battle*. Food, the writer of the article remarks, "*has two social functions, namely: to maintain the cohesion of the society and of group within it; to determine, in part, the relation of the individual to the society and to the smaller group within it.*"¹¹ This division also operates in Steinbeck's novel. The food the Party fights to provide the strikers has the function to maintain the cohesion of the group: while there is food they will keep the strike going. As for the second characteristic, the separate meals Mac and Jim eat determine their relation to the group of workers: one of superiority, since they often eat better food than that the Party gets for the strikers. While the workers eat stew, mush, raw pig, beans "swimming in pork fat" (171), Jim

and Mac often have hamburgers, ham or cheese sandwiches, a can of sardines. They once hide in their tent, away from the others' eyes, to eat. The selfishness of their ideals is reflected in their meals, both at the Party's quarters and on the camp. Food differentiates them from the other men. Instead of communion it emphasizes isolation. They consciously exclude themselves from the group.

Still in the same article, the author, Susan Kalcik, points out how food code can be used to express rank or hierarchy within groups: "*Eating together or eating similar foods in similar ways are expressions of equality. [...] Reserving certain special foods [...] would clearly indicate a lack of equality.*"¹² Ironically, Jim and Mac, by often choosing not to partake of the strikers' poor diet, reproduce the social inequality practiced by the farm owners they deplore. The pettiness of their attitude toward food is ridiculed in the scene where they share a can of sardines, while the men, their stock of food practically running out, eat beans "swimming in port fat." The passage can be read as a parody of the miracle of the multiplication of the fish: in Steinbeck's novel the Party leaders are unable, in their selfishness, to share their food with the others. At the same time, their methods of getting food for the strikers seem doomed to fail too: they are always fighting scarcity of food, incapable, as they are, of "multiplying" it. The eucharistic principle implied in the multiplication of the fish, with all men made one by the sharing of the same belief, is absent from this strike.

The workers are manipulated by Mac and Jim, manipulation that reaches a near religious climax when Mac incites the people to fight by keying them up with speeches similar to a preacher's, as Doc Burton observes:

"You surely know how to work them, Mac," he said quietly. No preacher ever brought people to the mourner's bench quicker. Why didn't you keep it up awhile? You'd have had them talking in tongues and holy rolling in a minute." (206)

But if they do not regard the workers as people like them, Mac (the older leader) develops towards Jim a sincere affection, which compensates for the lack of love or real concern for the others as individuals. This affection is revealed first in his constant worry to protect the young man who insistently asks "to be used" by the Party; second, in his sharing of whatever he has got to eat with him: sandwiches, chocolate bars, sardines, bread. His true self, as Fontenrose calls it, almost takes over his Party persona:

Mac [...] is a thoroughly dedicated Party worker, when we first meet him: he judges every person, object, and event in terms of Party advantage, advising Jim not to like people and discouraging his interest in stars and insects. He has deliberately suppressed his true self to shape himself in the Party image. Gradually, however, his true self shows through: he gives way to passions, as no Party worker should do, and his affection for Jim becomes more and more evident.

With Jim he is capable of developing a relationship based on respect, even if his Party persona wins at the end.¹⁴ There is the only possibility approached in the novel of an enabling relationship a phalanx should be based on. But even Mac's sincere feelings for his comrade end up by being taken over by his loyalty to the Party's principles, as his use of Jim's death to incite the strikers shows. Once again, a possibility of communion is abortive.

Not even the woman who represents the Earth Mother, a recurrent symbol in Steinbeck's fiction, provides generous nourishment, as Teresinha Ruiz in *Tortilla Flat*, Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Dora in *Cannery Row*. Liza, the young wife of one of the workers, who is constantly nursing her baby, is unable to share Jim's thoughts or loneliness. She even once misinterprets his gesture of sitting next to her as sexual approach and rejects him. Although a mother, Liza in fact represents the emotional sterility that surrounds the strike. It is interesting that Steinbeck should choose a married woman who had just had a baby to place opposite to Jim, who is himself proud of his own sterility:

I'm stronger than you, Mac. I'm stronger than anything in the world, because I'm going in a straight line. You and all the rest have to think of women and tobacco and liquor and keeping warm and fed. (249)

Jim's repression makes him a perfect member for the Party,

which demands all the energy, even the sexual, to be channeled into work. Liza represents no danger because she is characterized only as a mother. She is not to be consumed. Their inability to truly communicate—both on the intellectual and sexual levels—reflects the dubious objective of the strike.

Also among the workers the atmosphere is one of isolation and animosity. The camp meals attest to that: the emphasis is on the fact of food itself, and not on the men being together sharing it. There is no spirit of community in their meals. Sometimes they don't even sit to eat, but stroll away "gnawing at the soft meat" (157). The workers get in line to get their food—the meals have a regimental atmosphere rather than of a communal meal. In the scene where the slaughtered calves and cow arrive at the camp, the animalistic atmosphere is brought to a climax, with the hungry crowd following, step by step, the preparation of their meal. The violence which characterizes all action on the camp is present in the way the scene is described:

The cooks came through the crowd. The animals were hung to the lower branches of the trees, entrails scooped out, skins ripped off. Mac cried, "London, don't let them waste anything. Save all the bones and heads and feet for soup." A pan of hacked pieces of meat went to the pit, and the crowd followed, leaving the butchers more room to work. (217)

The strikers' meals seem to imply that these men, in their

social condition, are animals themselves, eating raw meat because they are too hungry to wait for it to cook properly. The California agricultural system treats them like animals, and, as Koloc points out, "[it] herds them around like sheep and treats them like pigs."¹⁵ The economic order devours them; they are defeated by excess of work and scarcity of food. The political system, as represented by the Party leaders, also devours them by ignoring their individuality to achieve an end. Mac, for example, admits that he cannot think of the feelings of one man: "I'm too busy with big bunches of men" (183).

Because the phalanx of the apple pickers is induced to go on strike and incited to act violently against scabs and farm owners alike, it fails to get positive results, as Clifford L. Lewis suggests in

*"John Steinbeck: Architect of the Unconscious":
 "...their phalanx is rather impotent and is caught between the self-interest of Capitalism and Communism."*¹⁶

In Richard Astro's words, Mac and Jim are also swallowed, by the Party itself,¹⁷ since its main demand is man's own individuality,¹⁸ symbolized in the novel by Jim's assassination by the farm owners and government people. Steinbeck, in a letter to William Needham, explains that some of the people who take part in strikes "are heroic and immolative to the point of the Christian martyrs."¹⁹ Jim's death, then, is a sacrifice (he keeps telling Mac, "Use me")

offered to his god, the Party, so that the movement may survive. In *In Dubious Battle* the sacrifice but not the communion sets the dominant tone. The sacrifice, in fact, defines the relationship between the leaders and the Party: it is one of submission and self-denial, since in sacrificing one gives up something valuable. A communion, on the other hand, implies participation—one communes with others. There is a relationship of equality rather than of submission.

Jim's death is strikingly similar to the calves slaughtering earlier on in the novel. The animals are killed by a blow on their necks; Jim's face is blown away by a bullet. The substitute sacrifice of animals²⁰ and the leader's death are also alike in so far as both are transformed into food to feed the phalanx. Just as the workers, after the bloody slaughtering, eat the meat of the animals, Jim's body is symbolically offered to them by Mac, who places it on a platform and uses the Party discourse in yet another effort to encourage a commitment to the cause. Mac and Jim's failure to bring salvation to the Torgas Valley world can be attributed to their tendency to sacrifice the phalanx for political interests; what unity is achieved appears in the strikers becoming "a group monster"²¹, keyed up to fight and kill only for the sake of violence. In the group's destructive drive lies its own destruction. The dubious battle which lacks perspective and direction has, in fact, no winners. The leaders, if mostly devouring the workers, are also devoured by the demands of the Party, which

expects them to submit their true self to the cause. The workers, consumed by their violent acts and incited by the leaders, lose their identity and dignity. Both groups are a proof that "coldness, selfishness and lack of sympathy block man from achieving his goals."²² If the fellowship characteristic of the ritual meal ceases to exist, the unit will disintegrate too: *In Dubious Battle*, as we can see, ends in "self-neutralizing ambivalence."²³

Although often referred to as one of the most significant strike novels of the thirties, *In Dubious Battle* cannot be classified as a proletarian or even primarily a political book.²⁴ Steinbeck's objective was clearly to explore the psychology of mobs. The novelist, however, was undoubtedly critical of the big farm owners who exploited small farmers and migrant workers alike, and of the stranglehold taken upon the land by absentee financiers, as mentioned by Brian Lee in *American Fiction 1865-1940*.²⁵ But despite sympathizing with the victims of the system, he could not accept the dubious methods used by the Left to achieve their goals. The portrait of Jim and Mac confirm such opinion: Steinbeck refuses to cast his characters in a heroic mold, and, according to his biographer Jackson Benson, "in doing so he makes his story more believable."²⁶

To recognize the actual heroism of his models would have been impossible—too many Marxist melodramas had been written over the years that automatically cast the labor leaders as heroes and the capitalists as villains. Anything that smacked of this same

routine would have been perceived as propaganda. Indeed, the book's reputation for realism rests to a considerable extent on the author's relatively harsh treatment of its labor-leader characters. ²⁷

It is only a few years later with **The Grapes of Wrath** that Steinbeck presents a phalanx composed of labor leaders and migrant workers overcoming difficulties through mutual cooperation. This sharing, the function of the communal meal, is the basic value of Steinbeck's model phalanx as opposed to the attitude of the group portrayed in **In Dubious Battle**, in which the main characters, although concerned with the welfare of the working people, see that welfare in political terms, not in terms of the immediate well-being of specific individuals around them. ²⁸

NOTES

- ¹ The phalanx theory is discussed in letters Steinbeck wrote to his friends Carlton A. Scheffield and George Albee. *STEINBECK AND WALLSTEN* (1975) pp. 74-82. Richard Astro also dedicates a chapter of *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: the Shaping of a Novelist* to the same theme.
- ² Steinbeck & Wallsten. (1975) p. 75.
- ³ "Argument of Phalanx" quoted in Astro. (1973) p. 65.
- ⁴ Steinbeck. (1973) Subsequent citation from this book refer to this edition and are identified by page number in the text.
- ⁵ Benson. (1984) p. 296.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- ⁷ Freud. (1938) p. 910.
- ⁸ Koloc. (1974) p. 202.
- ⁹ Astro. (1973) p. 70.
- ¹⁰ Koloc. (1974) p. 202.
- ¹¹ Kalcik. (1985) p. 48.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ¹³ Fontenrose. (1963) p. 43.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Koloc. (1974) p. 206.
- ¹⁶ Lewis. (1972) p. 128.

- ¹⁷ Astro. (1973) p. 73.
- ¹⁸ Lewis. (1972) p. 129.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Lewis (1972) p. 127.
- ²⁰ Fontenrose. (1963) p. 51.
- ²¹ Wallis. (1966) p. 154.
- ²² Ibid., p. 157.
- ²³ Astro. (1973) p. 128.
- ²⁴ Lee. (1987) p. 163.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Benson. (1984) p. 303.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.

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