

## **The Empowerment of Jim: The phalanx theory in *In Dubious Battle***

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### **Introduction**

*In Dubious Battle* is the least known work of John Steinbeck, which was published in 1936 when Steinbeck was 34 years old. The novel depicts the fabric of the relationships among a group of strikers. After the WWII, apart from strikers' conflict and life, critics began to pay attention to Steinbeck's idea of group mentality called the phalanx theory, and read some of his works in relation to the theory. They saw an influence of group mentality in *In Dubious Battle*, but their readings were limited to protesting the employer, emphasizing how group mentality manipulates the workers.

Previous critics have focused on the nature of strikes, the problem of labor issues, and the correspondence between the phalanx theory and the collision of strikers with the landowners. Because of their one-dimensional view, they have failed to observe the development of individual workers. To understand Steinbeck's true intention of writing *In Dubious Battle*, it is necessary to see how he reveals his idea about the book in his letters. Steinbeck writes to his friend, George Albee, about *In Dubious Battle*, "... but I have used an orchard valley as the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself" (Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters* 98). Unlike the conventional view on the valley as a means of giving credibility to the novel, Steinbeck uses the valley as a place of presenting the collision of man's self-love and self-hate. Rather than writing the history of fighting labor, Steinbeck writes about a unique individual, denying the universal strategy for personal growth. It is totally up to the suffering individual to figure out which pathway is theirs and where it leads. In fact, Steinbeck clearly states, "I'm not interested in strike as means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition" (98). This statement endorses his way of character building. Moreover, to explain the theme of the novel, Steinbeck refers to his use of John Milton's line from *Paradise Lost*, "It is called Dubious Battle from the lines in the first part of the argument of *Paradise Lost*" (99). This essay will delve into characters' development to clarify how and why Steinbeck presents this novel, and discusses how Jim Nolan, who is novice organizer wanting to start new life by joining the Communist party, is stimulated and empowered by group mentality to become an established party-man. The

close examination of the Phalanx Theory helps us read Jim more comprehensibly. Influenced by group mentality, Jim obtains self-confidence, motivation to fight against opponents, and most importantly reaches a conclusion that he is an essential part of the workers' group both mentally and physically.

### **Relationship between Jim and Strikers**

Jim develops as a communist organizer, as he gets training and education from Mac, who is to become his mentor for the Communist movement. After he finishes his training, he becomes independent and takes the responsibility of conducting a strike, making an impassioned speech. Indeed, his relationship with Mac is one important phase of his development, but he builds up his strength through his contacts with a group of strikers. Steinbeck explains group mentality in his unpublished essay, "Argument of Phalanx" and critics see that the phalanx theory is represented in the group-man scene in *In Dubious Battle*. In 1933, Steinbeck explains:

We have thought of mankind always in terms of individual men. We have tried to study men and movements of men by minute investigation of individual men units. We might as reasonably try to understand the nature of a man by investigating the cells of his body. Perhaps if we observe the phalanx, knowing it is a new individual, not to be confined within the units which comprise it, if we look back at the things it has done in an attempt to correlate and analyze its habits under various stimuli, we may in time come to know something of the phalanx, of its nature, of its drive and its ends, we may even be able to direct its movements where now we have only great numbers of meaningless, unrelated and destructive phenomena. (Argument of Phalanx 3)<sup>1</sup>

In "The Vigilante" (first published as "The Lonesome Vigilante") his earlier novel in 1934, Steinbeck also shows the nature of group mentality in describing how a person becomes lonely when he separates from a group. Comparing *In Dubious Battle* with "The Vigilante," Richard Astro sees that Steinbeck writes a person's "group involvement" results in "the destruction of the self" (69). In his further discussion, Astro importantly points out that "*In Dubious Battle* ends in self-neutralizing ambivalence" (128). Marcia Salazar agrees with Astro's view. Expanding on Astro's argument on the negative aspect of group mentality, Christopher Berardino points out "In the novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936) these collectives of

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<sup>1</sup> The passage of the Phalanx Theory is taken from San Jose State University's website (Jeanette Rumsby, "Steinbeck's Philosophy." *Steinbeck in the Schools*. San Jose State U, 2016, <http://sits.sjsu.edu/context/philosophical-influences/>. Accessed 12 May 2017) and Steinbeck's original writing is stored in Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, SJSU.

men almost always either exploit or endanger one another" (2). On the other hand, Jon Falsarella Dawson sees the positive effect of group mentality as "a means to combat landowners" (139) for labor, and interprets:

When operating as a unit, the pickers have a combined strength that enables them to restrain their adversaries' repressive inclinations and temporarily destabilize the conventional power relations in the Torgas Valley. (139)

In fact, the phalanx theory functions differently for each person. Group mentality indeed empowers Jim to fight against difficulties but discourages the leader when the workers become weak-spirited. The phalanx theory can be a double-edged sword, having both benefits and disadvantages.

Although F. W. Watt sees that "the author's [Steinbeck's] point of view is larger than Burton's" (56-57), Burton acts as a spokesman for Steinbeck. Reading the reflection of Steinbeck's own ideas in Burton's words, Peter Lisca points out that passages of *Sea of Cortez* (1951) also represent the developed idea of group mentality (119-21). Indeed, Steinbeck writes in his letter (1933):

All of the notations I have made begin to point to an end—That the group is an individual as boundaried, as diagnosable, as dependent on its units and as independent of its units' individual natures, as the human unit, or man, is dependent on his cells and yet is independent of them. (75)

Burton explains the nature of group-man: "A man in a group isn't himself at all; he's a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you" (113). Steinbeck and Burton are similar in understanding that each person of a group loses his individuality, though he is an important component. He no longer thinks and is obedient and servile to his leader. Early critics argue Jim's integration of himself into a group entirely differently. Claude-Edmonde Magny sees that Jim with Mac "voluntarily give up their individuals" (220). Lisca also states that Jim as well as Mac "voluntarily renounces their individuality" (121). Both explain Jim's resolution to become a party-man as voluntary, but Jim recognizes that he never loses his identity in relationship with other members.

When Burton discusses the idea of communism with Mac and Jim, Burton expresses his distrust of Mac. Burton says to Mac "You might be an expression of group-man, a cell endowed with a special function, like an eye cell, drawing your force from group-man, and at the same time directing him, like an eye. Your eye both takes orders from and gives orders to your brain" (Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* 114). Burton understands that Mac is the leader of strikers as well as part of them. Mac does not realize that he has lost his true self and has been overwhelmed by the group of strikers. Burton perceives that Mac leads

the strikers without knowing that he is a part of them. Mac does not think that he acts under the influence of strikers but thinks that he manipulates them.

Mac functions as the brain of the strikers, urging them to demand growers to raise their wages. When prospects for the slumped strike is not clear, Mac stirs up strikers. He uses the dead body of Joy, a punch-drunk veteran communist, to boost the morale among the strikers. "He didn't want nothing for himself. He was a radical! ... A dirty bastard, a danger to the government. ... The cops done that because he was a radical. His hands were broke, an' his jaw was broke. ... Dump him in a mud-hole, cover him with slush. Forget him" (177). He knows perfectly well how to stimulate the strikers into activity. Joy is killed by vigilantes who are on the side of the growers. Mac's use of Joy's body as a victim of the growers' nasty tricks spurs the discouraged workers strike.

Both London and Mac seem to lead the group of strikers, but actually they do not usually display strong leadership. Taking Joy's body to the grave yard, Dan, an ex-woodcutter and veteran migrant worker with knowledge of union activities, importantly points out that "They [strikers] never had nobody to tell 'em what to do. They never had no real leader" (171). Mac takes advantage of London because London wins the trust of the strikers. As Dan sees, London and Mac fail to grasp their subordinate strikers. Mac and London, though they accumulate experience, do not perfectly understand the group mentality. This suggests the frailty of the group of strikers.

After Mr. Anderson's barn is burned and Sam retaliates against it, setting the grower's house on fire, the situation gradually worsens. Losing courage, exhausted and depressed workers have difficulty in attaining unity. When Jim observes that workers become quiet, Mac and London point out the group-man's habit as inconstant and easily swayed. Even veteran strikers who went through many events with workers cannot predict how they will act. Mac admits that "It's damn funny about a bunch of men, how they act. You can't tell. ... They get steamed up, an' then, all of a sudden, they're scared as hell" (210). London agrees with Mac, saying "I've saw a bunch of guys run like rabbits when a truck back-fired. Other times, seems like nothin' can scare 'em" (210-11). Even these veterans cannot see what is going on in the mind of the group of strikers.

Even though the group of strikers does not succeed in continuing their activity, they help Jim's awakening, making him feel an important member of the entity. The factor of creating the entity is "religious ecstasy" (198). When Jim talks with Burton about his injured shoulder, the topic of conversation changes to religious belief. Burton says Jim has "something religious" and finds Jim is happy, adding, "It's the vision of Heaven" (157). They talk about troops. Jim asks Burton, "Do you get that, Doc? Like that—like troops and troops marching into you? And you closing around them?" (157). Recognizing himself as a

member of a troop and becoming a fanatic for activism, Jim begins to feel the influence of the group on individuals. It is the first step to Jim's awakening to power.

Strikers can be enthusiastic about their mission; however, it is clear that there is a lack of a sense of mission with the food shortage, the strikers become extremely lethargic:

An apathy had fallen on the men. They sat staring in front of them. They seemed not to have the energy to talk, and among them the bedraggled, discontented women sat. They were listless and stale. They gnawed thoughtfully at their meat, and when it was finished, wiped their hands on their clothes. The air was full of their apathy, and full of their discontent. (137)

The strikers easily break down when it comes to daily necessities. They are more content with happy living than accomplishment of the mission.

Once strikers feel motivated when they get food, Jim observes the excitement of the group. Steinbeck describes in detail how it begins to show signs of life: "Jim, looking at the crowd, saw it stir to life, it swirled. An excited commotion overcame it. The mob eddied, broke and started back to the truck" (182). Steinbeck also describes Mac's observation of the crowd:

Mac turned and looked out through the rear window of the cab at the crowd. They came boiling out of the cemetery in a wave. They broke on the road, hurrying along, filling the road, while the cops vainly tried to keep a passage clear for automobiles. The jubilant men mocked them and pushed them and surged around them, laughing like children. (183)

The strikers are swayed by sentiment and carried away by a passing emotion, hunger or fear. Therefore, Mac and London decide that they cannot obey the commands from their bosses.

Even though these disorderly strikers do not work together much, Jim escapes from feeling isolation. Before entering a new phase of having disturbances, the state of affairs is still unimproved, in the conversation with Burton about "the angry crowd roar," Jim explains his release from loneliness. He says, "They're mad. Jesus, how a mad crowd can fill the air with madness. You don't understand it, Doc. My old man used to fight alone. When he got locked, he was licked. I remember how lonely it was. But I'm not lonely any more, and I can't be licked, because I'm more than myself" (199-200). He is confident and aware that he is becoming independent, announcing farewell to his past memories. Jim felt he was a lone individual before he became a party-man, but he can finally grasp the group mentality because he enters into the group of strikers. It is necessary that he recognizes that he is a party-man and a cell of a group as well as an individual.

When Burke complains of their simple food and suspects that London conceals some

food cans in his tent, London gets furious and beats Burke hard until he draws blood with the aim of purging him as a disloyal element. Observing Burke's bloody head, the crowd is triggered into excitement and shows explosiveness and stamina to win the strike. Burke functions as a blood sacrifice to the victory of the strike and in addition, warms up the crowd to create a voluntary movement. Earlier in the novel, Dan reveals to Jim his fear of group-man's behavior before the strike starts: "I hope I'm dead before it happens. They'll be bitin' out throats with their teeth. They'll kill each other off an' after they're all wore out or dead, it'll be the same thing again. I want to die and get shut of it" (53). Dan is afraid of the group-man's nature from his experience. Furthermore, he expresses his anxiety: if he encounters the fear of group-man again, he chooses death because group-man's action frightens him.

Rather than feeling fear from the group-man's action, Jim sees that they are falling into a trance at the sight of the rapidly changing crowd. To stay out of the crowd's abnormal mobbing, Jim talks to himself, "Don't get caught. Don't get caught. Don't let it catch you. Use your head" (248), though he is actually enraptured. His facial expression as overwhelmed and enchanted shows that Jim is certainly melting into the group mentality.

Jim reports to Mac about the enthusiastic strikers' movement which occurs while Mac slept. Excited, Jim describes the group of strikers as "one animal." He warns Mac and himself not to get involve in the group of violent people. He insists that he himself should think carefully outside the group-man. Excusing himself for not waking Mac, he says, "It was like all of them disappeared, and it was just one big—animal, going down the road. Just all one animal. I nearly was there. I wanted to go, and then I thought, 'You can't. You've got to use your head'" (248). Mac approves of Jim's discovery. Then emphasizing fully developed figure of the group of people and their mentality, he says, "That's right, what you said. It *is* a big animal. It's different from the men in the it. And it's stronger than all the men put together" (249). Mac goes on to express his idea about the group mentality:

That's not what I mean. The *animal* don't want the barricade. I don't know what it wants. Trouble is, guys that study people always think it's men, and it isn't men. It's a different kind of animal. It's as different from men as dogs are. Jim, it's swell when we can use it, but we don't know enough. When it gets started it might do anything." His face was alive and excited, and slightly fearful. (249)

This idea conforms with Burton's awareness of the features of group-man. While Jim and Mac understand that group-man as animals at last, Burton noticed that group-man as a herd with a shared characteristic much earlier, saying "Why don't people look at mobs not as men, but as men? A mob nearly always seems to act reasonably, for a mob" (114). As stated above, Steinbeck writes about a group of people that has an independent existence,

like Burton sees a mob as one big unit.

Jim shows further development when he joins strikers, which leads to his empowerment. He gains power, stamina, belief, confidence, motivation, and leadership during his contacts with fellow strikers. Steinbeck's idea of group mentality is a key to Jim's changing into an independent striker acting as a leader, not a mere member of strikers without community spirit or a sense of strong unity.

### Conclusion

Steinbeck develops his idea about group mentality in his letter to George Albee in 1933. He states his final realization about a person's loss of his identity, in comparing an artist to "the spokesman of the phalanx": "when a man hears great music, sees great pictures, reads great poetry, he loses his identity in that of the phalanx" (81). Comparing the phalanx with a "creature," he adds:

You can't find a reason for doing certain things. You couldn't possibly find a reason. You are dealing with a creature whose nature you cannot know intellectually, of whose emotions you are ignorant. Whose reasons, directions, means, urges, pleasures, drives, satieties, ecstasies, hungers and tropisms are not yours as an individual. (81)

Individuals believe that they will never lose their selves even in working as a member of a group, but actually they are overawed by the group. As shown in *In Dubious Battle* as an experimental work about the phalanx theory, group mentality functions both positively and negatively.

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