

John Steinbeck's writing has generated, over the years, somewhat contradictory responses. To be sure, Steinbeck is a well-known author whose works have withstood the test of time and remain popular and commercially successful to this day. However, they have also been heavily criticized, particularly his Great Depression works that deal with "proletarian" matters. In aesthetic terms, Steinbeck's work has been described as superficial or sentimental, but he was also heavily criticized for his politics. At the time of its publication, Steinbeck's critique of the socio-economic situation in the U.S. was often interpreted as un-American, communist, Marxist, traitorous, or otherwise dangerous. His most popular novels are very politically charged and controversial, which is one reason why he was not treated with the same respect as contemporaneous American writers such as William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, or Ernest Hemingway. To this day, his work isn't often taught beyond the high school level, and relatively few dissertations, articles, and books are written about it. Even when he received the Nobel Prize in Literature the decision was heavily criticized, with many arguing that Steinbeck is unworthy of the prize.

Steinbeck's distinct political stance, which runs through his entire body of work-- even those of his works which are seemingly nonpolitical-- has often been misunderstood. This dissertation suggests a new way to read Steinbeck, one which liberates him from old misconceptions and brings to light the unique qualities of his socio-economic critique and worldview. While Steinbeck refused to label himself politically, I argue that his approach (not only to politics but to life) is inspired by *anarchism*, which is itself a distinct and often misunderstood doctrine. Anarchism is a philosophy which rejects the legitimacy of formal authority and hierarchy, particularly in the form of government, and upholds the notions of equality, personal liberty and self-government in small communities. This philosophy undergirds much of Steinbeck's work.

Revealing the anarchist sensibilities in Steinbeck's writing may put to rest accusations that he is a communist or a propagandist but raises new questions. Anarchism is an even more radical philosophy than those with which Steinbeck was wrongly associated, such as Marxism, and according to popular belief, it is more traitorous and dangerous as well. However, contrary to this belief, anarchism is a rich and complex philosophy which goes beyond the misconceived popular image of chaotic violence. Anarchism has a vision of a society which is non-capitalistic, non-hierarchical and non-coercive. Interestingly, some of the ideas presented in Steinbeck's work, such as the emphasis on community, solidarity and mutual aid, not only reflect this vision but were ahead of their time, as in the course of the 20th century they became key concepts in anarchism. Examples of this are the focus on nature and ecology, alternative systems of economy and alternative lifestyles such as squatting and dumpster diving.

The aim of this dissertation is not to attach a new label to old stories. Rather, it is to explore Steinbeck's narratives through an anarchist perspective, intending to elucidate his political voice as well as show that his holistic vision transcends the Great Depression and its unique issues and challenges. For this exploration, the dissertation turns to Steinbeck's primary works (*In Dubious Battle*, *Tortilla Flat*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*) as well as adaptations made of his works (John Ford's film *The Grapes of Wrath*, Bruce Springsteen's album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Rage Against the Machine's "The Ghost of Tom Joad" and James Franco's film *In Dubious Battle*). This enables a wide perspective on the way Steinbeck's political vision inspired various creators and evolved over time, and how it remained relevant through different political circumstances.

Literature is essential to anarchism, because a key concept in anarchism is the idea of prefiguration, meaning envisioning a new world while existing in the old; anarchists claim that people should lead the life they believe in rather than wait for a day after the election or

after the revolution. Thus, anarchism is a philosophy which is largely based on the imagination, on the belief that another world than that in which we live, is possible. This is why, as various anarchist scholars and authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Jeff Shantz and David Graeber emphasize, literature plays a significant role in the anarchist tradition. It helps inspire people to imagine a different reality and, thus, to create it.

Anarchist literature doesn't have to be written by writers who label themselves anarchists; as Nathan Jun suggests, a text can be considered anarchist if it demonstrates a synergy of radical antiauthoritarianism and radical egalitarianism. In addition, Jeff Shantz explains that anarchist literature often tends to experiment in style and form, make use of humor and satire, depict resistance as non-heroic and make use of colloquial speech, all of which are characteristics of Steinbeck's narratives. However, my discussion of the anarchist elements in Steinbeck's work isn't meant to place him within a so-called anarchist literary canon but to show his contribution to the anarchist imagination, which is what later enables his narratives to be incorporated into political activism of the turn of the 21st century, his narratives constantly evolving thanks to the various adaptations.

I begin my discussion with explaining what anarchism stands for and briefly reviewing its history, particularly in the United States. I show that contrary to popular belief, anarchism isn't as foreign to the U.S. as is often thought. Elements of anarchist thought can be traced back to the first days of settlement in the U.S., and undoubtedly American figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau have often expressed anarchist ideas in their writing (with Thoreau considered by anarchists as a leading influence). Thus, I explain that the connection between Steinbeck and anarchism is reasonable and most definitely doesn't mean that his writing is "un-American". Anarchism existed in the United States as a coherent political philosophy from the mid-19th century, throughout the entire 20th century, and into the 21st, when according to anarchist scholars such as Bray, Graeber and Grubačić it

has become the most significant among radical ideologies, standing at the center of the period's political activism.

The anarchist elements in Steinbeck's writing are clearly apparent even in his works which aren't overtly political. My analysis of *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, two short novels considered to be the most comic and lighthearted in Steinbeck's repertoire, shows the way Steinbeck's works prefigure a new world, one which is communal and equal, in which people govern themselves with no need for formal authority or coercion. Since *Tortilla Flat* is one of Steinbeck's earliest novels and *Cannery Row* one of the latest, they indicate Steinbeck's consistency of vision which is not affected by nor is a reaction to specific political events. In both novels, he describes non-capitalistic communities that run on solidarity and mutual aid, emphasizing friendship and personal connection over material possessions. Steinbeck upholds a closeness to nature, presents alternative monetary systems and innovatively describes squatting and dumpster diving which have become commonplace anarchist practices several decades after the publication of these novels.

Moving on to *The Grapes of Wrath* and John Ford's film version, I argue that the novel's true radical spirit is even more apparent when analyzing what the film producers chose to omit from it. Thanks to the novel's great success, the film was produced shortly after the book's publication. However, its controversial nature and the many heated reactions to the novel, which included questioning Steinbeck's credibility and threats on his life, meant that its political radicalism had to be toned down in the film, to avoid public outrage. The creators of the film chose to shift the novel's critical tone, which consistently highlights the faults of capitalism, the importance of mutual aid and the ability of people to live in solidarity with each other without formal authority, portrayed as violent and corrupt.

Instead, their story depicts the Great Depression as a temporary and unfortunate crisis in the nation's history, one which can be overcome with the government's guidance and the people's resilience. The people can't govern themselves because they turn hostile to one another and don't know what to do without a leader. In the film, those saviors are agents of formal authority, as well as Tom Joad. The novel's Tom Joad is a complex character who is part good, part bad, who isn't always right and ends his role in the story as an escaping vigilante, scared and somewhat lost. In the film Tom turns into a god-like figure, a charismatic leader and hero, who leaves his family to spread his goodness among the people. The story is changed to amplify his heroism and instill in the viewers a different kind of hope than the novel's. Here, hope stems from authority; whether it is the government or a leader like Tom Joad, they will lead the nation out of trouble, quite the opposite from the final tone of the novel and its anarchist vision.

The next adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* was created several decades later, with Bruce Springsteen's 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. At this point, I argue, Steinbeck's narrative and anarchistic vision weren't only reiterated but also evolved and made an active contribution to the political concerns and struggles of the 1990s. Springsteen conjured up the image of the Joads to start a discussion on the "New World Order", using the novel as a vehicle to express himself politically with a sense of anti-authoritarianism and egalitarianism. Springsteen changed his performative style from big rock concerts to acoustic, intimate, folkly concerts to effectively convey his anarchist sensibility to his audience. He does that to remind them that despite the impression of prosperity, for many Americans life hasn't changed since the Depression, and has even gotten worse, implying that the sense of hope given by such narratives as John Ford's film was false.

Steinbeck focused on one group of people, the Okies, but Springsteen uses the narrative to broaden the discussion, and represent and give a voice to minority groups such as

Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, single mothers and others living in poverty. The faults of capitalism, which promises a lot but delivers to very few, still exist, but by the 1990s, new problems have stemmed in relation to this system: illegal immigration, various criminal offenses, drugs, prostitution, and, as Springsteen sees it, great loneliness. Steinbeck allows him to convey this critique.

In 1998, Springsteen fans Rage Against the Machine, a band with a long-established history of political activism, saw the radical potential in Springsteen's album and decided to cover the title song, "The Ghost of Tom Joad", to radicalize Tom Joad further, turning the song from an acoustic ballad to an angry, electric rock anthem. Rage Against the Machine are anti-authoritarian, harsh critics of fascism and capitalism in America, of the work market, and the United States' immigration policy; they are fierce supporters of Mexican Zapatismo, have participated in countless protests and supported picket lines, and use their concerts and videos to express themselves politically. In a way, the incorporation of Tom Joad into their repertoire gives the character a kind of closure for his "I'll be there" speech at the end of the novel.

Rage take Tom on an activist journey, fulfilling his promises of solidarity.

Indeed, Tom was "there"; after Rage's countless performances of the song worldwide, Bruce Springsteen and Rage guitarist Tom Morello created a new electric version of it which they often performed together, usually using the opportunity to also give a short speech on social justice usually before the performance. In 2011, Morello took the song on his "Occupy" tour, performing it on various Occupy Wall Street spots he visited to support protesters. Springsteen and Rage Against the Machine understood the explosive, radical potential of the narrative and the character of Tom Joad. Rather than portray him as a majestic leader, they made him into a political activist, thus connecting Steinbeck's vision of the 1930s with their own reaction to the turn of the 21st-century political reality, enriching the original narrative.

The final adaptation I explore is James Franco's 2016 film adaptation of *In Dubious Battle*, one of Steinbeck's early works. Franco's approach to adapting Steinbeck stands in stark opposition to that of Springsteen and Rage. He identifies the radical potential of the novel as especially relevant to the charged political atmosphere of its own time but doesn't allow the narrative to teach anything about current political change and power. Franco's main changes to the narrative are the elimination of the novel's most radical character, Doc, and the switching of roles of Mac and Jim, turning Mac into the charismatic hero who dies at the end. These changes create a narrative that is hopeful, unlike Steinbeck's grim original, but does not make a powerful statement on political struggle, especially not that of the 21st century.

Steinbeck shows how utterly helpless and hopeless people can get under power and authority; whether it is capitalism's power or that of leftist strike organizers. Mac isn't a hero but a cynical man working to gain more power over the people he wants to organize. He doesn't care about them; he lies, cheats and manipulates them while they sacrifice their health and lives for a mysterious "cause". The film version aims to convey a message of hope and thus presents Mac as a martyr who gives his life to improve the lives of workers in America. But Steinbeck's message to our own time, and as Springsteen, Rage and Morello show, is that in America, hope comes not from individual charismatic leaders who change reality but from active resistance.

The final section of this dissertation is a discussion of "political hobbyism", a term introduced by authors David Swift and Eitan Hersh to describe the notion of feeling politically active and informed without leaving the house, thanks to smartphones and social media. Indeed, both John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Franco's *In Dubious Battle* offered their viewers a sense of hope during times of uncertainty without encouraging real action in the world, and by doing so, they missed the mark. Steinbeck's narratives, and Springsteen and Rage Against the Machine's adaptations of them, are radical because they

don't offer comfort, and don't imply that a solution lies in the hands of a formal authority which will sort everything out. Quite the opposite; Steinbeck's idea of political power is that it will not come from a political party, the police, a union or the government, but from the people. They cannot remain passive but must do the work themselves and live as they wish to see the world, through solidarity and mutual aid. This is why Steinbeck's prefiguration of alternative lifestyles is so powerful and his work is so uniquely radical, remaining so decades after they were written.