

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: Narrating the Wrong

JOXERRAMON BENGOETXEA*

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Abstract

Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* are incredibly modern. The setting can probably be universal, as are many of the underlying themes and narratives about human greed but also human solidarity. Some local cultural features like the federal camps as opposed to the state 'law of the jungle' also give us interesting clues on the creation of a national solidarity and welfare network, part of the national identity that moves internal migrants to California. Environmental disasters are also present in the background, as are some of the criticism of intensive agriculture in an ever expanding market treating agricultural produce as commodities. The role of the criminal justice system and social control is also modern, crimmigration, labour movements criminalisations and abuse of police force. All these elements make *Grapes of Wrath* a truly universal narrative on justice and hope.

Key words

Justice in Literature; Universal views of justice; The Grapes of Wrath; John Steinbeck

Resumen

Las uvas de la ira de Steinbeck es una obra increíblemente moderna. Probablemente, el argumento puede ser universal, como muchos de los temas que subyacen y las narraciones sobre la avaricia humana, pero también la solidaridad humana. Algunos rasgos culturales locales, como los campos federales opuestos a la "ley de la jungla" del estado también nos dan unas claves interesantes sobre la

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* Ph.D. in Law, University of Edinburgh; Profesor titular of Jurisprudence, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). Director of EHUGune. Coordinator for the UPV/EHU of the Oñati International Master in Sociology of Law and the Ph D Program in Sociology of Law. Member of the Academic Board of the Renato Treves International Ph D in Law and Society. UPV / EHU. Zuzenbide Fakultatea; Manuel de Lardizabal, 2; E-20018 Donostia-San Sebastián. joxerramon.bengoetxea@ehu.es



creación de una red de solidaridad y bienestar nacional, parte de la identidad nacional que provoca la migración interna a California. Los desastres medioambientales también están presentes de fondo, al igual que una crítica a la agricultura intensiva en un mercado en expansión que trata la producción agrícola como materias primas. El papel del sistema criminal de justicia y el control social también es moderno, crimigración, la criminalización de los movimientos obreros y el abuso de la fuerza policial. Todos estos elementos hacen de *Las uvas de la ira* una narrativa sobre la justicia y esperanza de carácter universal.

Palabras clave

Justicia en la literatura; Concepción universal de la justicia; Las uvas de la ira; John Steinbeck

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1. A personal note - Why *The Grapes of Wrath*?

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (TGOW) is strikingly modern. The setting is local but the message is universal, as are most of its underlying themes and narratives about human greed but also human solidarity. Above all, it uses a genre that combines journalistic reports and sociological insights (the general chapters) with the narrative biography of a family, the Joads, in their journey from the 'Dust Bowl' drought states of the Mid-West to a false, corrupt Paradise of California farms, from being tenant farmers in Oklahoma to becoming *Oakies*, migrants. All these elements, and many more make *The Grapes of Wrath* a truly universal narrative on injustice and on human dignity, understood in its minimum core as basic welfare: food, clothes, a roof, school, respect. The paper explores this dimension of the book and relates it to contemporary issues of social justice.

The idea of the Workshop on Justice and Literature that led to this edited collection was to ask each participant to choose one literary work that would be representative of their legal culture and to explore the concepts and experiences of justice or injustice as reflected in the work, in the plot, or the genre, the characters and their conscience, the style and literary techniques. Inspired by Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*, I visited Stanford Law School during Spring term 2012¹. Visiting Salinas, Steinbeck's hometown and touring California with my wife, Izaskun, I got the feeling that California still was a world of contrasts. Stanford, originally a cattle ranch, different from the fruit fields Steinbeck wrote about, seemed a golden cage, a promised land far removed from the troubles of many people and communities like Oakland, or those in East Palo Alto, a couple of miles away, in the heart of Silicon Valley. Reading TGOW - after having seen the John Ford movie or heard Woodie Guthrie, and more recently Bruce Springsteen, sing its themes - I felt really taken over, moved by the contrasts and its description of California.

Though not a Californian, I chose TGOW. But the choice of TGOW as a case study of injustice also relates to dramas that have been and still are taking place closer to home, in Southern Europe - Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal - like the migrant question, or the consequences of so-called EMU adjustment politics², and so-called *austericide*. Just like in the book people are losing their homes to banks³, foreclosures and evictions, over-indebtedness, poverty, unemployment⁴, hunger, increasing social inequalities are on the rise. The contrast was also in the attitudes of its characters: giving expression to the sense of injustice, a gaining of consciousness, the wrath of the starving migrants, the need to organize collectively; and on the opposite side *policing*, the increasing use of law and order to support land and capital and the great owners, the farmers association, the criminalization of protest, the derogatory tone of the media to report strikes. TGOW also reflects today's Southern Europe.

There is something extremely contemporary in this novel. This exploration of injustice by the novel is what I would like to highlight, by presenting its main plot

¹ In the framework of an agreement this University had with the Basque Society of Studies

² Just as in TGOW children officially die of 'malnutrition' instead of starvation, the Eurozone policy is not to be officially referred to as austerity or cuts but rather as 'adjustments'. Steinbeck is conscious of the relevance of propaganda 'speak'.

³ At least 2405 families were forced out of their homes by banks in 2012, according to the data of the Bank of Spain through judicial orders of eviction enforced by the police. There were around 10 registered suicides related to forced evictions. On unemployment related suicides, see *The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills* by D. Stuckler and Basu (2013b), summary in "How Austerity Kills" (Stuckler and Basu 2013a): "Countries that slashed health and social protection budgets, like Greece, Italy and Spain, have seen starkly worse health [and suicide] outcomes than nations like Germany, Iceland and Sweden, which maintained their social safety nets and opted for stimulus over austerity. (Germany preaches the virtues of austerity — for others.)"

⁴ Europe's economic problems are growing steadily worse, with unemployment in parts of the Continent now above the level reached in the United States during the Great Depression. Stuckler and Basu, *op. cit.* "Unemployment is a leading cause of depression, anxiety, alcoholism and suicidal thinking".

and story, its main themes and the genre it develops in order to touch upon such themes; and by examining in closer detail three specific issues: the migrant question, the government camp and the wrath, itself related to the issue of subjectification.

2. The story, the plots, the scenes

TGOW tells of the Joad's family brutal migration - on Road 66, "the path of a people in flight" from Middle America to the West defining a national urge for mobility, motion and blind striving; "from Oklahoma's dying Dust Bowl to California's corrupt Promised Land. In their ironic exodus from home to homelessness, from individualism to collective awareness, from selfishness to communal love, from I to we (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 14)⁵, Steinbeck's cast of unsuspecting characters - Ma Joad, Tom Joad, Jim Casy the preacher, Jim Rawley, the fictional manager of the Weedpatch government camp based on Tom Collins, Rose of Sharon, delivered of a stillborn child, giving her milk-laden breast to a dying stranger, looking up and smiling mysteriously - ... serve constantly to remind us that heroism is as much a matter of choice as it is of being chosen" (DeMott 1989). Some quotes from the novel give us a feel of style, themes and characters:

[Ch 8, Ma]: "'Tommy, don't you go fightin' 'em alone. They'll hunt you down like a coyote. Tommy, I go to thinkin' an' dreamin' an' wonderin'. They say there's a hun'erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all made the same way, Tommy - they wouldn't hunt nobody down.' She stopped. Tom: 'Many folks feel that way?' Ma: 'I don't know. They're jus' kinda stunned. Walk aroun' like they was half asleep'"

This passage sets the tone for the relationship of trust between Tom Joad and his mother, who has an individual common-sense of justice and resistance, which Tom then projects to a collective consciousness. Ma then wisely makes a point about alienation theory in simple language.

[Ch 14] "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. ...But this 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..."

This passage shows Steinbeck's deep economic and sociological understanding about the effects of banks becoming the owners of farms previously owned by farmers, and the pressure to mechanize farming in order to improve yields. This is the birth of industrial farming.

[Ch 17, at night in the camps on Highway 66] "leaders emerged, the laws were made, the codes came into being. And as the worlds moved westward they were more complete and better furnished, ... the families learned what rights must be observed ... And the families learned, although no one told them, what rights are monstrous and must be destroyed ... And with the laws, the punishments "

In this passage Steinbeck again displays great sociological imagination to explain functioning of Hoovervilles, or camps of migrants travelling West. The worst punishment is ostracism, it means losing the support of the peers.

[Ch 19] "The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the numbers of the dispossessed increased, and every effort of the great owners was directed at repression ... 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" ... [Ch 24] "This little [vineyard] orchard will be a part of a great holding next year, for the debt will have choked the owner. This vineyard will belong to the bank".

⁵ See below, section on the wrath.

This passage shows the connection between spheres of power - enforcement officers in charge of repression to destroy revolt and economic elites, the great owners, whereas small owners are also seen as victims of debt to the banks.

3. The sense of (in)justice: genre and themes

TGOW recreates a genre between journalism, sociological enquiry and fiction. It is extremely well documented, as a result of previous journalistic essays to report the floods, and of the ethnological-aesthetic method. Indeed, Steinbeck felt horrified, but he was taken over and he went to live with the migrants in the camps as a vital life-choice (see below). A feeling of injustice and a need to denounce clearly took hold, but how to tell the story and have an impact and provoke the same feeling of injustice on the reader without becoming outright pamphleteer? As Etxabe puts it: "[t]he responsibility of the artist is to their art and to this alone (to make it the best it can possibly be), but their object of creation can be engaged with in a different yet still responsible manner by the audience ... From this engagement, there springs a reality that is no longer the one which is represented in the work of art, but a different one that is being *enacted* as a result of the complex interplay between poet, text, and audience" (Etxabe 2013, p. 123). The empathic reader is transformed by travelling with the Joads and sharing their hopes, expectations, and feeling of injustice.

One of the greatest merits of TGOW is that it does not try to theorize justice; but rather recounts an experience of profound injustice. In this too, it is truly modern⁶. One can say about TGOW what Manderson says about D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* "the novel does not talk about justice - does not indeed mention it at all. Instead, it provides the reader with a literary experience of justice, which the author lived through writing the book and which changed him as much as it changed his readers" (Manderson 2012, p. 6). Steinbeck spent considerably more time and energy on the issue than DH Lawrence did in Australia, but the same can be said about TGOW, which integrates a family biography, with amazing characters, a pre-Kerouac road story, an epic or Odyssey (with some classical literary themes reminding of Antigone⁷) together with more general reports on the migrant question and the large farm economics. TGOW explores our sense of injustice provoking in the reader the related feelings of moral outrage and indignation.

The result is a combination of general and particular chapters, with descriptions, real and imaginary dialogues, reported speech, and the universal discourse about injustice is in both general and particular chapters. Indeed only by combining both levels of discourse do we realize that the Joads are but an instantiation of a broader social phenomenon. "A novel *can* persuade us of the truth of the world-view it presents not only because the beauty of the writing moves us, but because a novel, for example, affords an unusual depth of understanding into the perspectives and the lives it explores. A novel *can* transform the way we look at something or someone, providing us with a concrete vision that does justice to human lives" (Manderson 2012, p. 6). This is the enormous merit of TGOW.

What happened to the Joads was happening to all migrants, 300 000 of them. But only by witnessing the experiences of the Joads, the difficult decisions and judgments they make together - to stay together or split, to stay in the government camp or move on, to stay with the Wilsons in the car boxes and the floods, for Ma to share the food with hungry kids looking, for Tom to leave or stay on, for Casy to give himself up, for Rose of Sharon to share her milk with a starving

⁶ Amartya Sen makes the same point in *The Idea of Justice* (Sen 2009).

⁷ TGOW: in Ch. 13 Granpa dies of a stroke and the issue is how to bury him: follow the laws that require payment of an undertaker, reporting the death and paying 40\$ unless you are buried as a pauper, getting charity, or else bury him themselves; "Pa: 'Sometimes a fella got to sift the law. I'm saying now I got the right to bury my own pa. Anybody somepin to say?'" (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 13)

stranger - do we really come to understand the hardships and the inhumane predicament.

As Robert Demott put it, Steinbeck has a participatory aesthetic: "By conceiving his novel on simultaneous levels of existence Steinbeck pushed back the accepted boundaries of traditional realistic fiction and redefined the proletarian form" (DeMott 1989).

It is very interesting to track Steinbeck's own account of his process of writing TGOW, from his Diary, because it provides an impression of the plot and narrative strategies from the writer's perspective⁸:

[Entry 87, October 6 1938] "And the story is coming to me fast now ... Movement fast but the detail slow as always. ... How about the jail. Today the preacher and Tom and the raid on the tent and the killing of the preacher. And Tom's escape. Kills. Goes back to the camp to hide. Tom - half bitterness, half humane. Escapes in the night. Hunted, hunted. Over the last pages Tom hangs like a spirit around the camp. And in the water brings stolen food. ..."

In this entry one can see how Tom becomes a central character in the book, even where he has to hide and is hunted. But Steinbeck combines the details of situations with events and action, or movement of the novel.

[Entry 88, October 7th 1938] "... The cut in wages. The trapped quality. Must get it in - Difficulty of getting clean. No soap. No money to buy soap. Then peaches. The rush of workers and the fight for the peaches. Fight to get them. Must get this all in. There's so damned much in this book already." ... [Entry 90 October 11 1938] "... There is the problem of the flood and whether I'll include it. I think so. I think I will and I think I'll include the box car camp and the digging all night and the break through".

These two passages show Steinbeck's very deep understanding of the conditions in the camps and the farms, which will show the contrast with the federal camp. The migrants end up fighting between themselves to get the chance to pick the peaches, bringing down the price of labor. One can also see how the writer ponders how much material and information to include in the book. He had so much direct knowledge that some of the details had to be left out to keep the novel's pace.

[Entry 91 October 12 1938] "...The end is peering in on me now. I can feel it. It's coming closer. But a lot of things have to happen. Also I am pretty excited now about my story. ... Hint of small pox, measles. Measles for R.of S, weakening. Cause miscarriage or rather birth of dead baby. Breast pump. Then the rain. Tom comes back. And he goes again...." [Entry 96 October 19] "...Strong reluctance to finish I think. ... I'm on my very last chapter now. ...The rain -the birth - the flood - and the barn. The starving man and the last scene that has been ready so long⁹. I don't know. I only hope it is some good. ... - it isn't the great book I had hoped it would be."

These passages show the final climax and the writer struggling again to keep the balance between the individual characters' stories and the more general explanations on the injustice he wants to denounce. His own doubts as to the quality of the novel he was writing also point to the tension of the plot as a way to explain a broader social picture. As regards the final Chapters on the floods, it is clear Steinbeck was very well documented. As we mentioned earlier, he went to see for himself, as he tells in his non-fictional essay, "A Primer on the 30s" (Steinbeck 2002, p. 25):

"In the early days of the migration, some groups got trapped by other kinds of weather. For example, about three thousand, encamped in King's County, California, were caught in a flood. They were huddled and starving on high ground surrounded by water and mud-logged fields. I had a friend, George West of the *San Francisco News* who asked me to go over there and write a news story - the first

⁸ From the diary of John Stenbeck (1989).

⁹ The final scene is Rosa's Sharn breastfeeding the starving stranger, smiling mysteriously.

private enterprise job I could remember. What I found horrified me. We had been simply poor but these people were literally starving and by that I mean they were dying of it. Marooned in the mud, they were wet and hungry and miserable. In addition, they were fine, brave people. They took me over completely, heart and soul. I wrote six or seven articles and then did what I could to try to get food to them. The local people were scared. They did what they could, but it was natural that fear and perhaps pity made them dislike the dirty, helpless horde of locusts. ... I liked these people. They had qualities of humor and courage and inventiveness and energy that appealed to me. I thought that if we had a national character and a national genius, these people, who were beginning to be called Okies, were it. With all the odds against them, their goodness and strength survived. And still does."

4. TGOW as a treatise on Californian society of the time and as a tract against injustice

TGOW comprises different themes merging into a plot. For instance, one finds some local cultural features like the federal camps as opposed to the California state "law of the jungle", and this also gives us interesting clues on federalism¹⁰ and the creation of a national solidarity and welfare network, part of the national federal identity that moves internal US migrants, "Oakies" from the Dust Bowl to California.

One also finds detailed and precise technical descriptions about motorcars and their mechanics or of tractors, or crops, or landscapes, territory and roads. There is also an *avant la lettre* ecological conscience of environmental disasters: dust, drought, floods. One can also read some of the criticism of intensive, capital based agriculture in an ever-expanding market treating agricultural produce as commodities and destroying excess produce in order to control prices. There is also a critique of the rising individualism, and of the commodification of any value, even of existence¹¹.

Religion is treated with respect and religious zeal, puritanism and extremism with a touch of sarcasm as in the dancing scenes in the government camp where the zealots are watching 'them sinners' enjoy themselves. There are interesting considerations about spontaneous normative order as in the quote from Chapter 17 on the codes and governance of the government camps, even of the *Hoovervilles*. The role of the criminal justice system is questioned, prisons are critiqued in passing¹², and social control - law and order to serve the system of property and capital of the powerful - is very well described, it is very modern, what some authors now call *crimmigration*¹³ i.e. the criminalization of the migrant is there, labour movements are criminalized and abuse of police force is everywhere: [vagrants are put to jail]: "You know a vagrant is anybody a cop don't like..." [(Steinbeck 1939, Ch 24)

But TGOW is not only a comprehensive critique of an unfair economic and social system, it is also a call for awareness and *indignado* wrath, for commons and self-government, for solidarity and organized dissent. There is hope and faith. There are many emancipatory topoi in the book: the role of woman- and motherhood (including the final scene)¹⁴; family solidarity and solidarity among migrants, the poor helping the poor; the jail experience, the sense of community; insights on land planning and agricultural reform;

¹⁰ "You know a vagrant is anybody a cop don't like. And that's why they hate this here camp. No cops can get in. This here's United States, not California" (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 24).

¹¹ When the Farmers keep the horses in the winter and there is no work, they still feed them, but they treat the migrant worse than the horses (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 26 and 28).

¹² [Tom explaining the jail to Ma] "a kind a way a driving a guy slowly nuts .. there's somepin about it that ain't like nothin' else in the worl', somepin screwy about it, somepin screwy about the whole idea a lockin' people up" (Steinbeck 1939 Ch. 16)

¹³ Term coined by Juliet Stumpf (2006), see CINETS (2014).

¹⁴ In the final chapters of the story, when Tom, in hiding, decides with Ma that he has to leave to protect his family, the protagonism goes entirely to Ma and Ros'asharn, Tom will always be there but he disappears from the story. Ma knows the family will go on and survive. The men Pa and uncle John have long lost any protagonism they might have had.

In this contribution I deal only with a selection of the topics that I have considered most relevant for my own research interests and normative analysis: migration, the government camp, and the construction and expression of a collective wrath and responses to it.

5. From farmers to migrants

... "They were not farm men any more, but migrant men" (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 19)

TGOW was the product of Steinbeck's increasing immersion in the migrant material, which proved to be a subject of such related intertwining that it required an extended *odyssey* of his own before he discovered the proper focus and style to do the topic justice (DeMott 1989, p. xxii-xxiii). Steinbeck wanted to be a humanitarian advocate but did not want to appear presumptuous (DeMott 1989, p. xxxiv).

Between 1936 and 1938 he worked on 4 major projects on the issue: 1. a seven part series of newspaper articles 'The Harvest Gypsies' for the liberal *San Francisco News*, which punctuated with Dorothea Lange's graphic photographs of migrants; 2. an unfinished novel, 'The Oklahomans'; 3. a completed, but destroyed satire, 'L'Affaire Lettuceberg' and 4 TGOW.

On the one side there was the "entrenched power, wealth, authority, and consequent tyranny of California's industrialized agricultural system, which produced flagrant violations of the migrants' civil and human rights and ensured their continuing peonage", their loss of dignity, a key to the whole book, through threats, reprisals, and violence, low wages and hunger. On the other side, "the powerlessness, poverty, victimization, and fear of the nomadic American migrants whose willingness to work, desire to retain their dignity, and enduring wish to settle into land of their own were kept alive by their innate resilience and resourcefulness, and by the democratic benefits of the government sanitary camps (DeMott 1989, p. xxxiii).

Migration and *crimmigration* are combined in interesting ways. First any migrant asking for a wage higher than that offered by the Farmer becomes a red, an agitator, and risks being beaten and put in jail. Then there are raids by para-police organized by the Associated Farmers. Finally, any idle migrant, potentially all, is liable to be taken in as well. No question of rights. Yet these are all legal migrants; technically, all are nationals. But the state system is oppressive, and poor migrants become the equivalent of today's *illegal* migrants. There is racism by the local community of farmers and owners toward the migrant *Oakies*, and this is reflected in the California schools, in the police, in the organized gangs of owners burning Hoovervilles (camps) or lynching strikers.

The migrants perceive this racism with perplexity. Their looks and their language are not that different, and they are willing to work for less. An interesting turn of the migrant question is related to the large quantities of laborers mobilized in migratory movements. Interestingly it is the Great Farmers themselves who have triggered the migration from the Mid-West by printing and distributing thousands of advertisements calling for workers to pick fruit in their plantations. The more workers willing to work, the greater the demand, the lower the wages offered by the Farmers. If the wage is too high, the Farmers' Association will censure it. It takes migrants some time to figure out the system and get organized, but they do not always manage to unite. Interestingly it is those returning back on Highway 66 who give the most lucid accounts of the system, and insist that they should all ask for a paper signed by the contractor stating the wage offered. Also, Casey the preacher, especially after spending time in jail, when he is organizing the strike in the peach farm, is lucid. The turning point is when migrants begin to think as a group, from the 'I' to the 'we', as we shall see later.

6: Weedpatch, the (federal) government camp

The Weedpatch government camp makes an appearance in TGOW at the crucial moment when the Joads have experienced the first real hardships, run out of money, about to be lynched by the organized local owners who are going to set fire to one of the Hooverville camps where a fight with the police has taken place. The government camp is a type of *Utopia* in different senses: it is not legally or jurisdictionally California, but the U.S.; it is ideal and emancipatory, an area of freedom where one enters and leaves, it is almost dream-like, it cannot last too long. The Saturday night dances in the camp are the best event in the country, and the description of the dances and the tunes makes the reader want to join, like everybody else in the area.

The description of the camp is based on Steinbeck's direct experience. "In the late summer of 1936, Steinbeck witnessed the migrants' suffering first-hand when he travelled to Arvin, near Bakersfield to talk and tour camps with Tom Collins, manager of the Armin government camp. Out of this trip came the far grittier and more detailed *exposé* of the migrant situation, "The Harvest Gypsies", a series of seven articles published in October 1936 in the *San Francisco News*." ..His "forays into nonfiction chart Steinbeck's approach in TGOW itself: general overview, muckraking indictment, editorial wrath. Majestically symbolic, epic in scope, TGOW is at the same time insistently journalistic in its fidelity to the way people spoke, the lands they crossed, the conditions they endured..." (Shillinglaw and Benson 2002, p. 65).

The camp becomes an oasis of running water, cold and hot!, washbasins, toilets and showers - for the Joads, for the migrants and for Humanity. Dignity is recovered through welfare-solidarity - not charity - and through self-government. In the government camp you can get used to being treated like humans, and thus recover your dignity. In Chapter 22 TGOW there is a situation where the toilet paper in block 4 of the camp is being consumed faster and this is a cause for shame for block 4 in the general camp assembly. The ladies committee finds out the reason: one of the families has not found work lately, the children have been eating green fruit and developed diarrhea, skitters, thus using extra paper. Their mother, ashamed to confess so, insists they were not stealing it. She did not want to ask for credit from the camp because she had never gone on charity. The ladies committee responds:

"This ain't charity. You ain't got the right to let your girls get hungry in this here camp". (Steinbeck 1939, chapter 22)

Another relevant fact is that there are no cops in the camp. This reinforces its utopian, self-governed character. No deputy can come in without a warrant. The Farmers' Association does not like that and it will exert all sorts of pressure, like provoking fights during the dance, to have the camp closed down, unsuccessfully.

[Tom injured and in hiding speaking to Ma] "I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirselves; an' they wans't no cops wagglin' their guns, but they was better order than them cops ever give. I been a-wonderin' why we can't do that all over. Throw out the cops that ain't our people. All work together for our own thing - all farm our land" (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 28)

The federal camp is so utopian that its presence in the book is central but very brief and seen as an episode, a sense of freedom and dignity in the overall environment of social injustice. Yet, the camp has lived on into the present, and can still be visited. Its impact on the local collective memory is significant, and it can now be considered an element of Californian identity. Interestingly new versions of the camps as social experiments of solidarity by new types of migrants are being experimented in California, in the best Steinbeck spirit: the village community gardens or farms, funding of which is made possible by the California Mental Health

Services Act of 2004 (Brown 2013), which put a one percent tax on personal income of \$1 million a year or more. Gabriella Farinha (forthcoming), has explored the issue of legal pluralism developed in a small Southern California multiethnic community farm, The NRCF farm, created in 2011 to be commonly exploited by refugees from different countries and undocumented migrants¹⁵. The migrants are no longer "Oakies", but global and one can detect in her research interesting continuities with the Weedpatch government camp of TGOW, which she does not mention. Obviously the players and institutions have changed, and California no longer represents the legal Wild West, but perhaps the themes reflect a deep underlying ethos of autonomy and self-government, a resilient farming identity of migrants¹⁶, navigating through different legalities, a new case of self-help and solidarity, of organizing though the family of through the Union, the special role of the mothers in holding the community and the family together.

7. The wrath

"The great companies did not know that the line between hunger and anger is a thin line. And money that might have gone to wages went for gas, for guns, for agents and spies, for blacklists, for drilling. On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food, and the anger began to ferment." (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 21)

Hunger turns into anger. The conditions of modern capitalism and the absolute lack of respect for migrant workers, turned into a mere commodity in the purest Marxist tradition; the treatment of labor surplus like fruit or vegetable surplus, as something that can be translated into capital increases by reducing wages, ensuring competitiveness and increasing prices; the shops in the farm stores where food is sold to the migrant workers at prices that are higher than in town stores and where all the money earned in the day goes into buying the food sold by the store that belongs to the Farms; the treatment given in farms, schools and by doctors to starving children; the way the police deals with any migrant they dislike¹⁷ and if the migrants are too quiet, the police organizing lynching and raids into migrant Hooverville camps; all these items accumulate into greater anger, and then to wrath. But how does the process flow from individual to collective wrath, from the 'I' to the 'we'? Steinbeck addresses this issue in Chapter 14:

¹⁵ Master dissertation for the Oñati International Master in the Sociology of Law and presentation in the Basque Sociological Association Conference (Bilbao 2012) "Three different groups: Cambodian, Latino and Somali Bantu together with the NGO, the growers have solely the ability to use temporarily the land, through the management of the NGO. The latter drafted and signed with each individual grower a contract setting the terms for the use of each plot. The rules of the contract are identified by the growers as being the rules of the farm. The NGO holds a list of the official users of the plots and a waiting list of growers requesting a spot in the farm whenever a plot becomes vacant. Because the farm is public land, growers have no legal entitlement to it and no ownership to claim. All groups expressed that land connects them to their home countries, the ways of life of their fathers. Somali Bantu and Cambodian leaders expressed that people were depressed, living in apartments, not having anything to do, worried about their lives. The Somali Bantus and Cambodians talked about how farm is part of the livelihood, growing one's own cultural food, sharing the food within the community but also entailing the acquisition of more independence from the system, the possibility of earning extra-income by selling the food in the local market. All the groups expressed the freedom and relaxation enjoyed from the practice of harvesting, freedom from society rules, outside pressures and forced rhythms of life. The possession and harvest of the land means to all groups the possibilities of having autonomy, not only as a form of livelihood through the acquisition of economic resources as food and income but by being a space which allows growers to express and practice their inner cultural selves. It is exactly in the confluence between common identity vis-à-vis distinctive practices; of official law vis-à-vis distinctive group's normativities, that a common rule, the "autonomy rule", was enacted by the farmers in order to provide to each group its autonomy without disrupting the existence of the whole farm as a space of autonomy and livelihood outside the control and rules of the dominant society. "

¹⁶ In TGOW this feeling of a farming identity is very strong. Al, or Rose of Sharon and her husband are not so attached to land and farming, and are aiming at city jobs, but Pa and Uncle John express satisfaction at being able to work collecting cotton, something they know, as compared to picking peaches.

¹⁷ "where'ver there's a cop beating a guy" as Tom says to Ma (Steinbeck 1939, p. x).

"And from this first 'we' there grows a still more dangerous thing ... this is the thing to bomb. This is the beginning from 'I' to 'we' ... the quality of owing freezes you for ever into 'I' and cuts you off for ever from the 'we'".

[reporting the speech of the great owners who are] "nervous, sensing a change, not knowing these things are causes, not results, causes, not results; the causes lie deep and simple - the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times." (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 14)

In the initial chapters there are individuals like Tom Joad or Casy, the preacher, but they merge into the *we*, the family. Then they are thrown out of the land by individuals in tractors who were of their own folk, but had become an 'I'. They are perplexed and stunned¹⁸. In a sense the Joads and the tenant farmers were already part of a *we*: what Steinbeck calls the process from 'I' to 'we', can be interpreted as the empowering process from being simply 'we' to becoming aware of the 'We' dimension, a process of "subjectification" generating collective knowledge and democratic action,¹⁹. This process is reinforced by the realization of the migrants that they are no less than the locals who abuse and oppress them.²⁰

There is a psychological process around wrath. It combines personal and group psychology. It begins with the high expectations of the travel and the promised land of California farms where there is jobs for those who want to work. It continues with some initial misgivings and doubts on seeing so many people like themselves on Highway 66 and on getting the reports of some of those who have returned²¹. It then continues with the first experiences of not finding a job, and the perplexity. Then it is the struggle and the experience of strikes, and of strike braking and feeling miserable about it, losing your dignity by playing to the game of exploitation because you have to eat and feed your family, and the lynching, this takes to a feeling of impotence. The experience of the government camp is precisely the turning point, recovering your dignity: you experience the power of group solidarity, and equality, and then when you are out again looking for work and treated worse than an animal, the feeling of wrath comes:

"there is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success ... and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage" (Steinbeck 1939, Ch 25)

Steinbeck convincingly shows - with no false promise of success - that the wrath can be turned into mobilized collective action, like Casy the preacher does, or like Tom chooses to do, or it can be sublimated into solidarity, like the final scene where Rose of Sharon, in silent communion with Ma, breastfeeds the starving stranger²².

¹⁸ Tom: 'Many folks feel that way?' Ma: 'I don't know. They're jus' kinda stunned. Walk aroun' like they was half asleep'" (Steinbeck 1939, Ch 8).

¹⁹ "A mode of subjectification does not create subjects *ex nihilo*; it creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute" (Rancière 2004, p. 36)

²⁰ As the dialogue between Ma Joad and the storekeeper at the peach farm shows. He gives in and recognizes their humanity.

²¹ The family stays together. Tom and Al have fixed the Wilsons' car, they have reunited in a camp by Highway 66 where they have to pay per car; after lunch they are sitting and chatting and a ragged man who has lost wife and two kids starved to death, on his way back from California explains how the job market really works in the farms, to bring the wages down to 20 cents an hour, and you end up working just for food (Steinbeck 1939, Ch 16). This figure is like a Shakespearean ghost, a premonition of what they are in for. There is another premonition when they are bathing in the river before Needles, and where Noah decided to stay for ever, a man and his son back from California explain how it is (Steinbeck 1939, Ch 18).

²² This is "biopower" at its best! I mean it in a sense that somehow counters Foucault's (1976) biopower in *The Will to Know* and Giorgio Agamben's (1998) biopolitics. Agamben also speaks about the importance of "the 'camp' as the nomos of the modern", but this part of his theory is not so interesting for my current purposes. On the other hand, the concept of *homo sacer* and the bare life upon which he builds his opus is very relevant to interpret the migrants' predicament.

In a sense, the process of subjectification in the novel is not linear, but complex. There is a collective subject, a We that develops from a sense of family, of migrant communities, of camps. At the same time, the family is actually disintegrating as the novel progresses and the male characters tend to disappear. The individual characters have nevertheless gained enormous strength through consciousness of dignity, especially after the experience of the federal camp.

8. Conclusion

As Demott explains, *The Grapes of Wrath* "is one of those novels with the heart in the right place ... once populist and revolutionary ... it advances a belief in the essential goodness and forbearance of the "common people" and prophesizes a fundamental change to produce equitable social conditions" (DeMott 1989, p. xxii). It followed a migrant family, the Joads, in its exodus to the Garden of Eden, to find a corrupt system of exploitation. A family holding together, homeless and displaced, farm and home lost to the banks. In the promised land, California, they look for work, find none and yet survive this *Odyssey* with courage. Steinbeck gives voice to people's suffering, gives them dignity as migrants with faith and moral virtues; as poor folks with their own mind, knowledge and intelligence; as a family, providing identity and comfort, and as individuals, with their tensions.

"Wherever human beings dream of a dignified society in which they can harvest the fruits of their own labor, *The Grapes of Wrath's* radical voice of protest can still be heard. As a tale of dashed illusions, thwarted desires, inhuman suffering, and betrayed promises - all strung on the most fragile thread of hope - *The Grapes of Wrath* summed up the Depression era's socially unconscious art..." (DeMott 1989, p. xxiii).

Dignity and folk knowledge are two key themes merging into collective awareness in TGOW. Dignity is lost not because of poverty as such, but when inflicted injustice is accepted as inevitable. As an antidote, democratic decision-making and democratic knowledge, assemblies, consulting the family or the community and deciding together, is an emancipatory practice and a way to construct knowledge and action collectively. *The Grapes of Wrath* thus symbolizes "the staging of the very contradiction between police logic and political logic which is at the heart of the republican definition of community" (Rancière 2004, p. 41); (re)gaining dignity, thinking out alternatives, envisaging equality and practicing solidarity the Joads and many other migrants are the vehicle for Steinbeck to expose and denounce the *wrong* without falling into the pamphlet genre, by using journalistic report, rational argument in dialogues and poetic metaphor in his aesthetic narrative:

"there is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success... and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath..." (Steinbeck 1939, Ch. 25)

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