

**Socialism in The Grapes of Wrath**

by

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February 24, 1994

## Outline

Thesis: John Steinbeck used many clashes of tradition in his book The Grapes of Wrath to suggest socialism as the solution to California's economic problems.

- I. Introduction
- II. Examples in The Grapes of Wrath of clashes of tradition
  - A. Tom Joad versus institution (truck driver)
  - B. Jim Casy versus capitalism and religion
  - C. Tom Joad, Jim Casy, and Muley Graves versus the sheriff
  - D. The Joads versus the institution
  - E. et. al.
- III. Failures of socialism in the world
  - A. No successes of socialism ever
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    2. Communism in eastern Europe
    3. Communism in western Asia
    4. Socialism in the United States
  - B. Contemporary ideas on socialism
- IV. Problems with The Grapes of Wrath
  - A. Sentimentality

B.       Oversimplification

V.       Conclusion: Socialism is not the right choice.

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English III Honors (Advanced Placement)

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### **Socialism in The Grapes of Wrath**

John Steinbeck encouraged the philosophy of socialism in his novel The Grapes of Wrath through various conflicts of tradition as the solution to certain economic and social problems of times past. Probably unknown to him at the time, this philosophy of government has never worked. Socialism always rears its ugly head as an oppressive institution that sucks the lifeblood out of all people under it in the name of "fairness."

The first major clash of tradition in The Grapes of Wrath happens in the second chapter. Tom Joad had just been paroled from prison. He asks a truck driver for a lift to a few miles down the road. The truck driver initially refuses, referring Tom to the large sign in the windshield forbidding riders. Tom Joad eventually convinces the truck driver by appealing to the driver's sentiment. This clash of tradition could best be said to represent the age-old tradition of "every man helps another" versus a relatively new tradition of the times, one in which the capitalistic institutions must make a profit. The capitalistic institution that employs the truck driver forbids this driver from taking riders.

Tom Joad later encounters Jim Casy, both the martyr of the novel and a preacher from the area where Tom lived (Lewis 514). Jim Casy has ended his preaching career since Tom was in prison and went on a hiatus in

the wilderness (similar to the forty days that Jesus Christ spent in the wilderness). During the resulting conversation between the two, Casy says a statement that has very socialistic implications:

"The hell with it! There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do. It's all part of the same thing. And some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, but that's as far as any man got a right to say" (Steinbeck 30).

This statement is a huge clash to the charismatic conservative doctrine Casy has believed all of his life up to his hiatus from preaching. Casy also mentions his tendency to have sexual intercourse with the girls whom he had just baptized. The implication of all of Jim Casy's statements can be best summed up in the following statement:

"[Steinbeck] could not bring himself to believe that there was anything really wrong with the human heart, so that the causes of the wrongs must be other—practical, even mechanical; political, in short" (Lewis 514). Steinbeck makes a total clash against some primary aspects of capitalism, where there *is* right and wrong, and where the so-called "human heart" is almost never the primary emphasis of successful laws, decisions, or programs. In capitalism, a person's success is based on at least his own virtue, morality, strength, and determination. Absolutely none of these qualities are necessary under socialism because under this type of government, a person's rights to success and prosperity are not determined by any of the above mentioned ideals, but by the simple fact that he is alive.

Tom and Casy walk to Tom's old house, where another conflict takes place. The house sits on land that no longer belongs to the Joad family. After meeting Muley Graves, a former neighbor of Tom but now a mindless

wanderer of his repossessed land, the group notices headlights of a car piercing the dim sky over a nearby hill.

Muley encourages Tom and Casy to hide to avoid trouble with the approaching sheriff. Initially, Tom hesitates

because he still has a mental and emotional attachment to the land; he still feels like it is his family's land. Muley

mentions the possibility of trespassing charges that can be imposed on Tom for being on the bank's land (any

conviction against Tom would result in his parole being ended and his reimprisonment). The sheriff stomped out

their fire and searched for Tom, Casy, and Muley with his spotlight. During this entire scene, there are powerful

lines condemning both the repossession of the property and the institution that repossessed it. The message that

comes out of this is quite simple: capitalism resulted in the complete destruction of Tom's old home. Here, all the

blame falls on the company. Not one word suspects that the Joads themselves may be to blame.

Another clash of tradition occurred the day before the Joads left Uncle John Joad's farm. Agents from the

bank drove to Uncle John's house and warned the Joads that they must exit their property soon. This clash was

again between the capitalistic bank versus the Joad family. The bank is portrayed as evil for trying to make a profit.

Many other examples of conflicts of tradition leading to the condemnation of capitalism occur in the

novel. They are alike in that none of them even consider that the blame may not lie with the "system," but rather

with the "oppressed."

The philosophy of government that Steinbeck is alluding to is most clearly socialism. This philosophy is

one that took on a new steam in the 1930s (Harrington 102). Indeed, the United States government leaned more

to the left (politically) during that time with its socialist New Deal programs. Ed Paulsen, a person who lived during

that time, sums it up well:

Before Roosevelt, the Federal Government hardly touched your life. Outside of the postmaster, there was little local representation. Now people you knew were appointed to government jobs. Joe Blow or some guy from the corner (Paulsen 34).

Although socialism was gaining steam in America, the fact remains unchanged: Socialism has never worked, is not working now, and will never work.

One of the first groups of immigrants that came to the United States were the pilgrims of Plymouth Colony. These are the same Pilgrims who had the first Thanksgiving. This Thanksgiving was made possible, not primarily out of love and compassion for the natives of America, but because of a surplus of food created by private ownership of property (a great point of capitalism). When the Pilgrims first came to America, they agreed on a compact, or charter, which enforced collectivism, or socialism. Everyone would work for the common good; everyone would be the same. After starvations during the winters, a bright idea was raised: switch to private ownership of property. Unlike what Steinbeck would probably like to happen, the switch to private ownership produced the previously mentioned food surplus. That alone is the reason for the first Thanksgiving. Socialism did not work there.

Communism is a form of government that, in essence, is total socialism. The greatest difference between Communism and socialism is simple: the Communists shoot anyone who chooses to dissent with them. The forceful conversion of eastern European countries to Communism is a great example of this aggressiveness. One



fact is undeniable: People living in Communist countries have on average *never* attained the high standard of living enjoyed by citizens of the United States. Socialism did not work there.

Western Europe has for long time been mired with socialism. Again, these countries *combined* do not have the power, prestige, standard of living, respect, or gross national product of the United States. The French health care system is running a huge deficit. The high-speed rail systems are unable to run without government subsidy. England sold many of its socialist institutions. Socialism has not worked there.

The United States of America has been unfortunately slowly shifting toward the type of socialism that Steinbeck advocated, where welfare programs, unemployment aid programs, employment programs, and unions exist. Apparently, the major effects of these programs are increased crime rates, a declining rate of increase of standard of living, and an expanding trade imbalance. Welfare, a set of overlapping socialistic government programs, has only a 28 percent efficiency. Examples of gross abuses of the socialist welfare programs (which ironically are all done legally) can be heard in the news and on conservative talk shows daily. Welfare-dependent single parents commit the extreme abuses of children that make national news. Exorbitantly high tax rates, which are destroying the productivity and opportunity of Americans, are necessary to support all of the socialistic programs of the United States. The condition of the country has gotten so bad that the disillusioned public is electing idyllic soothsayers to major offices in the country. These idyllic soothsayers are marked by compassionate rhetoric and a desire to assault the public with even more unworkable socialist programs. Many minorities have been conditioned to expect so much from the government that they burn cities when they do not get their own

way. Socialism has not worked in the United States.

Steinbeck was very sentimental toward his characters. He was preoccupied with "primitives," which lead to "oversimplification" of the whole issue in concern (Frohock 324). In fact, the entire novel was composed "as if human sentiments and speeches had been assigned to a flock of lemmings on their way to throw themselves into the sea" (Wilson 530). This is why John Steinbeck could get across the radical philosophy of socialism so smoothly. He almost never put his characters in a bad light. By using this "oversimplification," he got out an overly simplified message: Socialism good, Capitalism bad.

The Grapes of Wrath has some obvious, blatant places where the implications of matters were merely glided over. Was there ever a place in The Grapes of Wrath where the Joads were portrayed as taking a crazy risk by going to California in an unsafe jalopy? Was it ever mentioned in the novel that the Joads were extremely gullible in trusting the California advertisement at face value? Was it ever mentioned that the Joads were not intelligent enough to make prudent financial decisions concerning their land? The unequivocal answer is *no*. The Joads were continuously portrayed as "good" people with "good" intents. A logical, rational conclusion would say that a mere "good" intent is not reason enough to justify anything, especially a new or radical philosophy of government.

The Grapes of Wrath clearly suggested the wrong solution to the economic problem of California. Socialism has never worked and will never work. It is a bankrupt government philosophy.

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