

Even slave superstitions, passed from generation to generation, contained some Christian influences. "If you are drowning...and cross your hands, you will come to the surface and float."²⁷ Another one is to "make the sign of the cross over your bread so that you will always have some, over your fire so it will always burn," and so on.²⁸ For such religious concepts to have integrated themselves into slave superstitions, the degree to which slaves internalized their religious beliefs must have been very great. Lichtenstein's thesis is too broad to be generally accurate. Applied to a specific place and time it might prove valid. As it is formulated, it cannot be applied to the entire South. In fact, slaves in the American South clasp the Christian moral code of their masters to their bosoms and made it their own. Possibly, the slaves were better Christians than were their masters. Christianity and slavery did not mix. The slaves understood that. But the whites chose to ignore it and compromised their faith. Considering the strength of their faith, they must have internalized the morals and values that accompany Christianity. Even Frederick Douglass, who eventually lost his faith, retained the values and morals that he had gained from it. With all of this evidence, one can hardly say that the slaves rejected the morals and values of white society in order to create their own moral economy in an effort to resist their condition. In a few instances, this may have happened. But it certainly did not happen everywhere. Thefts of necessity far outnumbered thefts as a means of resistance.

²⁷Blessingame, *Slave Testimony*, 301.

²⁸*Ibid.*

The Popular and Intellectual Response to Industrialism: Exploring the Urban Jungle with Upton Sinclair

by Mark G. Schmeltzer

It would hardly be a worthwhile endeavor to prove that Upton Sinclair, in his now legendary muckraking exposé, *The Jungle*, sought to publicize more than merely the need to reform the meat-packing industry. Even professional reviewers at the time of the novel's publication recognized that Sinclair had "a deeper cause to serve."¹ Now famous too, is Sinclair's reaction to his book's repercussions when he quipped, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."² It would be equally redundant to indict the author's description of his protagonist's conversion to Socialism as a "manifesto" which was intended to promote "the doctrine of Socialism."³ However, Upton Sinclair must be viewed as more than a tract writer for American Marxists. The popularity of *The Jungle* proved to be a necessary mechanism in the self-correcting machine of Democratic Capitalism. It earned this recognition by confirming the violence done to this nation's democratic sensibilities by runaway industrial growth. And it did so at the same moment in our history when the public was struggling to come to terms with the new reality. Scarcely had the verdict of time begun to gestate when an observer at *The Times* (of London) concluded that *The Jungle* "will be recognized far and wide for what it is—a most important sociological document; and the practical effect of it should be great."⁴

The biographers of Upton Sinclair and *The Jungle*'s critics may vary slightly in their judgments of the author's political intent. However, the more significant question in evaluating the novel is its broad social and historical implications.

¹Review of *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair, *The Literary Supplement of the Times of London*, 1 June 1906, 201.

²Leon Harris, *Upton Sinclair: American Rebel* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1975), 71.

³*The Literary Supplement of the Times of London*, 1 June 1906, 201.

⁴*Ibid.*

Harvey Swados determines from Sinclair's own testimony that he intended it to be "a tract that would help win many converts to the ideas of socialism and the growing Socialist Party." Swados claims that the unintentional importance of *The Jungle* was as a social history which recorded the struggles of "the cruelly used builders of the modern era, along with all the other untold millions who gave up their lives on the altar of production in the strange and terrible rites of the new industrial age." More importantly, the novel convinced much of the American consumer population that the price of "the American standard of living" and "the accumulation of capital" was profound human misery.⁵

Other biographers extend *The Jungle's* relevance beyond its portrayal of the working conditions of the period. In these evaluations, the novel, despite its decidedly socialist angle, portrays the larger crisis of reconciling industrialization with American traditional values. Leon Harris calls it a story of "the American dream turned into a Kafkaesque nightmare."⁶ William A. Bloodsworth, Jr. argues that Sinclair's style of piling up travesty on top of travesty "was his attempt to shout 'Stop!' to uncontrolled industrial progress."⁷

Assessing Upton Sinclair's importance in American history raises difficult questions. How was it that a socialist academic like Sinclair came to embody the crisis in American democracy? How could a writer so often regarded as a crank propagandist occupy such an indelible position in the history of American political reform? The answer had less to do with the public's identification with Sinclair's, or any other leftist's political agenda, than with the reactions to the growth of big business shared by both the muckraker and the public. Both were appalled by the personal degradation brought about by the great industrial explosion. Furthermore, while they advocated methods which appeared to be politically opposed, both the public and Sinclair endeavored to ameliorate these conditions.

⁵Harvey Swados, "The Jungle Revisited," chap. in *A Radical's America* (Boston: The World Pub. Co., 1962), 9-19.

⁶Harris, 71.

⁷William A. Bloodsworth, Jr., *Upton Sinclair, Twain's United Author's Series* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1977), 61.

Sinclair and the more conventional elements of reform part company when he suddenly changed his approach in *The Jungle*. His tale of Jurgis's conversion to socialism degenerated into a repetitious pamphleteering for the far left. However, if we put aside any arguments concerning American Socialism, we can uncover the author's deeper commitment, one that goes beyond petty partisanship and which is more closely aligned with American democracy than it may at first appear.

Jon A. Yoder points out in his brief biography of Upton Sinclair that Sinclair's political philosophy may have been his greatest liability. Nevertheless, as Yoder stresses throughout his book, Sinclair's socialism did not fit the popular conception of a violent revolutionary Marxism imported from overseas. Instead, Sinclair's idea of socialism contained a distinctively domestic influence whose roots were buried deeply in the soil of "an idealism often referred to as the American Dream."⁸ Yoder implies that Sinclair was a kind of ideological misfit within the greater international Socialist camp. Many biographers and critics who wrote more than a half century after *The Jungle* came to a similar conclusion.

Sinclair's response to the growth of industry, according to this view, went beyond the automatic Marxist reflex,⁹ and since his own conversion to socialism, he often strayed from "orthodox party lines."¹⁰ These authors find Sinclair's doctrinal motivation within a romanticized plea; indeed, he called for the return to American rural values and spirituality which he saw as implicit in Socialism.¹¹ His starting point in his critique of industry was the question: "What had happened to the spirit of America?", and from there he sought to "expose the inhumanity of capitalism so that Americans could opt for an economic system more closely aligned with their accepted ideals."¹²

Yoder demonstrates that Sinclair's success did not consist in winning converts to Socialism. Rather, it was in articulating for a vast audience the

⁸Jon A. Yoder, *Upton Sinclair* (New York: Frederick Ungar Pub. Co., 1975), 12-13.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Robert B. Downs, afterword to *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1906).

¹¹Yoder, 13-15.

¹²Ibid., 38-9.

betrayal by big business of America's faith in the free market, thereby giving liberal social reformers more effective ammunition in their war against the captains of industry. This was not Sinclair's intention, however. Yoder is wrong when he claims that Sinclair was merely a Socialist in name who instead equated Socialism with the true ideals of American liberalism.¹³

Regardless of *The Jungle's* actual consequences, Upton Sinclair saw himself not as a political liberal, but as a Socialist. In addition to belonging to the Socialist Party, his fiction was usually self-admitted propaganda, and his expository prose resembled the literature of the scientific Marxist tactics of Europe.¹⁴ In fact, according to Sinclair, it was the piecemeal reform legislation pushed through by political liberals which continually sapped the vigor of the Socialist drive in the United States.¹⁵

There is a critical distinction to be made between the actual effect which *The Jungle* had upon the American scene, and Upton Sinclair's thwarted revolution. The mass movement which Sinclair thought he had identified was far different from the American public's actual response to rapid industrialization.

Two important themes contained in Sinclair's ideal of Socialism resound throughout the final chapters of *The Jungle*: conversion and Social Darwinism. Sinclair's protagonist is pulled through the urban industrial grinding machine until he is eventually spit out into the gutter. Jurgis then wanders aimlessly through the dark streets of the city, a metaphorical lost and beaten lamb. Finally, by chance of fate, he wanders into a mass Socialist meeting where a passionate speaker identifies for Jurgis the root cause of all of his misery.¹⁶

Socialism comes to him like the Messiah, and Sinclair describes the hero's political conversion in very religious terms:

"It was...an almost supernatural experience...like encountering an

¹³Ibid., 14.

¹⁴See Upton Sinclair, *The Industrial Republic: A Study of America Ten Years Hence* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1907).

¹⁵Sundes, "Jungle Revisited", 9-10.

¹⁶Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* with an afterword by Robert C. Downes (1960), (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1906), 290-304, passage.

inhabitant of the fourth dimension of space, a being who was free from one's own limitations"

The author proselytizes further when he describes the Socialist movement as, "the new religion of humanity--or you might say it was the fulfillment of the old religion, since it applied but the literal application of all the teachings of Christ."¹⁷ William A. Bloodsworth Jr. explains Sinclair's equation of politics to religion by stating that, "from the beginning, it appears that he understood the way in which many Socialists accepted Socialism as the culmination of Christianity."¹⁸ Although deeply Christian, Sinclair later launched frequent attacks on institutionalized religion as it tended to encourage the working poor to accept their lot under Capitalism.¹⁹

Sinclair believed that the Socialist movement would organize people to establish the Heavenly Kingdom on Earth, and he urged mass conversion, stating that, "To join the Church of the Social Revolution is to follow the attack of Jesus Christ on the defenders of privilege."²⁰ He goes as far as calling Christ "the world's first revolutionist, the true founder of the Socialist movement; a man whose whole being was one flame of hatred for wealth, and all that wealth stands for...who again and again, in the most explicit language, denounced wealth and the holding of wealth."²¹ Sinclair saw the private ownership of the means of production (concentrated in the hands of so few and secured at the expense of so many) as a threat not only to democracy, but to Christian ethics as well.

Because of his Socialist bent, Sinclair's solution to the industrial crisis was fundamentally different from, and decidedly more ideological than, many of his muckraking peers. Whereas the latter were eventually pacified by liberal concessions and reform legislation, (i.e. government intervention), Sinclair's recently adopted credo contained the idea of inevitability. Socialism is based upon an evolutionary conception of human history, and the title of Sinclair's novel was intended to introduce this perspective.²²

¹⁷Ibid., 311, 319.

¹⁸Bloodsworth, 38.

¹⁹Yoder, 64.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 328-9.

²²See Sinclair, *The Industrial Republic*, clasp. "Industrial Evolution."

In this tooth and claw view of Capitalism, "American society...had returned to the law of the jungle, where might makes right in a brutal survival of the fittest." Life, according to Sinclair, had become a daily struggle for existence in the industrial jungle. The effect of competition was the dehumanization of society, whose its members had been lowered to a beast-like moral standard of kill, or be killed: "Those who survived the dehumanizing competition inherent in capitalism were likely to be the least fit morally."²³

To Upton Sinclair, the Socialist program provided the only practical answer to the violence created by the competitive wage system because it involved a strategy which worked within the existing parameters of evolutionary law--organization. Individually, wage-earners, dependant upon the capitalist for the means of existence, fought each other for survival, and those who lost...were generally exterminated.²⁴ Socialists saw themselves as the only formidable organization because they understood that class-consciousness was necessary to free the proletariat from the exploitation of the capitalist class.²⁵

Sinclair describes the predatory history of economic evolution through a speaker at one of the Socialist meetings in *The Jungle*, who then concludes: the Socialist movement was the expression of their will to survive. The inevitability of revolution depended upon this fact, that they had no choice but to unite or be exterminated; this fact grim and inexorable, depended upon no human will, it was the law of the economic process²⁶

Nevertheless, as Robert Downs reminds us, Sinclair's novel failed to draw the millennium any closer, and "There was only a prodigious commotion about beef and pork."²⁷ Downs contradicts himself in the same article, however, by correctly adding that the impact of *The Jungle* went beyond the issue of bad meat. Viewed in context of the progressive era's response to industrial abuses, Sinclair's portrayal of one industry moved

²³Ibid., 22-3.

²⁴Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 321.

²⁵Ibid., 308.

²⁶Ibid., 321-2.

²⁷Robert C. Downs, in *Critics on Upton Sinclair, Readings in Literary Criticism*, no. 24, Alaburn Blunderman, ed. (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1975), 122.

society and government toward self-reform. Evidently, the young author had struck a chord with the American public, but failed to correctly gauge their sympathy for the Socialist Party.

Such a misunderstanding, Richard Hofstadter maintains, was typical of reformers. In *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter examines the relationship between political thinkers and the ordinary citizen, between the feeling by both that something had gone wrong in American capitalism and "the conception that the proponents had of their own work and the place it would occupy in the larger stream of our history."²⁸ In his criticism of the political movement to which Sinclair belonged, Hofstadter argues that: ...liberal intellectuals, who have rather well rationalized systems of political beliefs, tend to expect that the masses of people, whose actions at certain moments in history coincide with some of these beliefs, will share their other convictions as a matter of logic and principle....they tend to exaggerate the measure of agreement that exists between movements of popular reform and the considered principles of political liberalism. They remake the image of popular rebellion closer to their heart's desire.²⁹

This was Sinclair's error. He enjoyed a receptive public up until the part of the novel in which he revealed his socialist hand.

The administrative control inherent in socialism was anti-theoretical to the American emphasis on individual achievement, and Americans generally feared it. According to Hofstadter, this is what made the reform movement so ironic. The historical importance of the age was that it was the beginning of the welfare state and the redefining of the government's role in business affairs.³⁰ The apparent contradiction in all of this was that the American people, perhaps unwittingly, began to seek refuge from one emerging bureaucracy (the industrialist state), by calling for the formation of another (a more active government)--neither of which were features of the American ideal of individualism. What Hofstadter continually emphasized was that the success of progressive reforms was not due to any public affection for

²⁸Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.*, (New York: Vintage Books, Inc., 1955), 6.

²⁹Ibid., 19.

³⁰Richard Hofstadter, introduction to *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915* Richard Hofstadter, ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1963), 15.

organization, but rather for the need to protect traditional American liberties against the new industrial order.³¹

Although ordinary citizens did not subscribe to reformer's programs and ideologies, they did join them in opposition to the unrestrained monopolistic growth of industry. If the public had been alienated from Sinclair because of his advocacy of socialism (if they were aware of it), they were allied with him because of his description of industrialization and urbanization. "The American tradition of Democracy," Hofstadter explained, "was formed on the farms and in the small villages, and its central ideas were founded in rural sentiments and on rural metaphors."³² The new reality which Sinclair's novel had so forcefully depicted was based on a decadent urban metaphor.

In the difficult transformation of the United States from a rural to an urban society, the public began to revolt against the industrial morality in which they saw cunning and deceit rewarded by the capitalist system. They believed, perhaps incorrectly as Hofstadter argued, that in the traditional agrarian democracy, "economic success" was "related to personal character."³³ In contrast with this ideal, "the great capitalist entrepreneur, hitherto heroic, lost much of his glamour. He was condemned as an exploiter of labor and an extorter from the consumer, and exposed as a corrupter of political life."³⁴ Most importantly, according to Hofstadter, was the popular view that all of this combined to pose "a threat to democracy itself."³⁵

Progressives like Sinclair articulated this American resentment toward industrial expansion and the public's alarm over the condition of democratic values. The end result, says Hofstadter, was that this alarm introduced the notions of the government's active responsibility toward its citizens. The contribution of progressive writers in this scheme was the "realistic journalism and social criticism which has become a permanent quality of

³¹Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 10-11.

³²*Ibid.*, 7.

³³*Ibid.*, 10-11.

³⁴Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 119.

³⁵Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement*, 2.

American thinking." Hofstadter concludes that the movement as a whole "must be understood as a major episode in the history of the American conscience."³⁶

These reforms could not have been advanced by one writer or one ideology. It was, rather, the convergence of numerous ideas, such as the socialist critique and traditional American values. Both shared a rejection of industrial capitalism. Only when such elements merge into a singular movement is real change possible.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 14, 15.