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Sinclair's Socialism: Passion or Overenthusiasm

The question of how much regulation a government ought to impose on its citizens is an oft-repeated one, especially in regard to the economy. Since capitalism became the world's dominant economic system, the discontent of varying groups towards it has spurred alternative theories, one of which is socialism, the doctrine that advocates for public rather than private control of the means of production. In the United States, the late 1800s' shift towards industrialization engendered outrage at corporations' exploitation of workers and the resulting living and working conditions, sparking the rise of the Socialist Party. In 1906, near the peak of American socialism, Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, a novel written as an exposé of the conditions of immigrants' and workers' lives in Chicago at the time. *The Jungle* had sweeping ramifications on both public opinion and governmental oversight of the meatpacking industry, begetting federal food safety laws that would later lead to the Food and Drug Administration still monitoring food production today. However, it was also largely intended as a call to action for socialism, as its main character, Jurgis Rudkus, undergoes a multitude of misfortunes before discovering the socialist cause in Chicago. Sinclair, a socialist himself, fervidly details the advantage of socialism to a working man such as Jurgis, and in many ways as a prominent socialist of that time he does encapsulate its essence, power, and motivation. Ultimately though, he fails to address possible criticisms or the facts about all who might have voted Socialist then, even as his voice throughout the novel certainly matches the opinions of socialist proponents.

While Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* captures the socialist spirit wholly and effectively, it occasionally blinds itself from socialism's true weaknesses and faults as a political force.

Sinclair encapsulates the revolutionary fervor of Progressive Era socialists, and thus *The Jungle* itself portrays the growing swell of the movement. As a prominent socialist himself, of course, it is no wonder that Sinclair's novel nourishes the passion of the most ardent socialists at the time. In fact, Sinclair spends a significant number of pages extolling socialism's virtues, describing Jurgis's awakening to it as a "deliver[ance] from the thralldom of despair" brought by "the voice of the poor [and] of the oppressed."¹ The whole novel, indeed, seems predicated on the glories of socialism: an idealistic tale of an immigrant crushed by the capitalistic industrial system and brought back to himself by the calling of socialism, a story filled with the lowest of griefs to build up to the great climax of a renewed spirit and hope. It may seem, on the whole, far too dramatic to ring true, and yet Sinclair's avid call for socialism that echoes throughout the novel is one that resonated with many socialists at the time. When Eugene Debs, a Socialist leader, was jailed for his opposition to the United States' entry into World War I, a Colombian socialist wrote to him in reverence, calling him a "venerable martyr" whose "deeds [and] pains...pierced [them] in the inmost recesses of the heart."² Debs and Sinclair themselves almost mimic each other in their lamentations of capitalism. Debs expounds in a letter that "the railroads, telegraph, telephone, express, etc. are all owned and operated by the government" and that "the government regulation of the trust and corporations is a roaring farce"; Sinclair exclaims in *The Jungle* that "the power which really governs the United States...is the Railroad Trust," which the people applaud for going after the Beef Trust, "never dream[ing] that it is [all] really the...battle of commercial competition."³ *The Jungle*'s righteous fury may at times seem

¹ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 283, 281.

² C. Jacinto Albarracin, correspondence with Eugene V. Debs, 1921, *JSTOR*.

³ Eugene V. Debs, correspondence with Robert D. Heinl, 1912, *JSTOR*; Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 296.

dramatic, but its language and passion emulate the spirit of socialists of the era, enthusiastic to its core.

Moreover, Sinclair's enthusiasm and arguments are socialist down to the details. One socialist's pamphlet stated that "the living wage is that share in the products of the common toil which belongs to men," and that the government ought to "municipalize the street-car lines, nationalize the coal mines, the forests, the iron mines, [and] stop the competition of children and the starving in the labor market."⁴ Sinclair exposes many of these grievances in his own novel, describing the streetcar overcrowding, with Ona's illnesses beginning when "the greedy street-car corporation...turn[s] her out into the rain," and detailing young Stanislovas's story of being forced to work to keep his family alive, "never know[ing] what the sun look[s] like...at the rate of five cents per hour," just another of the "million and three-quarters of children...earning their livings in the United States."⁵ His gripe with the systems of Chicago and the systems of America overall matches the socialist zeitgeist note for note.

Accurate, too, is Sinclair's choice to write about an immigrant family – in particular, a Chicagoan immigrant family – because an integral part of Chicago's socialism was the working-class immigrants of the Progressive Era. In fact, out of nine socialist publications in Chicago, six languages, from English to Armenian to Swedish, were represented, and the smaller, more community-specific, immigrant papers had more dedicated followings, just as Jurgis's pains as an immigrant in an unfamiliar, greedy land makes him more dedicated and grateful for his socialist awakening.⁶ Chicago itself had four socialist conventions from 1898 to 1910, including the founding of its Socialist Party in 1901; the stronghold of socialism was often

⁴ Henry Demarest Lloyd, "The Safety of the Future Lies in Organized Labor" (pamphlet, American Federation of Labor, 1893), 7, *JSTOR*.

⁵ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 132, 70.

⁶ "Socialist Publications in the Era of the Jungle," Entries Toward a Collaborative Atlas of Chicago, UChicago, Dec. 27, 2017, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/collaborativechicagoatlas/2017/12/27/socialist-publications-in-chicago/>.

said to be in the Midwest, especially Milwaukee, lending more truth to the burgeoning socialist movement Jurgis encounters in Chicago.⁷ Additionally, just as Debs went to jail and discovered “socialism...that helped [him] out of darkness into light” through writings from socialists sent to him, Jurgis goes to jail and uncovers Duane, a man who ends up exposing government corruption which allows Jurgis to later see past the lies of a South Carolina ‘pitchfork senator.’”⁸ Even this anecdote designed to uncover the brutality of prison parallels the realities of socialists. Jurgis himself and his story truly hold steady to the socialist story.

Furthermore, Sinclair allows himself to delve into the complexities and nuances of socialist thought. In one particular passage, he details the debate between two socialists, one with a background in philosophy who identifies as a “philosophic anarchist” and another moved to ideology by his interpretation of Christianity.⁹ Indeed, many socialists did derive their passion from God: as Sinclair’s ex-preacher claims that Jesus was “the true founder of the socialist movement,” a letter to Debs states that “Jesus...preached Communism to [his] disciples.”¹⁰ In an article published by the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a Christian socialist fellowship conference rejected another branch of socialism, disavowing socialism without religion.¹¹ Others like the anarchist, however, derive their ideology from other sources. Certainly, throughout socialism’s history, socialists have always wrestled about the type of socialism they wish to endorse. Where early 1800s Utopian socialists often argued that capitalism bred sins such as greed and proposed small cooperative communities, such as old early monastic orders and Robert Owen’s New Harmony, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels thought their brand too fantastical compared to their own widespread idea of socialism through a war between classes. In the 1890s, orthodox

⁷ “Socialist Publications in the Era of the Jungle”; Robert F. Hoxie, “‘The Rising Tide of Socialism’: A Study,” *Journal of Political Economy* 19, no. 8 (1911): 611, *JSTOR*.

⁸ Eugene Debs, “How I Became a Socialist,” *The Comrade*, Apr. 1902, American Yawp; Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 302.

⁹ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 309.

¹⁰ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 306; John Avirette, correspondence with Eugene V. Debs, 1920, *JSTOR*.

¹¹ “Socialism Gets Some Hard Jolts,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 3, 1907, *ProQuest*.

socialists who believed in Marx's worldwide revolution of the proletariat competed with revisionists who advocated for gradual and peaceful transition through such methods as unions. Sinclair himself faced socialism's disagreements when he proposed an End Poverty in California movement during the Great Depression only to have it rejected by Norman Thomas, the leader of the Socialist Party at the time, because it was not moving toward socialism.¹² By portraying that not all socialism is the same, that socialism is not a monolithic ideology, Sinclair holds true to the accuracies of the movement.

One of the prominent branches of socialism in the United States – manifested in part through the aforementioned Industrial Workers of the World union, or 'Wobblies' – was syndicalism, which developed in the late 1800s from French trade-union movements. Indeed, this extremely complex relationship between labor unions and socialism is corroborated by Sinclair's portrayal of it. In many ways, labor unions and socialists share the same values. In 1903, when President Theodore Roosevelt reinstated a foreman in the government printing office who had been unfair to labor unions, unions across the country wrote letters against it, including a Chicago organization that declared that "unless the principles involved are met by the president, every organization in the United States will be asked to make the issue personal and carry it into the next national campaign," a claim that resonates with socialist ideas of overthrowing political corruption.¹³ The Wobblies' 1912 textile strike essentially coined the socialist slogan "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too."¹⁴ Debs, in fact, made his start by uniting railway workers into the first American industrial union and leading it in a strike in 1894, then turned to socialism. In 1907, an academic even proposed that unions were moving toward socialism and becoming class-conscious, pointing out that wage-earners

¹² John Patrick Diggins, "Why the Future Never Happened," the *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1985.

¹³ "Join in Protest to Roosevelt," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1903, *ProQuest*.

¹⁴ Beverly Gage, "America Can Never Sort Out," the *New York Times*, July 17, 2018.

were beginning to bargain more collectively, that the president of the Telegraphers' Union once said their “fight w[ould] go on as long as capitalism exists,” and that more than 65% of the 275 Socialist congressional candidates in 1906 held memberships in trade organizations.¹⁵ In Wisconsin, the secretary of the Socialist Party stated that “the trade union movement is the economic wing...of the labor movement.”¹⁶

On the other hand, only 20% of the 1906 trade-unionists were socialists, and the largest labor organization, the American Federation of Labor, was staunchly anti-socialist and anti-revolutionary.¹⁷ Where the socialist Wobblies led successful militant strikes by combining the power of various ethnicities, the Federation often reinforced divisions between skilled and unskilled workers as well as excluded both Black people and women.¹⁸ A member of the Newsboys' Union's Federation membership book's rules of paying dues each month with the consequence of not being entitled to the defense fund contrasts definitively with Sinclair's Comrade Ostrinki's claim that any Socialist Party member who cannot pay their dues is excused from paying.¹⁹ Sinclair mimics this divide between socialism and unions, deploring unions' disconnect in Jurgis's stint manipulating union members into Mike Scully's hands – rightfully so, as many unionists such as a Federation member M.M. Mangasarian claimed that socialism lacked “the brains of the organizer.”²⁰ Sinclair, also, however, has Ostrinki proclaim that “as fast as the unions were broken up [by employers] the men [are] coming over to the socialists.”²¹ Sinclair properly portrays the nuances of unions' exchange with socialism: the disagreements,

¹⁵ John Curtis Kennedy, “Socialistic Tendencies in American Trade Unions,” *Journal of Political Economy* 15, no. 8 (1907): 479, *JSTOR*.

¹⁶ Kennedy, “Socialistic Tendencies in American Trade Unions,” 479.

¹⁷ Kennedy, “Socialistic Tendencies in American Trade Unions,” 482.

¹⁸ Eric Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?,” *History Workshop*, no. 17 (1984): 68, *JSTOR*.

¹⁹ Morris Elkins, “American Federation of Labor Membership Book” (document, American Federation of Labor, 1921), 3, *JSTOR*; Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 288.

²⁰ “Socialism Gets Some Hard Jolts.”

²¹ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 287.

the awakening of some, and the common ground, managing to tackle and capture this difficult disagreement. In many ways, *The Jungle* truly does encapsulate socialism's zeal, complexities, and relationships.

However, not even a socialist of the time such as Sinclair can ever properly epitomize such a movement. Regarding socialism after the publication of *The Jungle*, Sinclair predicts the onward expansion and spirit of socialism's continuation but does not predict its fading from the political stage in the 1900s. This is, of course, no true fault of Sinclair for not being a prophet, but it can perhaps be argued that his zeal for socialism blinds him from the movement's true future. *The Jungle* ends in a passionate description of the 1904 elections, with figures such as the Socialist vote in Indiana rising "from 2,300 to 12,000" and an organizer's speech declaring that Socialists "shall have the radical Democracy left with a lie" and that "Chicago will be [theirs]."²² It heralds Debs' increase in vote of 150% since 1900 and dares to dream of a complete socialist future. Admittedly, it has many grounds for this dream. In 1903 Chicago, the Socialist vote was in fact 6,285,364, a rise from the 1881 vote of 373,850.²³ In 1910, the American Socialist party claimed that "more than five hundred representatives had been elected to office," including one congressman, and in 1912, Debs did receive 6% of the popular vote, with Socialists holding 1,200 offices in 340 cities, including 79 mayors.²⁴ Milwaukee even had three Socialist mayors, and under them gained a reputation as "a well-managed municipality" with an increase in minimum wage 28 years before the federal government, community parks, an eight-hour workday standard for municipal workers, and an excellent public education.²⁵ One of its mayors was so popular that he was in office for 24 years, and in 1936, Time magazine said Milwaukee

²² Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 316-317, 318.

²³ Sumner, William Graham, "The Challenge of Facts (1914)," *American History*, ABC-CLIO.

²⁴ Robert F. Hoxie, "'The Rising Tide of Socialism': A Study"; E.J. Dionne, Jr. and William A. Galston, "Socialism: A Short Primer," *Brookings*, May 13, 2019.

²⁵ Nathan Robinson, "Socialism Is as American as Apple Pie," *The Guardian*, Dec. 10, 2019.

was “perhaps the best-governed city in the U.S.”²⁶ In Wisconsin as a whole in 1914, both major parties had adopted parts of socialism such as an eight-hour workday and ending child labor.²⁷

Unfortunately, more than a hundred years later, the socialist dream has all but disappeared. While the New Deal “drew on proposals pioneered by socialists,” and a young socialist named Michael Harrington did help launch the war on poverty, “socialism [has become] largely shunned or irrelevant” in electoral politics.²⁸ Through World War I’s repression of socialism in favor of the war with the Sedition and Espionage Acts, along with the Red Scare that conflated fear of communism with socialism, U.S. socialism was “reduced to a skeleton of itself” as Americans came to understand socialism under the lens of the USSR’s totalitarianism.²⁹ Some, indeed, claim that socialism’s pacifism killed itself in its adherence to its own ideology.³⁰ Even in Germany, once the primary stage for socialism, the 1950s Socialist Party suffered a series of electoral defeats from the Christian Democratic Union and gave up on its commitment to abolition of capitalism. While Sinclair could not have foreseen either World War I or the Cold War, *The Jungle*’s final pages make this part of its socialism claim both inaccurate and tragic in the face of socialism’s crushing defeat. His unwavering belief in the Socialist Party proved false, in no small part because of his absolute devotion.

In specific cases of socialism’s political success, too, *The Jungle* fails to acknowledge their true nature, especially their lack of class-consciousness. As previously stated, many socialistic plans and executions came from people who were not truly socialists, who only saw the capabilities of some pieces of it, such as FDR’s New Deal and trade-unionists of the time. Moreover, despite Milwaukee’s socialist strength, its city clerk once said that “they have to go up

²⁶ Robinson, “Socialism Is as American as Apple Pie.”

²⁷ Robinson, “Socialism Is as American as Apple Pie.”

²⁸ Dionne and Galston, “Socialism: A Short Primer.”

²⁹ Joey Laurup, “Bernie Sanders’ New Hampshire Victory,” *Time*, Feb. 12, 2020.

³⁰ Eric Foner, “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?,” 71.

against the obstructions of a minority in the council [and] limitations imposed by the city charter, the courts, and the state legislature,” a feeling surely shared by many such cities with socialist mayors and not much else.³¹ While much of socialist success itself could certainly have been indicative of collective class consciousness, at least half could be explained by other causes, such as the influence of immigrants, apathy, and local issues such as local industrial depressions – temporary causes that might not lead to mass change. A Missouri newspaper once stated that “the socialistic success was first due to illiteracy, second to dissatisfaction in the Democratic party, and third to socialist literature accepted as facts by the lower class.”³² A study into socialism found that out of 42 socialist victories, less than 11 could be called working-class victories, and the candidate’s issues other than socialism often factored in strongly, such as prohibition or taxation. At least 7 others were simply speakers enlisting young men in small towns with less permanent economic and political basis.³³ A vast amount grew from discouragement in politics – less a victory of awakening the masses from their “plod[ding] on like beasts of burden” and more a last-resort option.³⁴ These unfortunate components, which Sinclair never addresses, make his listing of “little towns which...made amazing and unprecedented increases in a single year,” such as “Benedict, Kansas from 26 to 260 [and] Martin’s Ferry, Ohio, from 0 to 296” far more lackluster.³⁵ While Sinclair spends paragraphs upon paragraphs heralding socialism, the details of their political fight are extremely vague, merely recognized in the time jump of Jurgis’s life. The details of socialist successes are important, and Sinclair’s failure to recognize them in *The Jungle* reveals yet another example of his disregard for socialism’s weaknesses.

³¹ Robert F. Hoxie, “‘The Rising Tide of Socialism’: A Study.”

³² Robert F. Hoxie, “‘The Rising Tide of Socialism’: A Study.”

³³ Robert F. Hoxie, “‘The Rising Tide of Socialism’: A Study.”

³⁴ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 280.

³⁵ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 315.

Perhaps most detrimentally, Sinclair does not explore either the counterarguments of socialism or non-workingmen socialists. Various people from various walks of life have frowned upon socialism. In 1904, a college student wrote a paper on it, stating that it “requires the state to overleap the purpose for which it was designed and invest in ignorant laborers’ undue privileges,” that “equality of income would remove the stimulus of invention,” and that “the illegitimate offspring [of the working class does] more toward creating a degenerate society than the so-called brutal demands of the employer.”³⁶ William Graham Sumner, an advocate for social Darwinism, went on at length about how “competition...is a law of nature,” with hereditary wealth as the strongest instrument to advance society.³⁷ He stated that “if a man is forbidden to labor over eight hours per day...he is forbidden to exercise so much industry as he may be willing to expend.”³⁸ Even the Supreme Court at one point claimed that discrimination against those who were members of unions or were socialists by employers was part of personal liberty.³⁹ Though one could argue that the pure story of *The Jungle* refutes such points, such as Sumner’s statement of hours of labor, Sinclair’s lack of direct address weakens his argument. Even when the *The Jungle* socialists make a point to invite an anti-Socialist magazine editor, Sinclair allows him no dialogue to truly refute, preferring to call him naïve and delve into another reiteration of the faults of capitalism.⁴⁰ Every argument has two sides, and to properly portray it means to properly portray both. Whether or not the student or Sumner were correct in their arguments, without allowing room for true discourse, Sinclair essentially ignores the ideological debate that is an integral piece of true socialistic struggle.

³⁶ Katharine C. Ricks, “Socialism and the Socialism Problem” (document, American Federation of Labor, 1904), 11, *JSTOR*.

³⁷ Sumner, William Graham, “The Challenge of Facts (1914).”

³⁸ Sumner, William Graham, “The Challenge of Facts (1914).”

³⁹ “Adair v. United States (1908),” *American History*, ABC-CLIO.

⁴⁰ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 308.

Women, too, found themselves spurned by socialism, with women suffragists in 1891 denouncing any ideas that suffragists were associated with socialism.⁴¹ Yet, despite Sinclair's hundreds of pages talking about women and their particular struggles under capitalism, such as his acknowledgment of Ona and Elzbieta's fate with having "famil[ies] to keep alive [and] ruthless economic laws that arrang[e] it that [they can] only do this by working" constantly, he does not involve them in Jurgis's final triumph.⁴² He simply states that Elzbieta is "impervious to socialism" and leaves Marija to her drug-addicted fate of prostitution.⁴³ One doubtlessly could claim that this simply reflects the reality of women under capitalism, unable to do much more than work, and yet the Chicago newspaper *The Progressive Woman* published letters from both urban and rural women with insight into their thoughts about socialism.⁴⁴ Similarly, Sinclair barely mentions people of color at all, preferring to discuss European immigrants, even though plenty of people of color were involved in fights for economic and social freedom.⁴⁵ By discluding anyone other than white men from the final revelatory awakening and merely using minorities as tools to prove the futility of their society as-is, Sinclair fails to capture the complete nature of the movement. Once again, he refuses to fully acknowledge any aspects he deems less important than his own approach to socialism.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* effectively describes and epitomizes the ardor of Progressive-era socialists, particularly the working-class, immigrant angle and the complexities of socialism as a movement through Jurgis, debates, and unions. However, he fails to prevent his devotion to the ideology from blinding him, and in doing so, neglects integral pieces in his portrayal, specifically any issues or problems with either socialism or the people advocating for

⁴¹ "Female Suffrage and Socialism," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 28, 1891.

⁴² Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 126.

⁴³ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 291.

⁴⁴ "Socialist Publications in the Era of the Jungle," Entries Toward a Collaborative Atlas of Chicago.

⁴⁵ Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?," 68.

it. To properly promote socialism as a remedy for all the various evils Sinclair describes, he must look past his devotion and view his novel through the readers' critical lens. Ultimately, though, despite these shortcomings and despite the future of socialism the modern-day now holds to be true, Sinclair's *The Jungle* retains and communicates the same message it always did: a compelling and sensational argument to turn society over on its ear and embrace a collective good. It is a passion piece written by a true socialist, even with its objective flaws, and though socialism might have been crushed by history's inevitabilities, future readers who may well look to it to guide them will still find the true essence of the early 1900s socialists.

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