

Walking Through The Jungle: Upton Sinclair Against Capitalism

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, the American novel started exploring social themes and raising social problems. Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, which appeared in 1906, was a true sensation for American reading community. On the one hand, it described the outrageous practices of meatpacking industry prevalent at those times on the example of slaughterhouses in Chicago suburbs; on the other hand, it exposed the hapless life of American worker: the book showed what kind of suffering the worker experienced from his thankless work and poor living conditions.

Sinclair hoped that the novel, which was avidly read both in America and abroad, would help improve the plight of American worker. However, to his disappointment, the government and society focused their attention exclusively on unhealthy meatpacking practices, which brought about necessary, but still superficial reforms, ignoring the main topic: the life of the common worker. Sinclair was labeled "a muckraker", whereas he in reality aspired for the higher ideal of changing the existing social order, the thought expressed both in his novels and articles. The writer did not take into account that his ideas of non-violent, but drastic change of social order were alien for American society, for which capitalism was the most natural and acceptable form of functioning. The present article refers to the opinions of both American and non-American scholars to explain the reasons for the failure of Sinclair's expectations, and, based on their views, concludes why such a failure took place.

Keywords: *The Jungle*, muckraker, socialism, capitalism, Americanism

I. The Jungle and its Importance for American Society

"I know of three contemporary American writers who are well worth reading: Frank Norris, Jack London and Upton Sinclair", said prominent Danish critic Georg Brandes upon his arrival in America in 1914, as quoted by the eminent American scholar Floyd Dell in his study *Upton Sinclair: A Study In Social Protest* (1928). Indeed, for readers from both America as well as the former Soviet Union, Jack London and Upton Sinclair were two writers, who differed distinctly from the other grandees of American literature at the beginning of the 20th century. London and Sinclair tackled a problem that had been insufficiently covered in American literature: the social problems of the American worker. This accounts for their appeal to members of the European left and to readers in the former Soviet Union.

Upton Sinclair was born in the South, and a southern spirit of nobility and honour accompanied him throughout the whole of his life. His parents and relatives wanted to make a businessman of him, but from the very beginning he started writing – first, in a local newspaper, then in larger periodicals. Grown in a refined, but impoverished family and having seen sharp contrast between the rich and the poor, Sinclair developed an acute desire to expose the injustice that was embedded in a capitalist society. Gradu-

ally, he started writing socially critical articles, "raking muck", wherever he was able to do so (Делл, 1928).

"Sinclair retells one such experience of how a newspaper provided him with an opportunity to write about abuses at small factories. Instead, he sent an article about the factories of the powerful iron-and-steel trust, where people worked 7 days a week for 12 hours a day, where money meant everything, and the life of a worker – nothing. On one occasion, a worker's legs were caught in the wheel of a gigantic rotating crane. In order to save his legs, the managers would have had to dismantle the machine, which would cost more money, and so instead, they let the crane continue to run. Both legs of the unfortunate man were cut." (Уразов, 1925, p. 8).

The plight of the American worker was what Upton Sinclair was interested in most of all. *The Jungle* is the book, in which the writer reaches the peak of his artistic creativity and emotional strain. The reader literally shudders at the horrors experienced by working people and reacts with compassion for the poor and indignation against the rich.

The history of how *The Jungle* was written is quite simple. During an industrial stockyard strike, Sinclair wrote an appeal to the workers in a socialist magazine, *Appeal to Reason*, intending to reveal the truth about their working

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conditions. The magazine commissioned Sinclair to write a novel, which could be published in several volumes, about the workers from the Meatpacking Trust. Sinclair conceived a large feature work, in which he intended to depict the living conditions of industrial workers and show how these conditions would accelerate the move towards socialism.

At that time a large strike in Packingtown in Chicago had come to an end, and several newspaper articles on the lives of the workers there came to Sinclair's attention. He visited Chicago slaughterhouses and spent seven weeks among the workers:

*"The workers paid the most cordial attention to me as a socialist, and talked to me about everything. I would spend nights with them in conversations. I studied their life in the finest details, writing down everything I saw and heard. Apart from the workers, I had conversations with enterprisers and maintenance staff, watchmen, tavern keepers and policemen, doctors, merchants and attorneys, with political figures, clergymen and cultural workers. I put a lot of work into checking the smallest facts, and I know that with this regard my book *The Jungle* can pass the most severe exam: everything in it is so credible, as if it represented a statistical account... I lived seven weeks in Packingtown, and for this period of time did not find a single light ray in the life of the workers of this region of Chicago, not counting pleasure, which drunkenness provides them with." (Вайсенберг, 1927, p. 24-25).*

To briefly summarize the plot, the story begins as a Lithuanian family immigrates to the United States from the Russian Empire attracted by the prospects of better living conditions and a better future for their children. Deceived by various travel agents, they arrive in Chicago. From the very beginning they experience fraud and outright swindle. For example, the house, which they purchase in installments, proves to be a "second-hand" one, sold and re-sold many times to unlucky purchasers, without even such basic requirements as sewage utilities, heating, or a bathroom. The food which they buy contains a multitude of unhealthy chemical additives, and fails to satisfy their hunger. The prospects for the children vanish when they are forced to work just like their parents. Nothing is more disappointing than their jobs: working from morning till night, in terrible heat in summer, and horrible cold in winter, being urged to work as fast as possible, receiving a meagre wage that keeps them on the threshold of starvation, while living with the daily fear of unemployment. They work in the stockyards (slaughterhouses) at a gigantic factory, where the average work day is 11 hours. Workers are faced with the daily risk of being injured, crippled or killed. The speed of operations is so fast, and the volume of cattle to be slaugh-

tered so high that many workers get injured or are crippled for life. Most of them are fired after two or three years due to deteriorating health or exhaustion. The house of the Lithuanian immigrants is very far from the factory, and in winter Jurgis Rudkus (the protagonist of the novel and the head of the family) has to accompany his wife and carry his son on his back through snowdrifts and snowstorms because they don't have enough money to pay for the tram ticket. Much of the cattle delivered to the stockyards are ill with tuberculosis. Not only the meat of tuberculosis cattle, but also that of dead cattle is cut and sold. Not a gram of any meat, healthy or ill, goes to waste. And the fate of the workers is little better. The worst off are those who work in the cooking rooms. There are huge pots, in which meat is cooked in boiling water. Occasionally, a worker falls into a boiling pot and there is little left of him when he is retrieved from it. Sometimes a worker who has fallen into a pot is not discovered at all and by the time his bones are withdrawn from the water, the rest of his body has traveled all over the world as first-class lard...

Gradually, all members of the Rudkus family either die or fall into prostitution. After Jurgis, the sole survivor, leaves Packingtown following the death of his last child, he eventually meets activists for the workers' movement, who help convert him to socialism.

Such are the events depicted in Sinclair's novel, based on his own seven-week experience in Packingtown. When the first parts of the book were published in the *Appeal to Reason*, its fame began to spread. In his letter to Sinclair, prominent journalist and novelist David Graham Phillips said that he never would have thought that he could enjoy reading a book issued as a series in a magazine. "I am now reading *The Jungle* and cannot find words to express those feelings, which it raises in me. *The Jungle* is a great work. Somehow I think that you yourself will be astounded by the reaction, which will rise around it. It is unimaginable to pass beside it indifferently – the book is too strong, trustful, too tragic." (Делл, 1928, p. 92).

Jack London, Sinclair's comrade in socialist convictions, did not take long to respond to *The Jungle*. He called the book the "Uncle Tom's Cabin of the slaves of hired work" (Foner, 1947, p. 524). When *The Jungle* was published in 1906 as a separate book, London's words were inscribed on the cover. The book was a huge and immediate success and was selling like hotcakes in both America as well as Britain and its colonies. It was translated and published in seventeen countries, informing the entire world about the ugly side of industrial capitalism. Upton Sinclair retold the sufferings of America's "hired slaves" (Делл, 1928, p. 92).

Sociologism is one of the most characteristic features of Sinclair's method. Along with Norris, London, and Dreiser, Sinclair was one of the main representatives of the social novel genre in the USA. The reason for the incredible suc-

cess of Sinclair's book should be understood as part of a general reaction against the prevalent tendency in late 19th century American literature to ignore social themes (Богословский, 1976). Sinclair proved to be among those who contributed to the development of social realism. "The Jungle shows that he clearly has a connection with Norris (The Octopus) and London (The People of the Abyss) on the one hand, and with the "muckrakers" on the other" (Богословский, 1976, p. 35). The term "Muckrakers" refers to American journalists and writers active in 1900-1914 who "aimed to expose political, commercial, and corporate corruption, and record frankly the age of industrialism, urban poverty, and conspicuous consumption". The names of Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Upton Sinclair are closely associated with this movement. (The Hutchinson Encyclopedia, 1988, p. 733). Like the muckrakers, Sinclair informs the public at large about the negative sides of industrial capitalism. However, most American critics classify Sinclair solely as a writer belonging to the muckraker school associated specifically with the turn of the century (Богословский, 1976).

Is such a classification justified? Or should Sinclair be interpreted in a broader context? Did he succeed in achieving his higher objectives?

II. Hitting the Stomach Instead of the Heart: A Logical Consequence?

The Literary success of The Jungle in America was soon overshadowed by the tremendous sensation and appalling scandal caused by his depiction of the canned products manufacturing process in Packingtown. Sinclair sent copies of The Jungle to President Theodore Roosevelt, who assured him that there would be an investigation into the matter. Roosevelt delegated the investigation to the Department of Agriculture, which, according to Sinclair, was like "asking a burglar to determine his own guilt". After the investigation, however, the Pure Food and Drug Act was adopted, imposing strict regulations for food production, including meat products. Roosevelt signed the Act on June 30, 1906 (Kantor, 1976).

At the same time, however, Roosevelt distrusted Sinclair and his fellow socialists, disturbed by their potentially disruptive social activities. According to Roosevelt, they could not do anything positive for society because they were devoid of intelligence. At the same time, Roosevelt considered "the growth of the Socialist party in this country" as "far more ominous than any populist or similar movement in the past" (Kantor, 1976, p. 1204). The term "muckraker" was in fact coined by Roosevelt himself (Kantor, 1976), and although he had applied the term to Sinclair as well, he obviously attached more weight to reputation than he was willing to admit, taking into account the given quotation.

The success of The Jungle offered Sinclair a wealth of opportunities for active agitation as a socialist writer. Manufacturers and large financial enterprises were, however, seriously alarmed by the sensation, and, attentive to Roosevelt's warning, combined efforts and influence to prevent the spread of denunciations and propaganda. They attempted to convert the fledgling author in the public eye into an irresponsible sensationalist (Делл, 1928), i.e. a muckraker.

As a result of the book's success, the main problem raised by Sinclair – the miserable plight of workers – sank into the background, and the public focused its attention on those parts of the novel that described the manufacture of contaminated, spoiled meat.

Not long after the investigations and public response, Upton Sinclair was famously quoted in Cosmopolitan magazine in October, 1906 (Kantor, 1976, p. 1202):

"I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."

This tendency to present Sinclair as a muckraker continued. The authors of The Cycle of American Literature aspired to disprove Jack London's famous quote about The Jungle. They classified The Jungle as a muckraking novel, attributing it to be the most influential novel of the movement. "An extremist novel, ending by an accusing speech in a socialist spirit", says one of them. "It is very comical that the most famous of Upton Sinclair's novels, The Jungle... was read extensively because it disclosed scandalous practices in meatpacking industry", says another. However, in Europe and in Russia, critics recognized the problem of social transformations in the book – problems to be confronted by socialism. "The Jungle deals not only with the appalling filth and the untidy methods of meat production", wrote Vestnik Inostranny Literature in 1906, "the book also deals with other issues: the author discusses the trends of socialism... introduces into the literary environment those, who wish to improve and reform society". The same idea is underlined in 1906 by the journal Russkoye bogatstvo: "The Jungle is not only a "denunciation" novel... The meatpacking trust is a symbol of capital. Therefore, The Jungle is a social novel... The author is a socialist who aspires to prove that the horrors and depersonalization of people described in The Jungle will vanish only when a more just and ethical form of manufacturing is established" (Богословский, 1976, p. 37).

The strongest argument against the label "just a muckraking novel" is the plot itself, which ends with Jurgis Rudkus' conversion to socialism. The novel ends with the words of a socialist orator:

And then will begin the rush that will never be checked, the tide that will never turn till it has reached its flood – that will be irresistible, overwhelming – the rallying of the outraged workingmen of Chicago to our standard! And we shall organize them, we shall drill them, we shall marshal them for the victory! We shall bear down the opposition, we shall sweep it before us – and Chicago will be ours! Chicago will be ours! CHICAGO WILL BE OURS! (Sinclair, U. The Jungle, The New American Library, 1960, p. 341)

Sinclair was a devoted socialist and he believed in the “velvet” transformation of the USA’s capitalist system into a socialist one. In *The Industrial Republic*, which he wrote and published in 1907, i.e. just following the success of *The Jungle*, the writer formulated his socio-political creed, delivering a prediction as to when it would be realized:

What do I mean by an Industrial Republic? I mean an organization for the production and distribution of wealth, whose members are established upon a basis of equality; who elect representatives to govern the organization; and who receive the full value of what their labour produces. I mean an industrial government of the people, by the people, for the people; a community in which the means of production have been made the inalienable property of the State. My purpose in writing this book is to point out forces which are now rapidly developing in America; and which, when they have attained to maturity, will usher in the Industrial Republic by a process as natural and as inevitable as that by which a chick breaks out of its shell or a child comes from the womb at the proper hour. I believe that the economic process is whirling us on with terrific momentum toward the crisis; and I look to see the most essential features of the great transformation accomplished in America within one year after the Presidential election of 1912. (Sinclair, U. 1907, p. X)

The Progressive Era was an age that produced the most famous muckrakers. Upton Sinclair rose above the muckraker mainstream and made a very bold and daring statement: that socialism would triumph in the United States as early as the 1912 presidential elections. His wish would never come true. Sinclair would prove many times through both his novels and actions that he was not just a muckraker – take, for example, his candidacy for the Governor of California in 1934, and his establishment of a commune in Englewood, New Jersey, called “Helicon Hall Colony”, which unfortunately existed for six months (Делл, 1928).

Let us now try to answer the question posed in the title of Part II: was it logical that *The Jungle* hit America’s stomach instead of its heart? The viewpoints of American scholars are critical here, because they, like the author, are members of the very society in question – that society, too, for which the novel was written.

“Why, then, do these books not have the authority which they should?” asks Robert Morss Lovett about Sinclair’s books, primarily *The Jungle*. In his opinion, it is due to the one-sided treatment of American society in the novel, with its over-emphasis on the existence of evil, formed by a generalization of particular cases, and **its extreme focus on the ideological component (socialism) as a panacea for society, an idea which is, however, shared by very a limited number of Americans**. Lovett gives an example of America’s higher educational system, with its instances of encroachment upon freedom of thought and action. Such infringements, however, can neither be ascribed to the “conspiracy of the possessing classes”, nor can it necessarily proceed from the nature of the “present social order”. “His explanation is over-simplified; he tends to see his facts in the light of a single motive” (Lovett, 1928, p. 712).

George Becker points out that this pioneering novel of American proletarian literature was written based not on rational reasoning, but rather on personal perceptions and emotion. Every page of the novel is blazing with the desire to put a swift and final end to injustice with whatever means it takes. Becker has the impression that Sinclair was convinced that he could “strike the reader’s heart” only by making the reader see, smell and feel those sufferings, which the inhabitants of Packingtown experienced themselves. Sinclair’s own experience reinforced his ability to do so. “Unfortunately for the novel”, Becker reckons, “the author turns the last third of it into a tract advocating Socialism, with the final fifty pages ceasing to be a story at all and becoming a harangue” (Becker, p. 133). According to Becker, Sinclair is the most productive, most indefatigable, and, perhaps, most efficient denunciator throughout the fiction of his day. However, being a serious person, he is considered an eccentric in America. A supposed seeker of truth, he stands accused of creating a depiction of American society so oversimplified that it could be called false. Becker has little doubt that abroad, where *The Jungle* has become very popular through many translations, the writer has had more influence than in his own country. The non-American’s eager acceptance of Sinclair’s approach owes to the distance that obscures the oversimplification of events. **“The American is bound to be resistant to the formulas of Socialism as Sinclair preaches them”**, states Becker (1959, p. 140), and presenting these formulas in an adapted and “oversimplified” manner does little to make them more attractive (Becker, 1959).

Hugh J. Dawson cites the opinion of Sir Winston

Churchill, one of the famous adepts of capitalism and one connected with America through his mother. In 1906, a two-part review was published by Churchill in the P.T.O. edition, who was then a member of the Liberal Party in the British House of Commons. He praises the novel highly for showing deep insight and offering great descriptions of the industrial practices of “packers”. However, Churchill reacts with biting irony to Jurgis’s conversion to socialism and the concluding speech by the agitator:

The reader will not, I think, be satisfied with this conclusion. After all that has happened, after all that has been suffered, he will look for some more complete consolation. Not so Mr. Upton Sinclair. This shrewd delineator of characters, this painstaking and careful exponent of detail, appears sincerely unconscious of our disappointment. Consolation? – Have we not the Socialist orator? Regeneration? – is not Jurgis fully instructed? Salvation? – who can doubt the earnestness of his convictions? What more can anyone require? Let us rejoice that through all his filth and agony one heart at least has been saved from error. There is one man more in Chicago who may be trusted to vote straight for the Socialist ticket. Hurrah!

(Dawson, 1991, p. 76)

Dawson’s article ends with a quote from an editorial letter from the P.T.O. issue, devoted to Churchill’s review and *The Jungle*, which reminds us not to forget that the city of Chicago is more than just the Packingtown described by Sinclair, but a “great city of as strange and startling contrasts as any in the world” (Dawson, 1991, p. 77).

A rather original opinion about Sinclair’s failure can be found in J. Michael Duvall’s analysis of the Progressive Era, a time when the capitalist economy converted society into a gigantic mechanical organism working exclusively to satisfy its own stomach. Appraising Sinclair as “the muckiest of muckrakers”, Duvall says that, in contrast to muckrakers, who did no more than seek filth in the world around them, Sinclair’s muck-rake was directed towards social change. There is only one way to create heaven on the earth: expose society to the dirt, raise disgust towards it, and provide an alternative – Socialism. “Thus did Sinclair hope to hit the heart by going through the stomach”, says Duvall (2002, p. 30). However, describing the outrage of industrial capitalism in his book, Sinclair could not combat what Duvall calls the “alimentary” nature of economy, which was established in America a decade after the Gilded Age. All factories described in Sinclair’s book follow one and the same pattern: ingestion (recruiting workers), the processes of the digestive system (exploiting workers), and, finally, excretion (throwing used workers out) – an “alimentary logic” of capitalist production. **Not only**

do people follow this cycle, but they become part of it, unable to break up the vicious circle. Duvall quotes Descartes, who said that “**the body, not requiring a soul, can function like a machine according to mechanical laws**”. However, “**the body in the Progressive Era is not simply ‘like a machine’, but more specifically like an industrial capitalist machine**” (p. 34) i.e. **the merciless industrial machine ingests the bodies of labourers and devours them, and they start acting like machines themselves.** One system engrosses another both physically and mentally. *The Jungle* wants to pull the body of the worker from the jaws of capitalist industry, to set the body free from the machine. It intends for socialism to set the body (the worker) free from the machine (capitalist industry), and vice-versa, to let the machine recover from being the heartless, avaricious body that is its essential form under capitalism (Duvall, 2002) – the unwritten denouement of the novel. **However, it is impossible because of the extremely integrated nature of the gigantic organism of the industrial capitalist economy at the turn of the 20th century, which wants only to consume as much as possible while giving as little as necessary; which can only devour, and cannot nourish. It deprives the Biblical expression ‘daily bread’ of its spiritual meaning as ‘the staff of life’, and replaces it with a shallow economic materialism.** This can be concluded from Duvall’s ideas, which complement the opinions, expressed by previous authors above. The main message delivered by *The Jungle* (the plight of the worker) goes unheard, and its solution (socialism) ignored.

Although Upton Sinclair’s endeavors were a relative success, they did not produce the effect he desired. The Pure Food and Drug Act, adopted in 1906, was a measure taken from above, although caused by the reaction of the public to the novel. Presidential elections were held in 1912, but socialist forces proved incapable of changing the system in a “velvet” way and establish an order, in which “it is demanded from everybody according to his capabilities, it is given to everybody according to his work”. Upton Sinclair, armed even with *The Jungle*, could not combat such a huge machine alone. For reasons already mentioned, he proved unable to challenge society with ideals higher than the Progressive Era was capable of digesting. The economic reality was far more complex than he imagined. American society was far too heterogeneous to unanimously accept his call. Finally, **America in general proved deaf to the demands of this extremely talented individual – a writer and public figure who strove to change the existing social order. The idea of accepting a completely new economic system was alien to American society.** This is the key to understanding Sinclair’s disappointment.

The brief summary on the specificity of American society by Soviet author Leo Weissenberg (1927) serves as a brilliant explanation for America’s rejection of *The*

Jungle's socialist theme. He paraphrases a sociologist (whose name he does not mention) who said that the United States "was the real Canaan, the Promised Land of capitalism" (p. 5). There, for the first time all conditions necessary for the full and unprecedented development of capitalism existed and nowhere on the whole globe can one point to another country and people so suitable for its realization. Abundance of natural resources was one of the factors essential to the perfection of a capitalist order. The United States, in contrast to the states of continental Europe, had few obstacles to prevent it from striving for unlimited expansion, an inherent drive of any capitalist economy. In the immense territories of America, capitalism could fulfill its potential for the first time. Its highly developed forms of economic and technical organization in combination with the hordes of immigrants, who flooded into America in the 19th century, resulted in an early 20th century capitalist order that had no parallel on the globe. The specific nature of the industrial forces produced special socio-political forms and trends, as well as that 'ideology', which is generally referred to as 'Americanism'. The unlimited power of the capitalist economic system expressed itself also in the very structure of society itself. Neither in the past, nor in the present (for Weissenberg, i.e. in 1927) can a non-capitalist origin of this society be found. Not a trace – not a vestige of those pre-capitalist classes that left their mark on society in every European country. There is no feudal aristocracy in the USA – instead, there is 'the aristocracy of capital', 'capital tycoons', 'industrial and railway kings' (p. 7). Neither are such feudal remnants as peasants and artisans to be found. Instead there are farmers who possess the newest agricultural equipment, and there are a great deal of small capitalist enterprises engaged in trade. These social groups to a large extent utilize the methods of capitalism and are led by its principles. "Glorification of the nation, material welfare, 'hundred-per-cent patriotism', 'Pioneer's optimism', 'Puritanism' and an obsession for material accomplishment" (p. 8) – these are characteristic features of the spiritual side of Americanism. Americanism, having taken shape by the beginning of the 20th century, was a form of material and spiritual culture, resulting from the supremacy of the aristocracy of capital. It revealed itself in all fields of America's social life – in the fields of education, law, religion and morality, in the attitudes regarding foreigners, women, and, of course, the workers' movement (Вайсенберг, 1927).

Upton Sinclair was a socialist writer, whose novel reflected those characteristics common to the whole national entity – and his book truly hit America in its stomach. He fought without compromise against the whole capitalist order and the cult of private property – and that is why he failed to hit America's heart.

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