Research paper on capitalism immigration socialism and america

Literature, Russian Literature



Upton Sinclair's The Jungle

Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, The Jungle, covers numerous subjects centered on life in Chicago, focusing on the corruption and collusion rampant during those years between industries such as the meatpackers, the politicians, and criminal underground. It describes the squalid and hopeless living conditions of working-class families, especially the immigrants, the fights and failures of unions, and presents an alternative and negative view of capitalism as well as arguments for socialism. The book became a best seller but not for the reasons Sinclair hoped, its socialist message overshadowed by the graphic and sickening descriptions of working conditions in the meat packinghouse (Wade 1991, 79). The book is still popular in classrooms today, and looking beyond the vivid packinghouse descriptions offers examinations of a number of topics which are still subjects of current concern, such as immigration, economics, politics, wages, and unions.

Capitalism " involves the rise of a mercantile class, the separation of production from the state, and a mentality of rational calculation" (Heilbroner 2008). It means that industries are controlled by private individuals, instead of the government, and are motivated by profit and competition. Adam Smith introduced many of the theories behind capitalism in his 1776 book, An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations. One of the most influential ideas behind capitalist thought comes from this book where he writes, " by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it" (Smith 1902, 161). In essence, Smith is saying that at all levels of industry, from the CEO of a company to the entry-level worker, the

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greatest good for society comes from all people doing their best to promote themselves and profit through the work they are doing. Competition is an important part of this idea; with companies and individuals constantly competing to continually outdo each other, greater profits and benefits to society can follow.

Capitalism was supported by other ideas of the time, such as Social Darwinism. Charles Darwin's theories described in his 1859 book, On the Origin of Species, concerned biological evolution and described how and why living creatures adapted, evolved, or perished based on natural selection, or survival of the fittest. As Darwin's ideas gained popularity, some people also began to apply his principle of natural selection to economic, political, social and corporate realms as well (Kevles 1995). For example, if there were three grocery stores in town and one of them went out of business, this was because the remaining two were obviously more competitive and better suited as businesses in the community that they existed. The store that closed did not survive perhaps for a number of reasons, such as being unable or unwilling to adapt to the demands of the community's consumers, uncompetitive pricing, or lackluster management. However, applying the idea of "natural selection" to economics and businesses is likely a misappropriation of Darwin's ideas; in Sinclair's The Jungle, it is clear that " graft," political machinations, price-fixing schemes, and other non-natural forces were behind the success or failure of businesses and individuals. Socialism is a "social and economic doctrine that calls for public rather than private ownership or control of property and natural resources" where people are not isolated but work and live cooperatively ("Socialism" 2012).

As a political movement, Socialism had its foundation in the Industrial Revolution, as ideas about ownership and roles of the common worker were debated (" Socialism" 2012). Although some of the ideas behind socialism existed long before the Industrial Revolution, much of the modern influence came from the writing of French thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, François-Marie-Charles Fourier, Louis Blanc, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (Ghent 1913, 5-9). The terrible working conditions in France leading to the French Revolution were criticized by Blanc, who in 1839 published Organization of Labor, which "[denounced] the evils of competition . . . declared that the working class must have access to the instruments of labor," and that the workers should be in charge of management and distribution of profits (Ghent 1913, 7-8). As Industrialism spread, so too did the worker-friendly ideas of Socialism. Socialism was not without its own internal debates about the best way to accomplish its objectives. Karl Marx, who is considered to be the most important theorist of socialist ideology, derided the French theorists and their "utopian" ideals in the Manifesto of the Communist Party ("Socialism" 2012). While Communism and Socialism had much in common as to their origins, they evolved into different political and economic movements. Socialism itself divided into different schools of thought about its theory and reasoning, including Marxist Socialism, Christian Socialism, Anarchist Socialism, Fabian Socialism, and Syndicalism ("Socialism" 2012). Capitalism and Socialism were at such odds in their philosophies of ownership, government control, and so forth, that their proponents made

endless criticisms of each other. Socialists believed that private ownership

touted by capitalism leads to unjust inequality because a minority of the population holds most of the wealth (Newcombe n. d.). Capitalists felt their system was better because "Capitalism creates an environment in which the human spirit can achieve and excel," whereas socialism lacks the capacity to motivate individuals to thrive towards bigger and better things, or basically it leads to laziness (Butters 2).

Schoolchildren are taught that America is a "melting pot" built by immigrants. People had, and still have, a variety of reasons for leaving their homelands to go to foreign lands with alien cultures and languages. A big reason to immigrate, including the deciding factor for Jurgis Rudkus and his Lithuanian family in The Jungle, is the perception that this foreign land offers opportunities for wealth and advancement that the native country of residence does not. Other reasons may include political or religious persecution or forced immigration such as with the African slave trade. Some of the first immigrants to America, the Pilgrims, fell into the category of religious persecution as their reason for leaving Europe. The idea that they could make a better life for themselves is similar to that of Jurgis's family, but the Pilgrims were not so much tempted by potential wealth as Jurgis's family was. Instead, they sought a place to settle where they would be free to practice religion and family life as they pleased without persecution or outside influence. Other immigrants to America such as Africans sold into slavery arrived on the continent for a completely different reason than Jurgis's family; they had no choice about remaining in their homeland. They were there to be chattel and the idea of bettering themselves was discouraged by their masters.

A recurring criticism of immigration is that it lowers the wages of workers. According to Ottaviano and Giovanni, "Separating the effects of immigrants on natives of different schooling levels we find positive effects on the wages and rents of highly educated and small effects on the wages (negative) and rents (positive) of less educated" (2007 n. pag.). From this, it seems that immigration has the effect of both raising and lowering wages of native workers, depending on how much education they have attained. The increase in income could be because the influx of immigrants leads to an increase in demand and therefore profits for business and property owners, who tend to be the more educated individuals. The decrease in wages for the less educated people could be caused by increased competition for entrylevel or unskilled labor types of jobs. However, Ottaviano and Giovanni also state that "In equilibrium the inflow of immigrants has a positive productive effect on natives due to complementarieties in production as well as a positive competition effect on rents" (2007 n. pag.). In other words, properly controlled immigration has positive effect for a country as a whole since it promotes growth. Unlimited immigration would not be positive because balance would not be possible in stabilizing growth, and therefore could be a cause of depressed wages.

As examples given in The Jungle show, immigrants are not the only possible cause of depressed wages. Before the advent of the minimum wage as part of FDR's New Deal, employers could pay their workers as little as they could get away with. In The Jungle, the meatpacking company is always threatening to or actually lowering the wages of their workers. Women were paid less than men, and children even less than the women. Although there

were laws in place prohibiting children under age 16 from working, as evidenced in The Jungle, this law was easily circumvented by desperate families who found doctors who were willing to falsify documents about a child's age. Lax enforcement of child labor laws, inequality of pay based on gender, and a nonexistent minimum wage contributed as much if not more to the depression of wages as the influx of immigrants.

There are a number of reasons why people still believe that immigrants " take away jobs" from workers already living in the country. Seeing foreigners in any number of occupations, from doctors to gas station attendants leads to the perception remains today by some that these people have ousted an equally qualified native-born citizen from a job. The typical belief is that immigrants will work for lesser wages than a native-born citizen, not that they are better or more competitive workers. However, in the Jungle, the loss of jobs by current citizens to immigrants is depicted as fact. During a strike, Jurgis sees that the positions of the strikers were easily filled by " an assortment of the criminals and thugs of the city, besides Negroes and the lowest foreigners--Greeks, Roumanians [sic], Sicilians, and Slovaks," or in other words, immigrants (Sinclair 1906, 184). With no evident control on immigration, wages, or work-standards, immigrants in The Jungle did not get jobs because they were better or more competitive workers, they got jobs because they were the only people willing to take positions as " scabs." Jurgis sees that the immigrants filling the places of the strikers "had been attracted more by the prospect of disorder than by the big wages . . . and only went to sleep when the time came for them to get up to work" (Sinclair 1906, 184).

Taking into consideration the previously mentioned study done by Ottaviano and Giovanni (2007), limiting immigration is advantageous because it encourages growth of a country by allowing immigration but keeps it at a manageable pace, whereas banning it could be detrimental because it would not promote growth. A sudden ban on immigration is unlikely to restore "lost jobs." Even if it is determined that immigrants have "taken" jobs from native-born workers, as long as they have legally immigrated there is no reason to believe that a ban or limit on immigration will cause them to leave those jobs and go back to their countries of origin.

America has a long history of revising its policy on immigration. For example, in 1798 the Alien and Sedition Acts allowed deportation of foreigners considered to be dangerous by the President, 1808 saw prohibition of importation of slaves, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act clamped down on Chinese immigration, 1901's Congress created the Anarchist Exclusion Act, the 1921 Quota Act limited European immigration to three percent of a particular nationality's population in the U. S. in 1910, and the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act made it more difficult for persecuted foreigners to gain asylum and created income requirements for the sponsors of legal immigrants (Mintz 2007). Although the national sentiment is that America with open arms to immigrants who built the nation we are today, historical facts such as those presented by Mintz (2007) show that over time, there was much flux on policy and considerable prejudice by nationality toward which immigrants were accepted or rejected. Even a quick survey of current events shows that immigration remains a hot topic of debate, much of it centered on the concerns of the families of illegal

immigrants, "anchor babies," border patrols, and paper requirements. Sinclair's book depicts immigration as an uncontrolled thing, to the detriment of immigrants and citizens alike. The immigrants such as Jurgis's family arrive ignorant of language, customs, or the reality of employment opportunities. Other immigrants, such as the scabs working during the strike are shown as lazy because they "did not want to work, and every few minutes some of them would feel obliged to retire and recuperate" (Sinclair 1906, 185).

In Sinclair's time, certain problems and incentives pushed farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers into the cities. It can be construed that farmers in America had much the same reason for moving to the cities as did farmers in England, which was because "the agricultural system . . . had become more advanced allowing farmers to produce more crops using less resources," some of those resources being people (Thatcher 2009). The Industrial Revolution created more jobs in the cities which became the center of manufacturing, so they were natural places for displaced agriculturalists to look for work. The flow of rural migrants to cities and industrial areas is a possible factor in lower wages since these people were largely uneducated and unskilled, but considering the increase in the number of jobs requiring unskilled labor at the onset of the Industrial Revolution, it would take more than a rural migration within the country to depress wages. Unskilled rural migrants were in the same pool as immigrants, competing for the entry level jobs that paid the lowest wages. Although it can be argued that the great number of rural migrants to the cities coupled with large-scale immigration was to blame for depressed

wages during the Industrial Revolution, it can also be argued that the lack of accountability by employers for labor conditions, child labor, product quality regulation, and lack of minimum wages were equally to blame. Today, China is encountering a similar rural-to-urban migration as "Hundreds of millions" of unskilled workers moved from the low-productivity agricultural sector to the high-productivity urban sectors which brought about significant productivity gains for China" (Meng 2012, 1). Although profitable for the China as a whole, there are disadvantages for the migrants to urban areas, who receive lower incomes and are not entitled to the social welfare or services available to those already located in the cities (Meng 2012, 1). People of past and some in the present still see America as the "land of opportunity." This concept implies that America is a place where a diligent, hard working individual can make a good living and even enjoy prosperity beyond making a mere living. Countless rags-to-riches stories past and present describe how America is the place where clever, industrious people get ahead and enjoy life's luxuries. Sinclair referred to America as "the jungle," implying that it was a dangerous, chaotic, primitive place with a more or less "eat or be eaten" rule characterizing the land. Both were true to an extent. In Sinclair's The Jungle, Jurgis and his family are defeated in their quest for America's alleged prosperity at first by language barriers and ignorance of customs and later by the predatory machinations of politicians and industries. Although at times, Jurgis appears to profit from his dealings with criminals and politicians, it is still the people at the very top who control the outcomes, and being at their mercy, Jurgis loses every time. However, in reality, much more moderate tales of success are common as well. Although

many immigrants who arrived on Ellis Island suffered from the same disadvantages as Jurgis's family, such as culture shock, disease, and language barriers, often times their children were better able to absorb the culture, get educations, and work their way to stable lives. The people most likely to "make it" in America, even if they did not become rich, were those that were literate or already had family or friends here to help them become acclimated and acquaint them with housing and employment procedures. Those who were less likely to "make it" would be the ones who had no contacts in America and no literacy, like Jurgis's family.

Although great technological advancements were made during the Industrial Revolution that brought innovations like electricity and indoor plumbing to the wealthy and some middle-class people, the working poor in 1900 still lived in badly lit and heated homes, used outhouses, and "the working life of both farmers and industrial workers was painful, stressful, and dangerous" (Gordon 2010, 4). Additionally, most city governments " acted upon the principle that those who benefited from services should pay for them," therefore, at the turn of the century city services such as sewerage, streetlights, plumbing, natural gas, and paved roads arrived only to the few wealthy or middle class people who had the money and political clout to obtain the services (Gordon 2010, 5). Squalid living conditions for the working poor as described in Sinclair's book were not uncommon, the standard of living lessened by the kinds of contaminated food he describes such as contaminated milk, water supplies, or meat was common at the turn of the century is supported by contemporary historians (Gordon 2010, 16). Sinclair's novel describes the dangers of the meat packing industry, but

other industries at the turn of the century were equally difficult and dangerous. The coal mining industry is a good example of dangerous and frightening work. Workers descended into the mines lit only by "a lamp with a simple flame on the top," into working conditions infested with rats, in constant danger of cave-ins, or the worst danger of all, which was methane gas (Miller 1995). Methane was hard to detect, and according to Miller, "the miner would have a lamp ahead of him trying to detect that gas, but if you failed to do that and took two or three whiffs of it, that could be the end of him" (1995). Although by the end of the 19th century, regulations required mine owners to add extra ventilation to reduce the dangers of methane and inspectors would check out the areas of the mine where people would be working that day, " oftentime the inspector . . . a local inspector -- that very inspector worked for the company" (Miller 1995).

The minimal income necessary for a comfortable existence in the late 1800s to early 1900s varies in estimation depending on the state or region of the country people lived in. For instance, for a family of five, a New York charity estimated this figure to be \$624 yearly, Massachusetts state estimated it at \$754; Forum magazine estimated that a comfortable life for a family of four that had the means to set aside money for retirement necessitated \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year (Kent 2002, 79).

Average salaries for men, women, and child laborers around the turn of the century varied greatly, not only in how much was paid to an employee based on age and gender, but also wages in industries varied from state to state and even within states. For example, in one table, the 1900 Census of the United States lists the wages of foundries and metal workers for males age

16 and over comparing five regions of the U. S. as well as the total average for the country. According to the chart, foundry and metal workers from the Pacific states made an average of between \$13. 50 to \$15. 00 weekly, while the same type of workers from the Southern states averaged between \$7.50 to \$9. 00 weekly (Dewey 1903, 668). In the same census, the average hourly rate earned by males in the U.S. was between thirteen and fifteen cents per hour, while the average hourly rate earned by females was about nine cents per hour (Dewey 1903, 634, 636). Child labor, or wages earned by people age sixteen and under, is not reported in the 1900 census because officially it was outlawed.

In addition to hourly laborers, there was also piecework. A pieceworker is an employee who is "paid so much per yard, per ton, per cut, per dozen, etc., and not for the time they work" (Dewey 1903, xvii). The advantage of being paid by the piece is that workers skilled at the job could potentially make more money than an hourly workers if they produced a lot of product. However, a disadvantage is that employers could pay dismally small amounts per piece, potentially making it difficult to equal the amount of money made at an hourly paid job. Today, piecework jobs can still be found in a number of industries in the U.S., including workers who harvest agriculture products (Billikopf 1996, 5).

For workers during Sinclair's time "benefits were minimal—if available at all —to workers in the industrial economy" (Fisk 2001). Also, "long-term disability payments, Worker's Compensation, and other provisions in statute or contracts [that provide] safety nets for the worker [today] . . . did not exist in 1900" and when injured on the job, a worker's only chance for

compensation from an employer was to sue for damages which was rarely successful (Fisk 2001). In the absence of lawful contracts between employees and employers, employees were not guaranteed their job would last year round, employers were not required to give any advance warning of layoffs, and severance pay was not given unless perhaps it was necessary as a bribe. Hiring and firing could happen at will, and although officially illegal, blacklists like the one Jurgis finds himself on in The Jungle after attacking Connor for raping his wife were covertly used to control workers. Several portions of The Jungle make it clear that Sinclair was critical of private, voluntary efforts to help the poor. At one point, Sinclair writes that there were charities in the stockyards district where Jurgis worked, but that Jurgis, " in all his life there he had never heard of either of them. They did not advertise their activities, having more calls than they could attend to without that" (Sinclair 1906, 99). It seems that Sinclair is saying that a charity that cannot meet the needs of a desperate and earnest family such as Jurgis's, a charity that is virtually invisible, is doing no good at all. Later, he writes about a Chicago newspaper that opens a soup kitchen for the unemployed; his cynical observation is that "Some people said that [the newspaper] did this for the sake of the advertising it gave them, and some others said that their motive was a fear lest all their readers should be starved off" (Sinclair 1906, 193). The demand for charity was much greater than was provided by public means, though it existed, and overall did little good to improve the standard of living of the poor.

Americans at the turn of the century viewed the poor in a black and white way. There was the deserving or "worthy poor," who Americans viewed as

moral, "painfully respectable people, whose clean and tidy rooms conceal the utmost evidence of their poverty" (Gettleman 1963). These were the people who were considered to deserve the help of charity. Those who did not fit the strict description deemed worthy of sympathy were considered "unworthy" of assistance, and were classified as drunks, lazy, "many of whom . . . have never done a good honest day's work in the world" (Gettleman 1963). Social Darwinism reinforced these definitive ideas, because the American people needed to subscribe almost religiously to the "American Dream" that every man was a free man and any man who worked hard would prosper. Anyone unable to succeed must have failed by his own fault for not trying hard enough.

Strikes and the attempts of labor unions to attain their goals found little success, perhaps because of the popular sentiment toward Social Darwinism at the time. Carroll Wright, who headed the newly created Bureau of Labor in 1885 had "belief in the ability of man to study his situation and to devise ways to improve it" which put him "in the forefront of the opposition to the prevailing doctrines of Social Darwinism" (Goldberg and Moye 1985, 6-8). Time and experience did not deter Carroll from his goals, but he also realized that the problems between employers and employees would not be easily solved. He said, "The labor question, like the social problem, must be content to grow towards a higher condition along with the universal progress of education and broadened civilization" (Goldberg and Moye 1985, 10).

Debacles like the Haymarket Affair in Chicago in 1886 in which several police officers and civilians were killed and many others were injured did not inspire either the government or citizens to support unions ("Haymarket Affair

Chronology"). The Industrial Workers of the World (I. W. W.) was established with the goal of removing "any societal aspect or group that supported capitalism," and was in direct conflict with the capitalist oriented American Federation of Labor (A. F. L.) (Holley, Jennings, and Wolters 2011, 56). Carroll appears to believe that greater education would eventually lead the American government, workers, and employers to support unions; he did not anticipate that the eventual rise and success of labor unions would not come about until after the onset of the Great Depression. Unions today still exist and have clout; however, like many long-lasting institutions, they are not immune to corruption. Americans still desire to be "free," and can feel resentful toward a union if they are forced to join it in order to gain employment. They also feel resentful when unions make rules benefiting long-standing members that are disadvantageous to newer members. However, many Americans still find their union useful in ensuring they receive proper benefits, wages, and compensation from employers. Capitalism flourished in America. Although the unions of Sinclair's The Jungle are socialist at heart, Newcomb writes, "trade unions are not always socialist instruments. In an economic boom trade union's demands are usually met, which leads to trade unions allying themselves with the capitalists instead of opposing them" (n. d.). Muckrakers were writers who " provided detailed, accurate journalistic accounts of the political and economic corruption and social hardships caused by the power of big business in a rapidly industrializing United States" ("muckraker"). Although President Theodore Roosevelt used muckraker as a derogatory term, writers falling into that category like Sinclair captured the public interest and led to

positive results including the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act (" muckraker").

Progressivism was different from charity work and philanthropic efforts in that it sought to use legal reform to enhance the standard of living for Americans; both muckrakers and Progressives advocated for changes in business practices, abolishing of child labor, elimination of city government corruption, and regulation (Mintz 2007, "Learn"). Unlike the Socialists, Progressives did not see the abolishment of Capitalism as necessary for improving the life of citizenry. Some reforms, like Prohibition, did not last. Others, such as food safety regulation, women gaining the vote, and antitrust laws remain today. Though the government at times hindered reforms, like its lack of early support for labor unions, later it became instrumental in promoting reform, especially during the Great Depression.

Sinclair's The Jungle was a facet of the fascinating Industrial Revolution, its

debates and reforms which still echo today. Although it did not have the author's intended effect, it remains an important piece of American literature and history for the wide range of topics it critically examines in detail.

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