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Looking Back

The Jungle at 100

In this age when the chief objections to the consumption of meat involve concerns about animal cruelty and an "epidemic" of obesity, it is worth remembering that there was a time when the industrial production of meat had more directly deleterious effects upon public health. In fact, this spring marks the centennial of a convulsive American reaction to revelations about the mass-production of meat. It began with the publication, in February 1906, of *The Jungle*, the first successful novel by twenty-seven-year-old Upton Sinclair. The book, which tells of the travails of a family of penniless Lithuanian immigrants, was an instant, astonishing, international success. What most captured the public's attention was the novel's description of the meat processing practices in Chicago's "Packingtown." Based largely on Sinclair's own observations, *The Jungle* describes in horrifying detail what went into American meat products: rats and filth and feces, poisonous chemicals, the spit of tubercular men, and sometimes even the bodies of workers.

Theodore Roosevelt—who coined the word *muckraker* in March 1906—was troubled by what he read in *The Jungle*, and opened a correspondence with Sinclair. The president soon sent a pair of trusted friends to Packingtown to look into the conditions there, and then dispatched experts from the Department of Agriculture. Even though the packers had tried to clean up their operations in response to the public outcry, the investigators confirmed Sinclair's findings. And so, with astonishing rapidity, President Roosevelt pushed through Congress the Meat Inspection Act, requiring mandatory inspections before animals were slaughtered, more inspections of meat after processing, and a new labeling system. It was enacted into law on June 30, 1906, the same day as the Pure Food and Drug Act.

The Progressive Era was at its height, which is why a book could so immediately lead to legislation representing such an unprecedented expansion of federal regulatory power. But Sinclair wasn't satisfied. *The Jungle* wasn't intended to be just an exposé of the meat industry; its portrayal of the workingman's plight was supposed to enrage readers. "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach," Sinclair said. The book was explicitly a work of socialistic propaganda, and it ended with a long speech on the coming socialist revolution. After the revolution took place and men became equals, Sinclair wrote, the benefits of modern medicine will be widely available, and we will use machines to perform "filthy and deadening and brutalizing work." Sinclair, who died in 1968, lived long enough to see (if never admit) that he had gotten it exactly backwards: modern science and technology largely serve the cause of human equality, they do not follow from it. And the public reaction to *The Jungle* one century ago showed that capitalism wasn't fatally broken and a socialist revolution wasn't necessary to make the world a better place: responsible government action could go a long way to clean up a little muck.