

JUNGLE REDUX:
MEAT INDUSTRY REFORM IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA
AND CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

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Introduction

"History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce."¹

Karl Marx

As he sat before the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture in June of 1906, meatpacking industry representative Thomas Wilson spoke self-assuredly. The Committee had summoned him to testify about conditions in Chicago meatpacking plants amidst a public scandal caused by the February release of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Sinclair's novel claimed, in grotesque detail, that the meat produced in the Chicago meatpacking district was adulterated and impure; the government was now investigating the truth of his allegations. As he methodically denied Sinclair's charges, Wilson directed much of his testimony to Representatives Wadsworth, from New York, and Lorimer, from Chicago, who sympathized with the meatpackers. Wilson calmly explained that the meatpackers did not wish to pay for further government inspections because they were unnecessary, although not unwelcome. Representative Brooks suddenly interrupted his oration, asking, "How can you object to the payment of fees for sanitary inspection of your canned-food products and other products,[...] which, on account of your own sins of omission, have been blacklisted? [...] How can you ask the Government reasonably to pull you out of the hole that you have digged [sic] for yourselves?"²

¹ Qtd. in Wisdom Quotes, "Karl Marx," <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/002484.html>.

² U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stockyards*, 59th Cong., 1st sess., 1906, 72.

Mr. Wilson was fully prepared to answer this question. “The present criticism and the present destruction of our trade is not of our doing, and it is unjust and unfair. The packers have gone to an enormous expense. [...] If the Government comes along and insists upon different inspection, that we do not object to, but—”

“Beg pardon,” Mr. Brooks retorted, “but it is not the Government, it is the people who purchase your goods that reject them.”³

This confrontation was only one incident in a heated struggle between American meatpackers and those who wished to regulate the manufacture of their products. For years, reformers and consumers had resented the meat industry’s high prices and illegal collusion, and some were concerned with potentially unhealthy ingredients. Suddenly, with the release of *The Jungle* in February 1906, the issue of pure meat dominated American politics. Action was swift. In June, Congress enacted the Meat Inspection Act, mandating federal inspection of all meats exported or sold between states. However, because some key members of Congress favored the meat industry, shortcomings that would compromise its effectiveness in later generations plagued this legislation. The Meat Inspection Act of 1906 gave the government unprecedented power over a major industry, but it also made the government responsible for the industry’s failings.

This project explores the conditions leading up to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act of 1906 and evaluates its impact today. The problems and solutions of Sinclair’s day are directly linked to problems in the meat industry today. This thesis

³ Ibid.

addresses three questions: What led to the reforms of the meat industry in 1906? What were the immediate and lasting effects of those reforms? Despite reform, why does today's meat supply pose a health risk to consumers?

Historiography and Sources

The history of the meat industry is largely uninvestigated, with only a few authors publishing work on the meat industry in general or on *The Jungle* or the Meat Inspection Act of 1906 in particular. Recently, however, journalists such as Michael Pollan have popularized the study of food industries. This thesis is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to examine the 1906 meat reforms in order to understand the state of the contemporary meat industry and the nature of government regulation of industry in general.

For perspective on the Progressive Era in which the 1906 reforms occurred, I relied on Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent*.⁴ This book portrays Progressivism as a middle-class effort to restabilize American society in the wake of urbanization, massive immigration, and industrialization. McGerr focuses on the big picture and uses individual movements as examples, rather than focusing on the minutiae of these movements. His writing vividly depicts the tension and reforming spirit that characterized the era.

Only two texts have been written specifically on the history of the meat industry. Mary Yeager's *Competition and Regulation: The Development of Oligopoly in the Meat Packing Industry* is the more recent of these, written in 1981; Yeager

⁴ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

noted in her introduction that the only existing history of the meat industry was six hundred pages, and written in 1923.⁵ This is Rudolf Clemen's *The American Livestock and Meat Industry*, which failed to mention both the meatpacking scandal and *The Jungle*. Indeed, its hagiographical treatment of the meat industry precludes it from being a wholly reliable source. Yeager's work, in contrast, was central to my research. *Competition and Regulation* portrays the meat industry from an economic perspective. Yeager places the development of the meat industry alongside that of the railroads, railroad history being Yeager's area of expertise.

James Harvey Young has written extensively about pure food and drug laws in American history. His monograph, *Pure Food*, covers food and drug reforms in general from the eighteenth century to the passage of the Meat Inspection and Pure Food and Drugs Acts of 1906.⁶ Its chapter concerning *The Jungle* is particularly salient. Young's article "The Pig That Fell Into the Privy" was also a major source of information regarding the reactions to *The Jungle*.⁷

Recently, there has been a revival of scholarly interest in the meat industry, and all food industries, supplying a deluge of sources on the meat industry today. Gail Eisnitz's *Slaughterhouse*, in particular, influenced this project—it formed the basis for my contention that the current meat supply is unsafe, and inspired me to discover

⁵ Mary Yeager, *Competition and Regulation: The Development of Oligopoly in the Meat Packing Industry* (Greenwich, CT: Jai Press Inc, 1981), xxv.

⁶ James Harvey Young, *Pure Food: Securing the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁷ Ibid., "The Pig That Fell into the Privy: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the Meat Inspection Amendments of 1906," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 59 (1985): 467-80.

why.⁸ *Slaughterhouse* describes unsanitary meatpacking facilities, pathogenic meat, the industry's contributions to the human population's increasing bacterial resistance to antibiotics, poor working conditions, and animal rights violations. These findings are verified, and further illuminated, in Michele Morrone's *Poisons on Our Plates*, Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, and Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.⁹

Terminology

For the purposes of this project, “meat reform” refers to the 1906 Meat Inspection Act, a piece of legislation that became law alongside the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Both laws provided for the regulation of the food, and thus meat, supply, although the Pure Food and Drug Act has always applied to all foods and medicines.

The term “meat” refers to edible animal muscular tissue, specifically pork, beef, poultry, and in some instances, goat meat, rabbit meat, or horsemeat. I will specify when only pork, beef, or poultry are being discussed.

Historians define the Progressive era as spanning from roughly 1870 to either the beginning of World War I or 1920. The first four chapters of this thesis examine

⁸ Gail A. Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

⁹ Michele Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates: The Real Food Safety Problem in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008). Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005). Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

the period from roughly 1880, when the American meat industry became fully industrialized, to 1906, when Congress passed meat reform legislation. Then, in order to demonstrate the effects of the Meat Inspection Act on the present, the last two chapters discuss meat in the present day and briefly explain why the meat supply was much safer in the interim decades of the twentieth century.

Progressivism is often described as a “movement,” but this term suggests that the reforms of that era occurred in tandem, and stemmed from one central effort. This is inaccurate. To use Michael McGerr’s excellent metaphor: “Rather than turn into a nineteenth-century symphony orchestra, [progressives] became like a musical innovation of their own time, the jazz band, in which each instrumentalist improvised a unique melody on top of a shared set of chords.”¹⁰ These movements were varied, fighting alcoholism and substandard housing structures, promoting environmental conservation and birth control, and advancing educational access and workers’ rights. Scholars would be more accurate in referring to the Progressive “Movements,” the term used in this study. The terms “progressives” and “reformers” here signify the general body of middle-class persons involved in Progressive-era reform, with the understanding that the majority of these individuals had shared values and rationales for their work despite diverse backgrounds and areas of focus. References to a particular group of these reformers will call for group-specific terms, such as “meat reformers” or “muckrakers.”

¹⁰ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 73.

The phrase “the meat industry” is used throughout this study, and its definition is multifaceted. On the one hand, there are several different actors involved in the production of meat: ranchers, farmers who grow animal feed, shippers, slaughterers, veterinarians, butchers, processors, and grocers.¹¹ This non-integrated system, in which many different businesses play a role in meat production, stands in stark contrast to the vertically-integrated, behemoth industry which controls the market for meats today. This project will demonstrate that, currently, much of the American meat supply comes from “the meat industry” in a singular sense—a few corporations handle every aspect of production, from fattening to slaughtering, from processing to distribution. That said, there are some companies or farms that produce meat independently, on a small scale, and rely on non-integrated systems of production. However, because they do not compete on a national scale, they are not subject to federal inspection. This project is concerned with the “meat industry” and its regulation by the federal government, and so this term refers to the collection of massive corporations responsible for the majority of meat produced in America today.

Project Structure

The first two chapters of this project outline the context in which the 1906 meat reforms occurred. Chapter One describes the social, economic, and political upheaval of the Progressive Era. I concur with McGerr’s assessment that the

¹¹ There are also those that advertise for meat products—in fact, the United States Department of Agriculture promotes beef and other meats, a job that at times conflicts with its role in industry regulation. This will be discussed in the project’s fifth chapter.

Progressive Era was a period of massive social change and class division. The Progressive Movements stemmed from the middle class embracing communalism—the “we’re all in this together” mentality—as a means to restore American society. Chapter Two details the rise of the American meat industry and the establishment of the Beef Trust. It explores the mounting public resistance to the trust’s high prices and apparent illegal collusion, and examines the blossoming pure meat movement, which sought to publicize the unhygienic conditions in meatpacking plants and meat products.

Chapter Three describes the impact Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* had on the American public in general, and the pure meat movement in particular. *The Jungle* propelled the pure meat movement by sparking governmental investigations that resulted in legislation. These investigations culminated in the Neill-Reynolds Report, which in turn led to Congressional action on the issue. Chapter Four describes the hearings before the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture and the political sparring leading up to the passage of the Meat Inspection Act. The testimony evidences a marked favoritism of key Committee members toward the packing industry, which ultimately compromised the wording and structure of the Meat Inspection Act to an extent that still affects us today.

In Chapter Five, I examine the shortfalls of the contemporary meat industry and demonstrate that weaknesses in the 1906 Meat Inspection Act underlie these problems. I argue that a government that shows leniency toward industries that have the potential to endanger consumers fails in one of its primary responsibilities: to

protect its citizens. This thesis employs historical knowledge to increase awareness of, and suggest more effective options for, reform. History can be an invaluable teacher to the present if its lessons are consistently heeded.

Chapter One

Progressive Movements and the Context of Reform

“National events determine our ideals,
as much as our ideals determine national events.”¹²

Jane Addams

The United States saw dramatic change at the turn of the twentieth century, during what is often called the “Progressive Era.” By 1880, America had healed many of the wounds of the Civil War and was moving toward rapid urbanization, industrialization, and the consolidation of industrial and agricultural production and distribution. While the number of European immigrants rose dramatically, internal migration increased from farm to city. These shifts in population fundamentally and permanently transformed the face of American life.

Change was evident in everyday life as consumers began to buy mass-produced goods instead of local products. Before this period, the typical American consumer purchased goods from a nearby producer or a family-owned store, or produced for herself whatever she required. As distant factories began mass-producing goods on an industrial scale, however, the consumer no longer knew the product’s origin or quality with any intimacy. If a consumer did not know the man who churned the butter she purchased, for instance, she could not know for certain if the product was pure and safe, let alone if it was truly butter. If the product was actually

¹² Qtd. in Repeat After Us, “Jane Addams: Ideals and National Events,”
<http://www.repeatafterus.com/title.php?i=8122>.

margarine, the consumer did not know whom to blame, nor to whom to complain.¹³ Instead, she would be faced with the bland anonymity of the industrial producer, and in an increasing number of situations she might not be able to avoid such products even if they proved dangerous or deceptive.

There was a social correlate to this: just as the producers of industrial goods were distant from the consumer, American at the turn of the century might feel estranged from their neighbors as well. In many ways, the social construction of early America was dissolving. This dissolution stemmed partly from demographic shifts, and partly from economic transformations. American business and industry, which were traditionally dominated by smaller entrepreneurs, saw the rise of corporations and plutocratic businessmen even as poor workers crowded city slums. The widening separation between the wealthy and poor led to class polarization, and the middle class, trapped in between, orchestrated social movements meant to restore order to American society.¹⁴

A New World: Urbanization and Immigration

America was changing with unprecedented speed and scope as massive immigration changed the makeup of the nation's population. In 1900, roughly one American in seven was foreign born. These immigrants comprised twenty-one percent

¹³ The substitution of oleomargarine, a new product, for butter was such a problem during this period that it fostered bills in Congress, and was a major factor leading to required labeling of foodstuff ingredients.

¹⁴ This interpretation of the Progressive Era is derived from McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent*.

of the workforce, making them highly visible to their new neighbors.¹⁵ Many immigrants of this era came from southern and eastern Europe, the Slavic countries, Greece, and Scandinavia; these countries were not previously major sources of immigration. Naturalized or native-born Americans viewed these new arrivals with suspicion and unease, and felt a sense of anonymity and isolation in response to unfamiliar languages, dress, customs, and goods.¹⁶

Massive migration into burgeoning cities led to the rapid creation of crowded, unsafe housing and new neighborhoods. These newcomers to the cities included not only foreigners, but also migrants from rural America. In 1860, the population of New York City was 1,079,000. Forty years later, it had more than tripled to 3,437,202. Boston's population similarly swelled from 177,000 to 560,892 over the same period of time.¹⁷ Poorly constructed, hastily erected tenements housed the growing population, and because the cities were not designed for so many inhabitants, public sanitation measures could not meet demand.¹⁸ Many tenements lacked running water,

¹⁵ Charles Hirschman, "Immigration and the American Century," *Demography* 42, no. 4 (2005): 597. These statistics do not include the American-born children of immigrants, who would have been considered part of the immigrant population by native Americans.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 599-601.

¹⁷ Winthrop D. Jordan and Leon F. Litwack, *The United States: Conquering a Continent*, vol. 1 (Redding, CA: North West Publishing, 2003), 238. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1900," Census Results, June 15, 1998, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab13.txt>

¹⁸ Jane Addams, "The Objective Value of a Social Settlement", in *Reforming American Life in the Progressive Era*, ed. H. Landon Warner (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1971), 29-30.

and entire neighborhoods lacked sewers.¹⁹ The city of New York did not require builders to install indoor toilets until 1901.²⁰ Progressive Era cities were noisy, dirty, smelly, crowded, and dangerous, but still workers and families poured into them. These new arrivals, foreign- and native-born, fueled the American economy, which was also undergoing dramatic growth and change.

The Advent of the Industrial Juggernaut

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the American economy transformed from a mercantile, agrarian-oriented system to an industrial juggernaut.²¹ As urban populations grew, industries suited to mass-production—such as oil, steel, and tobacco—adapted to fit this new geographic model.²² From 1897 to 1904, 4,200 American companies merged into 257 corporations.²³ These large, vertically-integrated firms overshadowed small businesses and eliminated the need for the many middlemen central to smaller business plans.²⁴ A few behemoth corporations came to control the major industries in oligopolies.²⁵ Many of these corporations, such as Standard Oil and General Electric, are familiar to Americans today. These firms required vast sources of capital and had many fixed costs, which encouraged them to

¹⁹ Andrew Dolkart, “The 1901 Tenement House Act: Part One: Birth of a Housing Act,” *Lower East Side Tenement Museum*, http://www.tenement.org/features_dolkart2.html

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, xxi.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lewis L. Gould, *America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1914* (London: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), 25.

²⁴ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, xxi.

²⁵ Yeager coins this term in *Competition and Regulation*.

maximize production in order to capture the largest possible share of the market.²⁶ Sometimes this meant prices fell to the point where they were no longer profitable. Consequently, some corporations formed “trusts,” business alliances that worked together to manipulate the market and ensure each stayed afloat.²⁷ Price-fixing, either formally or implicitly, became common.²⁸ Corporations also introduced the concept of brands to secure customer loyalty based on recognition; in the past customers had selected products based on cost.²⁹ Thus, the buying experience changed for the American consumer. Some felt threatened by this new orientation of the market; it ran counter to the small, independent, entrepreneurial spirit that had characterized American business and, indeed, American political ideology.

The Socialist Reaction to Industrialization

Some argued that the oligopolistic capitalism driving industrialization was based on the immoral exploitation of the poor for the benefit of the wealthy. One of the most prominent—and provocative—theories used to thwart this exploitation was socialism, which emerged in this period as a remedy for the ills of the capitalist economy. Socialism called for publicly owned, government-regulated industrial monopolies and asserted that all workers and citizens should have access to the

²⁶ Ibid. Some types of businesses were more prone to this transformation than others. Oil, for example, was capital-intensive and in high demand, and so lent itself to mass-production. Specialized industries such as furniture making, in contrast, remained small-scale and localized for the time being (Ibid, xxiii).

²⁷ Ibid., xxi-xxii.

²⁸ Ibid., xxii.

²⁹ Ibid.

nation's sources of wealth, rather than a powerful few.³⁰ The appeal of this idea is apparent in the popularity of the Progressive-era novel *Looking Backward*, which envisioned a socialist society, and by the highly visible political campaigns of prominent socialists such as Eugene V. Debs.³¹ Americans elected socialists to city, state, and federal offices.³² However, these politicians were unable to garner enough clout to enact the drastic changes socialists envisioned. Socialism was perhaps too radical an approach for a society that had been steeped for so long in individual prerogative and property.³³ Further, the threat of socialism made many Americans wary of any extension of governmental regulation over private business.³⁴

Trust-busting: Theodore Roosevelt's "Big Stick"³⁵

The American government employed a more moderate method of corporate regulation: trust-busting.³⁶ Before the Progressive era, several states passed antitrust laws that prevented corporations from working together to control the market.³⁷ In 1890, Congress passed the Sherman Act, which proclaimed the illegality of "every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of

³⁰ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 152.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 152, 32.

³² Stephen J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 223.

³³ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 154.

³⁴ Even today, socialism or allegations of socialism can polarize the American public. This is evident in our most recent healthcare reform, which was labeled "socialist" by its detractors in an effort to evoke fear and alarm in others.

³⁵ Roosevelt used this term in reference to the Roosevelt Corollary, in which he stressed that Europeans should not meddle in South and Central American economic or political matters. However, the phrase characterizes his treatment of industry giants, and indeed, his political philosophy in general.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations.”³⁸ Since most corporations competed nationally, in theory the Sherman Act severely restricted their ability to manipulate costs and prices. In practice, however, the government was often unable to check oligopolistic activity. The infrastructure for national regulation was simply too weak, and the public often resisted perceived over-governance.³⁹

When Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901, he proved a formidable foe for many plutocratic businessmen.⁴⁰ Roosevelt accepted the permanence and economic importance of corporations, but disliked the maneuverings and haughtiness of big business owners.⁴¹ He was, in his own words, a proponent of “conservative radicalism.”⁴² Roosevelt believed that alleviating the negative effects of industrialization would re-stabilize American society.⁴³ Often Roosevelt seemed to go after corporations whose executives he found particularly arrogant or abusive, such as John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil, while he allowed what he considered honest businesses to operate unhindered.⁴⁴ The courts shared this tendency. In 1906, the Supreme Court ruled that the Sherman Act only applied to oligopolies whose control

³⁸ U.S. Congress, 1890, The Sherman Act, sect. 1,
<http://www.stolaf.edu/people/becker/antitrust/statutes/sherman.html>.

³⁹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 155.

⁴⁰ His successor, William Howard Taft, would file even more suits than Roosevelt. However, the meat reforms predate his presidency, and therefore he will not be discussed here.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Kevin Mattson, *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006), 59-60.

⁴³ Ibid., 59. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 157.

⁴⁴ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 157.

over trade was “unreasonable.”⁴⁵ This left big businessmen and prosecutors alike confused as to what was legal and what was not; the outcomes of anti-trust lawsuits were highly unpredictable.⁴⁶ The Sherman Act was a potentially useful but unwieldy tool.

Roosevelt was unsatisfied with the limitations of the Sherman Act and agitated for the creation of a bureau through which he might recommend trust-busting legislation to Congress. In response, Congress created the Bureau of Corporations in 1903; it reported directly to President Roosevelt, who had the right to publicize any findings.⁴⁷ Its commissioner of corporations was legally empowered to obtain information and documents pertinent to industry practices.⁴⁸ Roosevelt’s devotion to trust-busting echoed a widespread American opposition to corporate abuses and the disproportionate wealth of the plutocracy.

A Great Divide: Class Polarization and Class-Based Values

The industrial boom and economic expansion made the rich even richer, while the poor appeared poorer in comparison. In 1890, the richest one-percent of Americans owned fifty-one percent of the nation’s property, while the lowest forty-four percent owned 1.2 percent.⁴⁹ Class polarization resulted. Americans identified more with their social and economic class than with a common American identity;

⁴⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 186.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Diner, *A Very Different Age*, 4.

class background had more of an impact on values and traditions than citizenship.⁵⁰

Then as now, Americans searched for someone to blame for the nation's woes, and usually pointed their fingers at other social classes or ethnic groups, or the most recent immigrants.

While the rich enjoyed leisure time and lives of privilege, huddled masses of immigrant and native-born workers struggled to survive in the increasingly crowded and polluted cities. Many poor families put their children to work, or planned marriages for economic gain.⁵¹ In 1900, 26.1 percent of boys and 6.4 percent of girls ages ten to fifteen were part of the labor force. This rate was even higher for foreign-born and African American children.⁵² Abject, squalid working conditions united workers in a common misery. In 1890, the average workweek for a factory worker was 100 hours.⁵³ Factories were often unpleasant and unsafe— safety exits and windows were locked, buildings were poorly lit and ventilated, and employees had to pay for their own supplies.⁵⁴ Hired thugs and industry blacklists quelled attempts to unionize.⁵⁵ In response, families and ethnic communities banded together to assert or maintain Old-World identities separate from native-born America—an “us and them”

⁵⁰ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵² Robert Whaples, “Child Labor in the United States,” *EHNet Encyclopedia*, <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/whaples.childlabor>

⁵³ Kelly Whalen, “How the Weekend Was Won,” *PBS.org*, <http://www.pbs.org/livelyhood/workday/weekend/8hourday.html>

⁵⁴ David R. Colburn, “Al Smith and the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, 1911-1915,” in *Reform and Reformers in the Progressive Era*, ed. David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, ed. Christopher Phelps (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 181, 222.

worldview, conservative and defensive in nature. Indeed, American individualism was an unknown quantity in the shabby, dark, and filthy tenements. In the unstable urban environment of the age, the poor often saw individualism as wasteful, extravagant, and selfish.⁵⁶

The nation's wealthy, on the other hand, populated the newspaper headlines with tales of elaborate parties, dramatic divorces, and staggering wealth.⁵⁷ These plutocrats defended their individual right to spend their money as they pleased and resisted popular protest over their ostentation. As a result, the upper and lower classes were widely separated, asserting values—individual and flamboyant for the rich, united and cooperative for the poor—that reflected each group's concerns and proved abhorrent to the other group.

Progressivism: The Middle Class Response

The middle class found itself caught somewhere between these extremes of wealth and poverty. The austere trappings of Victorianism had become trademarks of the middle class in the decades before the Progressive Era. Victorians emphasized domesticity, modesty, thrift, and sacrifice within a classically nuclear family structure.⁵⁸ These values, Victorians felt, led to economic prosperity and the preservation of the moral order. However, Victorian stability could not withstand the new pressures of immigration, urbanization, and further industrialization. The middle

⁵⁶ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7, 11-13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

class watched as divorce rates rose and wealthy families dissolved publicly.⁵⁹

Alcoholism, promiscuity, and materialism were apparent among both the wealthy and the poor.⁶⁰ Industrialization and urbanization meant that more of life was lived in the public sphere, which diminished the domesticity so central to Victorianism. In response to these stimuli, and a resulting sense of societal chaos, the middle class developed a new value system: Progressivism.

Progressivism was the middle class belief that societal reform could restore American culture to a state of moral, economic, and social harmony. The Progressive Movements rejected the storied American value of individualism in favor of a more communal, socially aware perspective.⁶¹ This perspective came to be called “mutualism” or “communalism,” and some Progressives alluded to the “environmental argument,” in which an individual’s circumstances did not stem solely from his actions, but from his surroundings.⁶² Progressives, like their Victorian predecessors,

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11. The divorce rate for Americans worth \$20 million or more doubled after the Civil War, but was still nowhere near current rates. Although this was only a handful of couples, these individuals were in the public eye, and so it seemed divorce was more prevalent than it actually was.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, poor, single working women often spent a fair portion of their income on elaborate clothing, so as to enjoy one aspect of the lavish lifestyle of the wealthy (Ibid., 20).

⁶¹ Ibid., 59.

⁶² This value system is still apparent in American politics today; the environmental argument is balanced against an emphasis on individualism, the average American is still mistrustful of large corporations, and politicians along the entire political spectrum call for “reform” and “change” of practically every institution or practice in place. Although there is no longer a highly visible class of reformers shaping the American public, the Progressive Movements’ sense of equality and interdependence remain part of the American worldview.

valued modesty, education, and quiet dignity.⁶³ These visionaries embarked variously and vigorously on campaigns to combat alcoholism, squalid living conditions, shabby tenement constructions, inferior quality of food and water, the lack of healthcare and childcare services for the poor, and various willful corporate abuses. Although the Progressives pursued a number of different causes, all worked with the common goal of re-stabilizing American society. One of the most emblematic and wide reaching of these Progressive Movements was the reform of the meat industry, which took place in 1906, the year of *The Jungle*.

⁶³ Ibid., 10.

Chapter Two

The Rise and Decline of the American Meat Industry

“They use everything about the hog except the squeal.”⁶⁴

Upton Sinclair, The Jungle

The American meat industry developed in step with an urbanizing, industrializing nation, aided by advances in railroad technologies. Like other massive industries at the time, it engaged in illegal collusion and met with governmental and public resistance, in this case trust-busting efforts and the pure meat movement. By 1906, Americans—including President Roosevelt— were exasperated with the high prices of meat, rumors of unwholesome manufacturing processes and preservatives, and the industry’s successful evasion of governmental curtailment. The consolidation and cutthroat competition made necessary by the nature of the industry led to its fall from public grace.

The Industrialization of the Meat Industry

Before the advent of the railroads, meat was a seasonal, largely local product.⁶⁵ Western ranchers sold their cattle and hogs to middlemen who herded them to the Eastern cities for slaughter. Rural consumers slaughtered their own animals or bought from a neighbor.⁶⁶ Those who did the slaughtering did not butcher the meat and butchers did not make processed meat products. The industry was informal, subject to

⁶⁴ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 73.

⁶⁵ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

high turnover, and regulated by cost.⁶⁷ Meat that was not eaten fresh was salted or cured for later consumption.⁶⁸

The development of the railroads changed the structure of the meat industry. Railroads became a lifeline for small towns between the American coasts and offered a sure and rapid way to transport people and goods across the continent. This led to the standardization of time zones and the birth of a national product market.⁶⁹ Cattle and hogs, like so many other products, were now shipped by rail. This decreased prices for meat and thus increased demand, leading to industry expansion.⁷⁰ Meatpacking companies sprang up where railway lines intersected, which affected the city of Chicago in particular. The Union Stockyards were built there in 1865 to handle the vast numbers of livestock now moved around the country.⁷¹ Railways shipped animals eastward all year. However, since meat spoiled quickly without adequate refrigeration and there was as yet no way to keep meat cool as it traveled via railcar, meatpacking was restricted to cold-weather months.⁷² Shipping live animals by rail had its own problems: animals lost a significant amount of weight on the journey, and some perished.⁷³

Full industrialization came with the development of the refrigerated railcar. The earliest attempt at a refrigerated model appeared in 1878; it failed to keep meat

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ “This Day in History: November 18,” *History.com*. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/railroads-create-the-first-time-zones>.

⁷⁰ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 12.

⁷¹ Ibid., 14.

⁷² Ibid., 17.

⁷³ Ibid., 3.

cool, however. To quote the meatpacker Philip Armour, “You might as well have shipped the meat in a clothes basket.”⁷⁴ By 1886, all major Chicago meatpackers shipped beef successfully in well-designed refrigerated cars.⁷⁵ The air in the cars was cooled in ice bunkers in the ceiling corners. As it cooled, it sank lower to the ground, which forced the warmer air up into the ice bunker. This created constant cool air circulation in the refrigerated cars.⁷⁶ The meat shipped in these cars was dressed: that is, it had been skinned, cleaned, and cut either for cooking by consumers or for further preparation in butcher shops. Meatpackers no longer needed to ship the parts of the animal that were not consumed—bones, fat, and skin, for example—so shipping costs dropped.⁷⁷ Now able to ship meat anywhere at any time, packing companies would purchase animals in stockyards set up by railway stations, slaughter and process the meat in plants built near the stockyards, and use their own railcars and distribution centers to circulate the resulting products across the country.⁷⁸ By the 1880s, the meatpacking industry was one of the largest industries in America.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Qtd. in Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 49.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁷ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), 236. This gave shippers of dressed beef a marked advantage over livestock shippers, which led to the negotiation of higher shipping rates for refrigerated beef. Indeed, an entire second paper could be written on the sparring that occurred over railway shipping prices as the meat industry modernized.

⁷⁸ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 58-62.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Opposition to the Beef Trust

By the 1880s, a handful of large packers dominated the meat industry and struggled to survive its cutthroat competition.⁸⁰ Like other industry giants, these packers determined that forming a trust was the best way to find stability and ensure success. The “Big Four:” Armour, Swift, Hammond, and Morris, controlled the trust.⁸¹ These firms, all based in Chicago, operated massive packinghouses. Together they controlled what was publicly called the “Beef Trust.” These packers engaged in price-fixing and the communal negotiation of shipping costs with railroads in spite of the Sherman Act.⁸² The trust clashed with government officials almost from its inception.

Despite repeated legal battles, the government was unable to check the Beef Trust’s manipulation of the market. In 1888, Western cattlemen began to complain that the Big Four were coordinating their cattle purchases in order to secure unfairly low prices.⁸³ A Senate committee investigated these charges and found that the Big Four were guilty of working together to fix beef prices and force retailers to buy their product.⁸⁴ However, at this time most Americans believed that collusive activities would be weeded out by supply and demand. This traditional American belief in a laissez-faire, self-regulating market economy precluded the committee from recommending government reaction.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ibid., xxiv.

⁸¹ Ibid., 50.

⁸² Ibid., 29-41.

⁸³ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 175-176.

In subsequent years, however, many consumers came to reject this traditional belief. Americans came to so resent the beef trust's high prices that the mounting clamor facilitated legal action. When Theodore Roosevelt became president, he identified the Beef Trust as an evil oligopoly. In 1902, the government successfully sued the beef trust for violating the Sherman Act.⁸⁶ This changed little. The trust members merely paid the required fines and continued to collude illegally. Consumers still complained that meat prices were too high.

Thus, in 1903 Roosevelt directed the Bureau of Corporations to investigate the beef trust.⁸⁷ The resulting report found no evidence of wrongdoing resulting in unfairly high prices.⁸⁸ These findings were very unpopular, as many Americans felt the price of meat was too high. Newspapers such as the *New York Sun* and *New York Press* criticized the Bureau, echoing Americans' mounting frustration at government inaction in the face of perceived thievery.⁸⁹

From February to August 1905, Charles E. Russell wrote a series of articles in the investigative journal *Everybody's Magazine* that focused on the Beef Trust.⁹⁰ In "The Greatest Trust in the World" he argued that the major meatpackers were not evil men, but that the system they had mastered was based on eliminating competition and

⁸⁶ Young, *Pure Food*, 227.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 226. Charles Russell, *The Greatest Trust in the World* (New York: The Ridgway-Thayer Company, 1906). The articles originally ran serially in *Everybody's Magazine*; the version cited here was released, unaltered, as a book in 1906.

making the highest profits.⁹¹ The economy was so unpredictable that businessmen could not be blamed for seeking the stability of a trust. Despite his sympathy for the meatpackers, Russell argued that the high price of beef was due to price-fixing, and not economic fluctuations, since the packers were also cutting the prices paid to cattle ranchers.⁹² Readers were infuriated that the Beef Trust was successfully swindling both its suppliers and consumers. They did not share Russell's compassion for meatpackers.

At the same time, the government once again prosecuted the Beef Trust for illegal business activities. Unfortunately, the judge determined that the Bureau of Corporations, which had collected evidence against the packers, had compelled meatpacking officials to admit to guilty actions. This violated their Fifth Amendment rights, and so none of the information the Bureau collected would be admissible in court. The attorney general characterized this decision as an "immunity bath," and once again the public lamented the beef trust's seeming invincibility.⁹³

At this time, most of the public and governmental animosity towards the Beef Trust stemmed from high prices. Another movement was also developing, however, which charged that American meat was not only overpriced, but also unsafe to eat.

The Pure Meat Movement

Although the rapid modernization of the meat industry meant that a handful of companies, including the Big Four and a few others, were producing meat for the

⁹¹ Russell, "The Greatest Trust in the World," 5-6.

⁹² Young, *Pure Food*, 226. Russell, "The Greatest Trust in the World," 2-3.

⁹³ Young, *Pure Food*, 228.

entire nation, there was no national standard of inspection. Instead meat inspection in America was left up to cities and states, preventing the export of some meat products to European countries that had specific meat inspection standards.⁹⁴ To encourage exportation, federal government passed its first meat inspection law in 1890.⁹⁵ The federal government provided inspection of meat for export at no cost to the packer and the service was completely voluntary. Uninspected meat could be shipped within the United States.⁹⁶

The first stirrings of a movement for a more hygienic meat supply appeared in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War.⁹⁷ American troops had been supplied with “embalmed beef” as part of their food rations, and it was widely believed by the soldiers and the public that over three thousand troops had died after eating this low-grade and routinely rancid canned meat.⁹⁸ President Roosevelt himself testified against the meatpackers during a Congressional investigation into the quality of beef rations, having served as a Rough Rider in Cuba during the war.⁹⁹ This may explain the

⁹⁴ Thomas A. Bailey, “Congressional Opposition to Pure Food Legislation, 1879-1906,” *American Journal of Sociology* 36 (July 1920): 54.

⁹⁵ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 177.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* Technically, this inspection was meant for meat that would be exported, but in his Congressional testimony, Thomas Wilson notes that most of the meat was processed together, and so the inspector generally oversaw all production. If meat did not pass inspection, it could not be exported, but could still be sold to Americans.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176, 198.

⁹⁸ William Parmenter, “The Jungle and its Effects,” *Journalism in History* 10 (1983): 14. This statistic is probably untrue, and is at any rate unproven, but was popularly believed during the Progressive Era. In fact, during his testimony before Congress, Thomas Wilson tried to dispel this rumor.

⁹⁹ Mattson, *Upton Sinclair*, 66. James Harvey Young, “The Pig that Fell into the Privy: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and the Meat Inspection Amendments of

president's particular animosity toward the Beef Trust and his eagerness to diminish its power.

Yet pure meat legislation, and pure food legislation in general, proved difficult to enact. Between 1879 and 1906, 190 measures to prevent the adulteration of specific foods were introduced into Congress.¹⁰⁰ These measures failed for several reasons. Some legislators supported those who stood to profit from the sale of adulterated foods, such as meatpackers and canned-food manufacturers. Others argued that banning certain ingredients from food was an inappropriate extension of government control. Still others felt the issue was too trite to be dealt with; on several occasions measures were tabled so that Congress could attend to a more pressing matter.¹⁰¹

With Congress failing to address the issue of impure meat and food, others took up the cause. Beginning in 1902 and continuing into 1907, Harvey Wiley, a chemist in the Department of Agriculture, mounted a campaign against preservatives in food in an effort to spark legislation requiring that food be labeled with a list of ingredients.¹⁰² In order to test the effects of common preservatives, Wiley assembled a "Poison Squad" of twelve young men who ate pure foods, then adulterated foods, so

1906," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 59 (1985): 468. Roosevelt's first-hand experience with putrid meat would lead him to take future allegations of dishonesty in the meat industry very seriously.

¹⁰⁰ Bailey, "Congressional Opposition," 52.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁰² Young, *Pure Food*, 151. Judson A. Grenier, "Muckraking the Muckrakers: Upton Sinclair and his Peers," in *Reform and Reformers of the Progressive Era*, ed. David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 72.

that the chemist could determine the effects of the preservatives.¹⁰³ The squad first tested borax, a preservative used in many foods, including meat. Wiley found that a daily dosage of four grams of borax left his volunteers unable to get out of bed. He wrote that the average amount ingested by Americans, about a quarter of a gram daily, was enough to impede kidney function. He argued that the American government should ban borax from food, as Germany had already done.¹⁰⁴ Wiley's Poison Squad captured media and public attention, increasing the popularity of the pure food movement.¹⁰⁵ Wiley argued that preservatives used in canned meats posed a particular health hazard to consumers.¹⁰⁶

Articles warning of unhealthy American meat products appeared sporadically in journals worldwide. In 1905, the British medical journal *Lancet* published a series of articles by Adolphe Smith on the Chicago meatpacking district.¹⁰⁷ The articles depicted the stockyards as filthy and poorly run.¹⁰⁸ Smith wrote that Americans were in danger of contracting tuberculosis from the tubercular animals slaughtered there.¹⁰⁹ He also warned readers about trichinosis, an illness caused by worms that live in pig flesh.¹¹⁰ In the same year, the famed muckraker Samuel H. Adams published an article in *Colliers* denouncing food adulteration in general as a public health threat.¹¹¹ Public

¹⁰³ Young, *Pure Food*, 151-153.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Parmenter, "The Jungle and its Effects," 16.

dismay increased with every published article on the state of the American meat supply, but Congress still did not take up the issue.

By 1906, the meat industry had already garnered the odium of the American people and their president. Years of trust activities and high prices, coupled with allegations of meat impurity, increased this tension to a fever pitch. The drama culminated in a final confrontation between the Big Four and the Roosevelt administration. It would be sparked by the writings of a largely unknown novelist, a young socialist named Upton Sinclair.

Chapter Three

The Jungle Fever

“I aimed for the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.”¹¹²

Upton Sinclair

No text had greater impact on the pure meat movement than Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. While many earlier publications about the pure meat movement had been expository, Sinclair framed his criticism of capitalist society in general, and the plight of meat industry workers specifically, as a novel. This gave his message a much wider appeal. The American public was already frustrated with the beef trust’s high prices, and Sinclair’s claims of corporate dishonesty and unscrupulousness played right to this frustration. Public outcry over the state of the meat industry as depicted in *The Jungle* fostered the government action that would finally, many hoped, call the unwieldy industry to heel. *The Jungle*’s vivid, abject descriptions of urban immigrant life and the inner workings of the meat industry propelled the pure meat movement by sparking governmental investigations that resulted in legislation.

The Jungle was first published beginning in February of 1905 as a serial in the socialist periodical *Appeal to Reason*, and then as a book in 1906.¹¹³ At the time *Appeal to Reason* had perhaps 300,000 readers.¹¹⁴ However, because of the novel’s sensational content and political relevance, over one million people had read the novel

¹¹² Upton Sinclair, “What Life Means to Me,” *Cosmopolitan*, October 1906, 594.

¹¹³ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 8.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

by 1907.¹¹⁵ In *The Jungle*, a family of Lithuanian immigrants struggles to survive in Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century, and bears witness to seemingly endless hardships and atrocities. The novel's central characters, the Rudkus family, spend their first several years employed in various positions in "Packingtown," the city's fictionalized meatpacking district. While Sinclair's principal aim was to direct attention to the plight of workers in a capitalist society, instead *The Jungle* sparked outrage over the way meat was processed in the United States. Noting public reaction, Sinclair famously reflected, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."¹¹⁶

Sickening Accusations

The meat industry as depicted in *The Jungle* sold meat products that were rotten and commonly contaminated with filth; readers demanded protection from these unscrupulous practices. In the novel, government inspectors monitor the Packingtown plants, but are easily distracted and do nothing to impede the inclusion of rancid, diseased, or inedible meats in production.¹¹⁷ Chicagoans believed the presence of inspectors meant the meat supply was safe, and did not understand that meats declared unfit for export were not destroyed but simply sold within Illinois.¹¹⁸ Sinclair suggested that the inspectors were often involved in graft.¹¹⁹ Jurgis, the novel's protagonist, learns that the meatpackers pay inspectors at least two thousand dollars

¹¹⁵ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 161. In the hundred years since its original editions, *The Jungle* has never gone out of print (Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 27).

¹¹⁶ Sinclair, "What Life Means to Me," 594.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *The Jungle*, 76-77.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

weekly in “hush-money” so that tubercular cattle can be processed, and another two thousand dollars are paid so that pigs arriving dead on the trains can be used to make lard.¹²⁰

The meat processed in Packingtown was, as a rule, adulterated and unsanitary.¹²¹ Some of the more vivid passages detailed the work of Antanas, who mopped pickling liquids from the filthy floor into a container to be reused. The container had a trap for meat scraps and “odds and ends of refuse,” which were shoveled back into the meat supply.¹²²

Sinclair also described cattle that were “steerly,” or covered in boils resulting from their diet of fermented grain. Fermented grain is alcohol-laden, a byproduct of breweries, and costs far less than fresh grain. The diet-induced boils would burst during slaughter, splashing the workers. Sinclair claimed that these cattle became “the ‘embalmed beef’ that had killed so many American soldiers in the Spanish-American War.”¹²³ Perhaps the worst offenses involved the making of sausage, which was comprised of moldy meat returned from Europe and bathed in chemical preservatives such as borax and glycerine. Sausages contained meat that had fallen onto filthy

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Packingtown is a fictionalized version of Chicago’s meatpacking district, but Sinclair claimed to have based the details in *The Jungle* from his own observations as well as stories told to him by the workers he met while doing research there.

¹²² Ibid., 99.

¹²³ Ibid., 132.

floors, dried rat dung, poisoned bread set out to kill the rats, and the dead rats themselves.¹²⁴

Government Response: The Neill-Reynolds Report

These allegations horrified consumers. In 1906, the average American consumed 176 pounds of meat yearly—186 including lard.¹²⁵ Alarmed citizens inundated the White House with letters demanding government intervention.¹²⁶ President Roosevelt, who had also read *The Jungle*, shared the public's concern and immediately sought to corroborate Sinclair's claims. The Department of Agriculture conducted an investigation and found some faults with the industry, but disparaged the sensational allegations in *The Jungle* as “willful and deliberate misinterpretations.”¹²⁷ Sinclair met with Roosevelt personally to argue that the Department of Agriculture was complicit in the industry's practices; after all, its inspectors were accused of incompetence and graft.¹²⁸ Sinclair proposed that Roosevelt commission a second investigation, and the novelist would put those investigators in touch with his contacts in Chicago.¹²⁹ Roosevelt agreed, sending Charles Neill and James Reynolds to Chicago packinghouses to investigate their conditions.¹³⁰ Neill was the Commissioner

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Young, “The Pig that Fell into the Privy,” 467.

¹²⁶ Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 12.

¹²⁷ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 199. Qtd. in Young, *Pure Food*, 232.

¹²⁸ Young, “The Pig that Fell into the Privy,” 469.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ ““The Jungle’ Hunt to Produce Game,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 11, 1906, p. 1,6. Interestingly, Neill had once lived at the University of Chicago Settlement near Chicago's meatpacking district, at the same establishment where Sinclair took his meals while conducting research for his novel (Young, “The Pig that Fell into the Privy,” 470, Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 5).

of Labor at the time, and Reynolds, a sociologist, had done investigative work for Roosevelt before, most notably regarding consular services in China.¹³¹

The American public was eager to see a government response to the allegations in *The Jungle*, and so the newspapers reported heavily on Neill and Reynolds' inspection of the Chicago meatpacking plants. Sinclair had wanted the pair to conduct their investigation undercover so that they might hear stories from plant workers and personally witness the unscrupulous practices detailed in *The Jungle*.¹³² Charles Neill, however, was too prominent an official to go unnoticed.¹³³ Chicago newspapers announced Neill and Reynolds' arrival, and plant representatives accompanied them on their tours of meatpacking facilities.¹³⁴ Thus, employees were hesitant to share stories with the investigators.¹³⁵ Nonetheless, Neill and Reynolds published a damning report of the meat industry after two and a half weeks of investigation. They included only circumstances they had witnessed personally, and could not substantiate Sinclair's claims that meat was chemically treated or that a worker had perished in the lard vats.¹³⁶ Yet the report vindicated many of Sinclair's claims, and in general revealed many of the filthy slaughterhouse conditions described

¹³¹ "President Hunts in 'The Jungle,' *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 10, 1906, p. 1,4.

¹³² Ibid. Young, *Pure Food*, 232-233.

¹³³ Young, *Pure Food*, 232-234.

¹³⁴ Ibid., "The Pig that Fell into the Privy," 469. "President Hunts in "The Jungle," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1, 4. "The Jungle' to Produce Game," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1, 6.

¹³⁵ Young, *Pure Food*, 234. Ella Reeve, a famous Communist, transmitted workers' stories of unsanitary and unsavory practices in the meatpacking plants, but Neill and Reynolds did not include these accounts in their report (Ibid., 470).

¹³⁶ Ibid. "Packing House Report Outlined," *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 2, 1906, p. 1.

in *The Jungle*. Neill and Reynolds' corroboration gave President Roosevelt the leverage needed to call for pure meat legislation to protect American consumers.

The Neill-Reynolds report describes dirty, poorly constructed facilities with bad lighting and ventilation.¹³⁷ Newer buildings were not noticeably better than older plants.¹³⁸ Working surfaces and containers were generally made of wood, which was difficult to clean, let alone sanitize.¹³⁹ Bathroom facilities lacked partitions and sinks, so male workers would relieve themselves on the floor.¹⁴⁰ Those who did use the privies returned to the lines without washing their hands.¹⁴¹ Neill and Reynolds believed that fresh meats were relatively wholesome and well-cleaned because they required little handling, but processed meats—products that were cured, canned, smoked, or manufactured—were commonly thrown on dirty or wet floors, walked on, spat on, and touched with dirty hands.¹⁴² Although managers argued that the meat would be sterilized when cooked so handling did not matter, consumers typically ate some of the contaminated products raw.¹⁴³ Old meat was mixed in with fresh, cans were relabeled to look new, and pieces of pigskin and rope became “potted ham.”¹⁴⁴ At one point, Neill saw a pig carcass fall from the line into the privy; workers retrieved it and put it back on the line without any effort to clean it.¹⁴⁵ Plant managers,

¹³⁷ U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stock Yards*, 3-4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

who defended these practices and clearly had made no effort to put on a show of cleanliness, accompanied Neill and Reynolds at all times.

The report recommended how to remedy the filthy conditions in the packinghouses. Neill and Reynolds suggested that the Secretary of Agriculture regulate the production of meat for interstate and foreign trade; the federal government, then as now, lacked the jurisdiction to regulate products sold within a single state.¹⁴⁶ The investigators prescribed inspections before and after slaughter, inspections of animal tissues under a microscope, and an increase in the number of inspectors.¹⁴⁷ The report compared the filthy Chicago slaughterhouses to a model facility in New York that boasted well-laid bricks, cement walls, daily rinse-downs, and clean bathrooms; some of the problems noted in the document would require major renovation to correct.¹⁴⁸ Many of Neill and Reynold's proposed solutions would be taken into account by the pure meat law that was now finally on the legislative horizon. Upton Sinclair's novel had made pure meat, and pure food in general, a major theme in American politics, and, with the results of the Neill-Reynolds Report, Congress was obliged to take action. The nature of that action would be fiercely debated, however, and would reveal the biases and compromises that ultimately weakened its effects.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

Chapter Four

The Passage of Pure Meat Legislation and the

“Beveridge Amendment” Hearings:

Government Bias in Industry Reform

“Th’ Prisdint, like th’ rest iv us, has become a viggitarian, an’ th’ diet has so changed his disposition that he is writin’ a book called ‘Supper in Silence,’ didycated to Sinitor Aldrich.”¹⁴⁹

Mr. Dooley

Public animosity towards the meat industry had reached fever pitch, and the issue of meat regulation now commanded Congressional attention. Unfortunately, the American government was a house divided. While President Roosevelt and Senator Albert Beveridge fought for stricter pure meat legislation, Representatives Lorimer and Wilson supported packer interests. The resulting Meat Inspection Act represented a compromise between the two sides, insufficient to guarantee pure meat. Ultimately, the government protected the meat industry instead of the consumer.

The Beveridge Amendment

Senator Albert Beveridge, a Wisconsin Republican, had been contemplating a bill to strengthen meat inspection laws even before publication of *The Jungle*.¹⁵⁰ After Neill and Reynolds confirmed the unsanitary conditions in the packinghouses,

¹⁴⁹ Qtd. in Young, “The Pig That Fell into the Privy,” 471.

¹⁵⁰ Young, *Pure Food*, 236.

Roosevelt supported Beveridge's effort.¹⁵¹ The original Beveridge Amendment, as the bill came to be called, passed the Senate unanimously as an amendment to the Agricultural Appropriation Act.¹⁵²

The amendment called for post-mortem examinations of all cattle, sheep, swine, and goats destined for human consumption.¹⁵³ Inspectors could examine the product at any point in its production, and would personally supervise the destruction of condemned meat.¹⁵⁴ Only federally-inspected and approved meats could be sold between states and internationally.¹⁵⁵ Processors would be required to date all canned meat products, but would not have to list ingredients.¹⁵⁶ The Secretary of Agriculture was charged with overseeing meat inspection. Meatpackers would pay inspection fees.¹⁵⁷ The latter stipulation was key: by charging the packers for the cost of inspection, the Secretary of Agriculture could be sure that adequate funding would be available even as the industry grew or market conditions changed.¹⁵⁸

“Friends to the Packers”

The meatpackers offered no resistance to the passage of the bill in the Senate; instead, they turned to their allies in the House of Representatives. William Lorimer, a Republican representing Illinois, had longtime ties to the Chicago meatpacking

¹⁵¹ Ibid., “The Pig That Fell into the Privy,” 469. The bill was attached to this piece of legislation so that it could be passed sooner.

¹⁵² Ibid., 470.

¹⁵³ U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stockyards*, 351.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 351-352.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 353.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 354. Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 201.

¹⁵⁸ Braeman, *Albert J. Beveridge: American Nationalist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 103.

industry and sat on the Committee on Agriculture.¹⁵⁹ The Committee chairman, James Wadsworth, was a wealthy Republican stock-raiser from New York.¹⁶⁰ *The Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that Wadsworth promised to “defend the packers’ interests as if they were his own.”¹⁶¹ *The New York Times* characterized him as “champion of the packers” and he and Lorimer as “friends to the packers.”¹⁶² Lorimer publicly stated that he would try to block the bill from being voted on favorably by the Committee.¹⁶³ Wadsworth characterized the public ferment over meat inspection as “senseless.”¹⁶⁴ Mr. Haskins, another Committee member sympathetic to the packers, had driven cattle to the stockyards in his youth.¹⁶⁵ As members of the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, these three men were ideally situated and inclined to challenge the Beveridge Amendment on behalf of their associates in the meatpacking industry.

The Release of the Neill-Reynolds Report

Wary of the pro-packer faction’s influence, Roosevelt chose not to release the Neill-Reynolds Report to the press. The president worried that the Beveridge Amendment would be defeated in the House of Representatives, and used the threat of the report’s release as political leverage. Further, the president hoped to prevent

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ “Packing House Report Outlined,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1.

¹⁶² “Neill’s Meat Report Coming in Sections,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1906, p.1.

¹⁶³ Qtd. in Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 202-203.

¹⁶⁴ Qtd. In Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 203.

¹⁶⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stockyards*, 18-19.

further damage to industry sales.¹⁶⁶ A frustrated Sinclair thwarted the president's plan when the author leaked details of the report to the *New York Times* in late May.¹⁶⁷ This maneuver led an exasperated Roosevelt to complain, "Tell Sinclair to go home and let me run the country for awhile."¹⁶⁸ Three days later, the president was obliged to make the full report public.¹⁶⁹

Congressional Testimony

After the president released the Neill-Reynolds report, the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture summoned Neill and Reynolds to testify regarding their findings. Thomas Wilson, a meat industry representative, appeared to counter their testimony. The hearings heavily favored the meatpacking industry and demonstrate the willingness of key Congressional representatives to defend the packers, even in the face of egregious negligence.

Thomas Wilson was the first to testify.¹⁷⁰ He began his testimony by asserting that the meatpackers he represented had always been in support of more inspection and regulation, although the industry operated in an "extremely sanitary, healthful, and

¹⁶⁶ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 201.

¹⁶⁷ "Sinclair Gives Proof of Meat Trust Frauds," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1906, p. 2. Sinclair was concerned that the Beveridge Amendment might be found unconstitutional, and that in any case, impure meat would still be sold in state. He argued that only by alerting the public to the facts of the despicable conditions in meatpacking plants would the problem be solved.

¹⁶⁸ Young, "The Pig that Fell into the Privy," 473.

¹⁶⁹ "Neill's Meat Report Coming in Sections," *The New York Times*, 1.

¹⁷⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stockyards*, 17, 35. Wilson represented Swift, Armour, Hammond, Anglo-American, Fowler Brothers, Nelson Morris & Co., Schwarzchild & Sulzberger Company, Libbey, McNeill, and Libbey, and the Cudahy Packing Company.

cleanly manner.”¹⁷¹ He then invited the members of the Committee to tour the meatpacking plants in Chicago. Implicit in this suggestion was that Neill and Reynolds, government representatives themselves, were incompetent in their investigation. Wilson argued that the bloodshed involved in animal slaughter “would have a very shocking effect on the nerves and senses of two men with the necessary fine sensibilities that such men as Messrs. Neill and Reynolds must have [...] but men such as this Committee is made up of [...] will immediately appreciate how the conditions reported have been exaggerated.”¹⁷²

Wilson vehemently denied many of the charges in the Neill-Reynolds report, specifically the “livening up” of old canned meat, the absence of bathroom and hand-washing facilities, and the use of choleric or dead-on-arrival hogs used to make lard.¹⁷³ Wilson argued that no meatpacker would sell unwholesome meat, leave meat in a pile, mix rope and other objects into the meat, or leave meat lying exposed because these practices would not be economically sound.¹⁷⁴ No member of the Committee challenged his denials, although one might argue that mixing any kind of filler into fresh meat would increase profits if consumers never noticed. Wilson also argued that meat exists in two states—either good or inedible—and thus no rotten meat can possibly be sold to the public.¹⁷⁵ This, of course, is untrue; meat spoils gradually and its quality can be difficult to determine if it is processed or otherwise adulterated. The

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11- 12, 18.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23, 43.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

Committee, however, was congenial and for the most part left Wilson's claims unchallenged.

According to Wilson, the meatpackers had only three objections to the Beveridge Amendment: they did not want preservatives banned, they did not want to date canned meats, and they did not want a fee levied on meatpackers for each animal slaughtered. Mr. Wilson was reluctant to admit the extent to which preservatives were used in meat products, because consumers often opposed their use. However, he eventually admitted that all cured products had traces of borax on them. This, Wilson claimed, would make it problematic to ban the use of all preservatives in meatpacking.¹⁷⁶ The meat industry representative also opposed the dating of cans, because consumers would naturally prefer more recently canned products, and this would make older products difficult to sell.¹⁷⁷

Wilson's final, and most pivotal, objection to the Beveridge Amendment was the expense of inspection. The packers, he argued, already lost money when inspectors condemned an animal they had purchased as unfit for human consumption. He asserted, "We have an objection to paying any further expense in connection with this inspection. We feel that we are [...] standing more than our share when we are standing this condemnation expense."¹⁷⁸ Indeed, Mr. Lorimer argued that the Beveridge bill would run every small packer out of interstate commerce, because the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 77.

costs of inspection would be prohibitive.¹⁷⁹ Pro-meatpacker legislators would later spar with pure meat crusaders over this key position.¹⁸⁰

Neill's Testimony

In general, members of the Committee were cordial towards Mr. Wilson. They allowed him to say all that he wished to say, and they did not challenge his more dubious claims. In contrast, When Charles Neill took the stand, Mr. Lorimer commenced a drawn-out interrogation designed to exhaust him. He drilled Neill on minor details—when Neill said there was rubbish mixed in with pork scraps, for example, Lorimer asked him three times what sort of rubbish it was.¹⁸¹ Mr. Neill fired back, “I repeat that the fact it was rubbish was sufficient to satisfy two reasonable-minded and fairly honest men, and I still say it was rubbish.”¹⁸²

This needling escalated into a blatant attack when the chairman adopted an accusatory tone: “You found nothing but fault there. Is that what you were sent to Chicago for? [...] To find fault and not to praise?”¹⁸³ Mr. Wadsworth continued to attack Mr. Neill, charging that “he did not report the actual conditions. He reported nothing but what was to the discredit of the packers.”¹⁸⁴ Eventually, Mr. Bowie, a Democrat from Alabama and a more neutral member of the Committee, raised an objection: “It does not seem to me that the representative of the Government—Mr. Wilson being the representative of the packing houses—should be put on a cross-

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

examination like he has been, and treated as if he were a culprit.”¹⁸⁵ The hostile grilling ended at this point; Mr. Neill’s competency was no longer questioned and he was merely asked what he saw, as Mr. Wilson had been.¹⁸⁶ Mr. Wadsworth had been subdued, but only momentarily.

“The Packers’ Bill”

The Committee’s bias in favor of the meatpacking industry became even more apparent when, despite Neill and Reynold’s testimony as to the filthy conditions in the Chicago meatpacking district, the Committee produced an alternative bill. This version was tellingly dubbed “the packers’ bill” in the press.¹⁸⁷ The House version of the Beveridge Amendment was so different from the original that *The Chicago Daily Tribune* believed “Beveridge would not recognize his own child.”¹⁸⁸ As the packers wished, the bill stipulated that the government would pay for inspections. Canned meats would not bear the date of manufacture. Meatpackers could ship uninspected meat between states and appeal inspectors’ rulings to federal courts.¹⁸⁹ Although the president attempted to persuade Mr. Wadsworth to revise the bill in order to compromise with Senator Beveridge, the House of Representatives promptly voted on and passed their own version.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁸⁶ Reynolds also testified before the Committee; his testimony was similar to Neill’s and was largely uneventful.

¹⁸⁷ “Roosevelt Hits Meat Substitute,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 15, 1906, p. 1.

¹⁸⁸ “Packers to Win if Action Stands,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 13, 1906, p. 4.

¹⁸⁹ Young, *Pure Food*, 240-241. In this version of the bill, meat that was not inspected could still be sold, but would not bear the government’s seal of inspection.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 246.

The Meat Industry Reformed?

The Senate and the House of Representatives had now passed two sharply different versions of meat inspection bills. The most divisive issue was how to fund inspections. As Wilson testified, the meatpackers wanted to avoid paying for government inspection; their allies in Congress argued that the inspection fees were an undue expense.¹⁹¹ The president, on the other hand, supported the stipulation in the Beveridge Amendment that a fee be levied on meatpackers for each animal slaughtered. This would ensure continued inspection of the meat supply long after the public outcry over the state of the meat supply had disappeared from newspaper headlines.¹⁹²

After several failed attempts at reaching a compromise, the Senate capitulated. The meat lobby was simply too strong to overpower. The Congressional session was nearly at an end, and so pure-meat legislators were obliged to pass a slightly-altered House of Representatives version of the bill in order to have any law at all.¹⁹³ The president signed the bill into law the next morning, June 30, 1906, and it became known as the Meat Inspection Act of 1906.¹⁹⁴ The law was essentially a declawed version of the original Beveridge Amendment; most crucially, it did not require packers to pay for inspection.¹⁹⁵ Instead, Congress appropriated three million dollars

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 238.

¹⁹² U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stockyards*, 5-6.

¹⁹³ Young, *Pure Food*, 251.

¹⁹⁴ Braeman, *Albert J. Beveridge*, 109.

¹⁹⁵ Yeager, *Competition and Regulation*, 210.

annually to cover the cost of meat inspection.¹⁹⁶ The decision to charge the American public for meat inspection, instead of the packers, ultimately made meat safety the government's responsibility. As Beveridge had feared, the money appropriated by Congress to fund inspections proved insufficient in later generations.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Beveridge recognized that the revised bill was better than no law at all, but planned to press the issue of inspection funding in the next Congressional session. His efforts bore no fruit, however: by 1908 the American public was reassured of the safety of the meat supply, and so Beveridge found, just as he had predicted, that there was not enough political impetus to enact further change (Braeman, *Albert J. Beveridge*, 109-110).

Chapter Five

Jungle Redux

“This is like déjà vu all over again.”¹⁹⁸

Yogi Berra

The structure of the contemporary meat industry, coupled with century-old deficient legislation, makes today’s meat supply less safe than ever. Although politicians claim that American meat is “the safest in the world,” many of the nations of the European Union refuse to import American beef and poultry because these products do not meet EU meat safety standards.¹⁹⁹ And Americans are all too familiar with meat recalls and outbreaks of *E. coli* and *Salmonella*. Why is meat safety suddenly a problem?

The Modernized American Meat Industry

The high rate of microbial contamination in American meat stems from the meat industry’s unhygienic raising, slaughtering, and processing procedures. These procedures have undergone a significant transformation in the past few decades. Animals are crowded and filthy from fattening to slaughter; cattle are fed diets that

¹⁹⁸ Qtd. in Yogi Berra.com, “Yogi-isms,” <http://www.yogiberra.com/yogi-isms.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 124, 290. Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 142. Of course, it would be practically impossible to determine which nation has the safest meat. Foodborne illness is frequently unreported, and it is difficult to prove that it is meat that caused the sickness. Further, although the United States may measure meat safety in terms of the number of pathogens harbored or consumers sickened, European countries emphasize the importance of antibiotic-free and genetically unmodified meat. The yardsticks are different for each nation, and so the claim that American meat is the “safest in the world” is empty.

create new diseases and weaken our ability to fight existing ones. Processing occurs at speeds that preclude caution and cleanliness, and industry standards are designed to maximize output regardless of the resultant health hazards.²⁰⁰ This transformation could not have occurred if the Meat Inspection Act were strong enough to adequately protect consumers. Since the USDA lacks the authority and funding to truly regulate the meat industry, the Department instead lowers its food safety standards, in essence condoning the meat industry's problematic practices. There are not enough inspectors to examine all the meat that is processed even though there are fewer processing facilities today than there were for much of the twentieth century.²⁰¹ Without effective oversight, the task of ensuring meat safety falls to the consumer.

The meat supply was considered safe for much of the twentieth century. Mothers did not think twice about feeding their children rare hamburgers or raw cookie dough.²⁰² Because there was no evident problem with the meat supply, there have been no significant changes to the Meat Inspection Act since its inception.²⁰³ In the 1980s, however, the pathogen *E. coli* 0157:H7 was discovered, and rates of

²⁰⁰ Curious readers should consult Gail Eisnitz's *Slaughterhouse*, which examines the meat industry and related government agencies from the perspective of an animal rights activist. *Slaughterhouse* goes into exhaustive detail and includes many issues and arguments outside the scope of this thesis.

²⁰¹ Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 181.

²⁰² Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 45.

²⁰³ I have discovered no indication that funding, which of course increased periodically, was insufficient until the 1980s, probably because farming and slaughtering practices didn't change dramatically until the last quarter of the century. For a list of the (relatively minor) laws enacted pertaining to meat inspection after the Meat Inspection Act, see this FSIS website: http://www.fsis.usda.gov/About_FSIS/100_Years_Timeline/index.asp

foodborne illness began to rapidly increase.²⁰⁴ Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that approximately one-third of all Americans contract a foodborne illness every year.²⁰⁵ Every day an average of 200,000 people are sickened with foodborne illnesses, 822 are hospitalized, and fourteen die.²⁰⁶

This high rate of illness coincides with a dramatic transformation in the American meat industry: when infection rates increased in the 1980s, traditionally pastured food animals were being raised and slaughtered in crowded, filthy facilities and fed a diet based on corn. The concentration of food animals minimizes transportation costs and encourages the uniformity necessary for machinated production lines. Today, independent contractors raise chickens owned by chicken processing companies in large, windowless chicken houses. The chickens never see sunlight.²⁰⁷ Almost all American beef cattle are now raised in concentrated animal feedlot operations (CAFOs). CAFOs are collections of grassless pens housing hundreds to thousands of cattle.²⁰⁸ Because so many cows or chickens cannot graze or forage in one contained space, food must be brought to them. That food is corn.

Historically, American farmers fed their grass-fed cattle moderate amounts of corn in order to fatten them and improve the flavor of their meat, but today corn is the

²⁰⁴ Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 82.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰⁶ Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 195.

²⁰⁷ *Food, Inc.* Directed by Robert Kenner. 94 minutes. 2009.

²⁰⁸ Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 14-15.

main component of an American cow's diet.²⁰⁹ Since the 1970s, the USDA has subsidized many staple crops, the cheapest of which is corn.²¹⁰ As such, sixty percent of American corn is now used to feed cattle, pigs, chickens, and even farmed salmon.²¹¹ Cows' diet is supplemented with animal-based protein, vitamins, and antibiotics, but is usually devoid of the grass cattle evolved to eat.²¹²

Eating so much corn results in many health problems among cattle, including *E. coli* 0157:H7.²¹³ Because the rumen of a corn-fed cow is much more acidic than that of a grass-fed cow, the bacterial strain has adapted to an acidic environment. *E. coli* 0157:H7 is thus unimpeded by human stomach acid, the body's first line of defense against ingested pathogens.²¹⁴ This particular organism is particularly threatening to humans, secreting a toxin that can lead to hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). HUS can be deadly, causing swelling of internal organs, seizures, fluid buildup in and around the lungs, kidney and heart failure, internal hemorrhage, and

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 74. James McWilliams, "A Myth of Grass-Fed Beef," *NYTimes.com*, 27 Jan 2010, <http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/27/a-myth-of-grass-fed-beef/> (accessed 25 April 2010).

²¹⁰ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 51-52, 61. Arthur Trese, interviewed by Molly Davis, May 17, 2010.

²¹¹ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 64, 67. This massive surplus of corn is also used to sweeten and preserve foods, and even fuel cars.

²¹² Ibid., 71. Couric, Katie. "Animal Antibiotic Overuse Hurting Humans?," *CBS Evening News*, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/02/09/eveningnews/main6191530.shtm>. Although not all scientists agree that feeding healthy cattle antibiotics increases bacterial resistance to the drug, European nations avoid the practice based on this logic. American medical professionals, similarly, avoid prescribing unnecessary antibiotics to patients because it fosters bacterial resistance to the drugs.

²¹³ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 82.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

stroke.²¹⁵ The illness kills five to ten percent of those afflicted—mostly children—and maims many others.²¹⁶

Today *E. coli* 0157:H7 resides in roughly forty percent of the American cattle population, and sickens 40,000 Americans annually.²¹⁷ Yet this problem is easily fixed. Research has demonstrated that feeding cattle a diet of grass for three days before slaughter removes eighty-percent of *E. coli* from their systems because it changes the environment of the rumen; however, this solution has not been widely adopted because meat industry leaders deem it too cumbersome and expensive, and the USDA has not disagreed.²¹⁸

Consolidation and its Discontents

Just as large numbers of animals are raised at fewer facilities, since the 1980s more animals have been slaughtered and processed at fewer meatpacking plants. Although there were dozens of slaughterhouses in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century, today, thirteen plants process the vast majority of meat consumed.²¹⁹ Four packers—ConAgra, IBP, Excel, and National Beef—control eighty-four percent of the beef market.²²⁰ The poultry industry is similarly

²¹⁵ Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 37, 50-52, 56.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37-39.

²¹⁷ Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 38, 158. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 82.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* The American food and meat industries are fascinating and complex; interested readers should consult the writings of Michael Pollan, most notably *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, for an in-depth explanation of the business, philosophy, and politics behind the American meal.

²¹⁹ *Food, Inc.*

²²⁰ Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 137-138.

oligopolized: eight companies produce two-thirds of the chicken sold to consumers.²²¹

This dramatic consolidation occurred during the big-business-friendly Reagan administration; unlike the “Big Four” packers in the Progressive Era, today’s four major packers did not need to fear trust-busting litigation in the politically conservative 1980s.²²²

The concentration of American meatpacking in a handful of facilities is dangerous. With thousands of animals constantly moving through, facilities are difficult to keep clean. The animals themselves are covered with dirt and feces that contaminate the meat during the slaughtering process.²²³ These substances harbor harmful pathogens, and so do the animals themselves. Even under more sanitary conditions, when animals live in crowded conditions, disease invariably spreads. And, contamination at one large national plant has a much larger and farther-reaching impact than it would at a smaller, local plant. Since a single hamburger from a large plant can contain flesh from up to one hundred cattle, one infected animal can contaminate sixteen tons of meat.²²⁴

Because more animals are being slaughtered in fewer facilities, line speeds have also increased dramatically, enhancing potential for cross-contamination and unhygienic handling. A 1996 USDA study found that 78.6% of the ground beef sampled contained coliforms, bacteria spread primarily through fecal matter.²²⁵ Some

²²¹ Ibid., 139. Young, “The Pig that Fell into the Privy,” 467.

²²² Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 137.

²²³ Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 81-82.

²²⁴ Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 159.

²²⁵ Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 197.

of this fecal matter came from slaughtered animals, but some also came from slaughterhouse workers. Since the production line runs continually, workers cannot take breaks or clean themselves off; this in turn leads to contamination. In the early 1990s, one poultry plant worker testified before Congress that “workers sometimes go to the bathroom on themselves—they have no other choice. If workers are feeling sick, they are not allowed to leave the line. Then, they get sick on the line and vomit on the floor.”²²⁶ Such a work environment renders proper sanitation impossible. Poor sanitation ultimately leads to sick consumers.

The Shortcomings of the Meat Inspection Act

In theory, the Meat Inspection Act should prevent this factory-style method of meat production because the method facilitates product contamination. Government inspectors are charged with protecting the American public by condemning impure meat; high rates of condemnation would, in turn, discourage these problematic farming and processing practices. However, the Meat Inspection Act does not grant the USDA the level of clout and funding needed to adequately monitor the meat supply.

As a result of these legislative shortcomings, USDA has lowered the threshold for meat safety. Desperately understaffed and pressured to keep up with the meat industry’s output, the Department must be lenient. And so the USDA allows the beef industry to irradiate beef in an effort to kill any pathogens— to quote one researcher, “to try to sterilize the manure getting into the meat—” instead of rejecting meat that

²²⁶ Qtd. in Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 270-271.

has been contaminated with feces in the first place.²²⁷ The USDA has similarly condoned the poultry industry's embracing of "decontamination." Essentially, plant operators pay little attention to how poultry becomes infected, and instead chemically treats all products to kill pathogens. For example, freshly slaughtered poultry routinely bathes in a large, communal chill tank for six hours prior to processing, enabling cross-contamination. To remedy this, plant workers add bleach to the water.²²⁸ The USDA continues to support this practice although its own studies have proven that it does not satisfactorily decontaminate the product.²²⁹ In 1997, fifteen nations of the European Union banned the importation of American poultry, citing an inadequate reliance on "decontamination" rather than the prevention of contamination in the first place.²³⁰

Unsurprisingly, these methods produce tainted products. A look at the USDA's website reveals a long list of ongoing recalls for food products, mostly beef. As of December 26, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the division of the USDA that handles food recalls, had issued sixty-nine recalls in 2009 alone for various reasons, including product contamination with *E. coli 0157:H7*, *Salmonella*, metal clips, and plastic shards.²³¹ In at least two instances, the FSIS recalled beef tongues with tonsils still attached; the USDA requires that tonsils be removed because

²²⁷ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 82.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 290. Interestingly, most American cattle cannot be sold in the European Union either, because the EU has banned the bovine growth hormone commonly used by American ranchers (Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 142).

²³¹ The Food and Drug Administration. "FSIS Recalls: Current Recalls and Alerts." http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fsis_Recalls/Open_Federal_Cases/index.asp.

their ingestion may lead to bovine spongiform encephalopathy, better known as mad-cow disease.²³² All of the contaminated meat was USDA-inspected and certified during processing.

These recalls are voluntary.²³³ The federal government lacks the authority to order the recall of any food product, although it certifies these products as safe for consumption.²³⁴ The Meat Inspection Act may enable inspection “from the hoof to the can,” but once meat is processed, it is outside the government’s jurisdiction.²³⁵ Generally, recalls occur only after consumers have been sickened, and much of the contaminated product has already been consumed.²³⁶ Although the Food and Drug Administration is charged with alerting consumers of food recalls, most recalls go unnoticed unless they are covered by the news media.

Recalls and decontamination processes are not enough to ensure the safety of meat products today, but the USDA is not equipped to implement stronger methods. As a result, the meat industry was able to develop in ways that maximized profit with no regard for consumer safety. In her investigative report *Slaughterhouse*, Gail Eisnitz’s description of documented food-safety violations from 1996 to 1997 bears a striking resemblance to Sinclair’s description of Packingtown almost a century

²³² Ibid.

²³³ The USDA issues recalls with the permission of the processor, or the processor itself recalls a product and notifies the USDA.

²³⁴ Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 122.

²³⁵ U.S. House of Representatives, *Conditions in Chicago Stockyards*, 1.

²³⁶ Ibid., 129.

earlier.²³⁷ Eisnitz describes maggot-infested processing equipment and meat packed in boxes with “fist-sized clumps of fecal matter.”²³⁸ Like the fictional characters in *The Jungle*, sick workers cough and sneeze on the product or on their hands as they work.²³⁹ And, just as Sinclair observed, “plant personnel shoveled food directly off the floor into edible sausage bins.”²⁴⁰ Given today’s meat industry scenarios, one might legitimately think the Meat Inspection Act was never passed at all.

²³⁷ These violations must be fairly apparent; I was not barred from touring any of the several large meat processing facilities I contacted in the course of my research.

²³⁸ Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 287.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Politics of Reform: Then and Now

“Justice and peace must be brought together, so that whatever is just may be powerful, and whatever is powerful may be just.”²⁴¹

Blaise Pascal

Because traditional American culture tends to value free enterprise and individual prerogative, the American government often finds itself torn between defending the citizen in his or her various pursuits, and defending corporate America in its pursuit of profit. Often defense of one is at the expense of the other. The United States Department of Agriculture represents a case in point. The Department’s original purpose was to promote commerce in American agricultural products. The specific task of monitoring the meat supply, and alerting consumers to various shortcomings in meat products and in the meat industry itself, conflicts with this original mission.²⁴²

When the officials regulating an industry have a vested interest in that industry’s commercial success, and that success may depend on a very light regulatory imprint, administrators find themselves in a difficult position. Precarious policies such as decontamination may be adopted for political reasons and defended for economic ones. Officials may also mislead the public as to the safety of the industry’s products. For example, most Americans believe the USDA categorically prevents impure meat

²⁴¹ Qtd. in Think Exist.com, “Blaise Pascal Quotes,” http://thinkexist.com/quotation/justice_and_power_must_be_brought_together-so/146157.html.

²⁴² Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 243.

from being sold, and have no idea that in fact the government allows an acceptable threshold of feces on every roasted chicken and hamburger.²⁴³ This standard of regulation would be intolerable to many consumers, and so the Department does not publicize it. Since the meat industry, like all other industries, wants to maximize its output, and the USDA is unequipped to adequately inspect the meat supply, Americans risk their health at every meal.²⁴⁴

This arrangement is unacceptable. Five thousand Americans die every year—many of them children—after eating tainted meat; this is not because of the government’s ignorance of the problem, but due instead to its willful inaction.²⁴⁵ The solutions are to amend the Meat Inspection Act in order to levy a fee on meatpackers for each animal slaughtered and to empower the USDA. Some mechanism must ensure there are enough inspectors, sufficient staff to support inspectors, and adequate scientists and technicians to provide inspectors with up-to-date techniques of selection and inspection. Congress should also give the USDA more control over the number of animals each inspector examines each minute, which will require processing lines to slow down, thereby reducing contamination. The federal body charged with regulating the meat industry needs clear authority to recall contaminated and harmful products, in the manner the FDA is empowered to regulate medical products. If the USDA seal is on a product, implicitly attesting to its safety and quality, then the USDA should be granted the power to guarantee that quality and safety to the consumer. Congress

²⁴³ Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse*, 169, 180.

²⁴⁴ Morrone, *Poisons on Our Plates*, 117.

²⁴⁵ Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 195.

failed to put the consumer first in 1906, and Americans continue to pay for that failure more than 100 years later, some with their lives. Industry opposition should not prevent the government from fulfilling its duty to protect its citizens.

There is a tired cliché that passing legislation is like making sausage: one should not attend too closely to studying the process, but instead to enjoying the final product.²⁴⁶ In 1906, President Roosevelt and Senator Beveridge intended that pure meat legislation protect the meat supply, but as we have seen, the legislative process required that some quality cuts be left out and some undesirable scraps ground in. The final product was not what the label promised, and despite changing tastes and consumer awareness, the recipe has not changed much over time.

This metaphor applies not only to 1906 but also to the present. Over the intervening century the safety of the American consumer's meat supply has been abased further and further, and in ways impossible to envision in Sinclair's day. The law has never been significantly overhauled to reflect contemporary realities. A law that was deficient in 1906 is all but useless given the structure of today's meat industry. As was the case in 1906, the industry does what it can to generate corporate profits, and depends on a public perception of safety that experience does not support. The same can be said of the USDA. With its approval and its small staff of inspectors, it encourages the perception of meat safety and quality, which experience again does not support. A responsible government owes its citizens the same standards of food safety promised a century ago, but not met then, and still not met today.

²⁴⁶ BrainyQuote, "Otto von Bismarck Quotes,"
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/o/ottovonbis161318.html>.

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