

Upton Sinclair and the Personification of the American Dream

Mohamed Cherif HAMZI *¹,

¹ University of Oran 2 Ahmed Ben Ahmed (Algeria),
hamzimc@gmail.com

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Abstract

Upton Sinclair is generally considered as one of the main American socialists and his commitment to the anti-communist cause, as well as his rejection of all labels including that of socialist after the Second World War, is something of an enigma. The aim of this article is to shed light on the coherence of his attitude and the internal logic of his commitment in the 1950s. This implies considering Sinclair as a fundamental individualist who advocated social justice in the same way that the Founding Fathers advocated a reasonable revolution... which clearly shows his link with eighteenth-century idealism, and more particularly with the American dream.

Keywords:

American Dream; individualism; socialism; fight; idealism; engaged writing.

¹ *Corresponding author/ Mohamed Cherif HAMZI*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing about Upton Sinclair's Dead Hand Series gives a neglected writer the homage he deserves, for merely publicizing the objectives at which he aimed makes clear Sinclair's tenacious earnestness and selfless nobility. Although he lacks some of the word-weaving talents of poets, Sinclair is still remembered as the Great Chronicler. He was a journalist writing on the world's most challenging question--on civilization's creation and its effects. Sinclair believed in single-handedly altering social institutions: literature, Religion, education, the press; Sinclair was a socialist, a man who was all his life, even when later running unsuccessfully for governor of California, on the fringes of society.

Sinclair was a bright student who began as a hack writer, churning out boys' novels to pay his way through college. He became disillusioned with Protestant Christianity and turned to socialism; some say as a compensation for personal problems. Regardless of the reason, Sinclair toiled selflessly, turning out dozens of books on as many subjects and rarely relaxing in his quest for the perfect society.

Sinclair reformed the Chicago meatpacking industry with his most famous novel, *The Jungle*, which is said to be marred only by its didactic conclusion and heavy handedness. He was the companion of many famous writers and even American presidents.

Sinclair's dream of "industrial democracy," if actualized, would bond modern technology and a widespread spiritual awakening which would use peaceful means to cause the captains of industry to cease oppressing the "wage slave."

Modern technology would make it possible for shorter working weeks and increased leisure time for all. Thus, in the title of the series Sinclair "tried to show the difference between the reality of a 'Dead Hand'

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of greed in human life and the ideal of Adam Smith's laissez-faire concept of an 'Invisible Hand' guiding economics" (Bloodworth, 101).

Regardless of the wistful scope of his dream, Sinclair achieved much over the course of his life. Near his death, he saw some of these as "the improvement of journalism... the renewed interest in psychic research, the formation of the [ACLU]. [And] the introduction of socialism to American colleges" (Yoder 112-113).

Sinclair's philosophy on the exploitation of the poor by the rich is declared in *The Jungle* and later repeated in the *Dead Hand Series*. He believes rebellion by the poor is justified and says, "They were swindlers and thieves of pennies and dimes, and they had been trapped and put out of the way by the swindlers and thieves of millions of dollars" (*Jungle* 199).

The *Dead Hand series* is unique in the history of American letters, not only because of Sinclair's singlemindedness of purpose but because the series best demonstrates the undiluted, idealistic American muckraker.

Here is Sinclair, filled with the spirit of righteousness, armed with a vision of a world to win over for the cooperative commonwealth that was to be. Long after the earlier reformers had discarded their muckrakes, Sinclair continued to assault the most prominent capitalist institutions, informing the entire reading public of the irresponsibility and shortcomings of organized religions, newspapers, the schools, art, literature and economics.

While the citadels of capitalism remained immune and largely invulnerable to the charges Sinclair levied against them in the series, in writing *The Dead Hand series*, as Lewis Fretz observes, Sinclair performed an invaluable service by persistently and methodically exposing the flagrant abuses caused by capitalist control of American institutions.

Other leftist critics, Fretz continues, had complained of the nefarious effects caused by a capitalist elite. But only Sinclair comprehensively studied and documented these charges. Although the series failed to rally a wide audience, the charges Sinclair made could not easily be dismissed. Though we might scoff at Sinclair's socialist theories, one critic observed, "We must, at all events, think and think deeply."

Furthermore, as Fretz argues, Upton Sinclair was one of the noteworthy exceptions to the disillusionment of the liberals during the 1920s. Indifferent to the rampant materialism of the Harding-Coolidge era, Sinclair raked with stubborn zeal and vigor. He never lost faith in the American people's ability to correct an injustice once that injustice had been brought to their attention.

All the people needed to overthrow their capitalist oppressors was the truth: Sinclair assumed that people everywhere, at last freed by his version of the truth, would rebel against the dead hand of capitalism. Even though no rebellion ever took place, Sinclair's series was a potent educative force and a dominant influence in developing converts to the Socialist Party. Betty Yorburg contends in *Utopia and Reality: A Collective Portrait of American Socialists* that the numerous writings of Upton Sinclair for many people "started the process of active or deliberative political self-identification," As Walter B. Rideout maintains, Sinclair attempted to be "the persuading intermediary between the contending classes.

When Sinclair died in November 1968, at the age of ninety, many thought he was already dead. He belonged to a long-gone era associated with the explosion and prestige of capitalist power. As a witness to an almost prehistoric era, when people believed that the individual could change the course of things, Sinclair had deeply believed in the individual act, in the heroism of the isolated. He thus appeared as the clear conscience of America at the beginning of our century, the symbol of an intensely religious and purifying socialism confronting the behemoths of a tentacled

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capital.

The Manichean figures evoke quite well the character fighting against the corruption of his time. Though, the evolution of the United States since the 1960s, and in particular the rise, then the crumbling, of a “New Left” unfamiliar to Sinclair in its aims and methods, lead to a modification of the somewhat simplistic image that Sinclair had wanted to give of himself, of a knight of socialism at war against the capitalist dragon. It is now possible to draw up an assessment, to identify the lines of force, while trying not to fall into caricature.

It is certainly not easy with Sinclair: the obsessive anti-alcoholism, the therapeutic fasts, the various "crusades", and, of course, the parapsychic experiences to which Sinclair willingly lent credence - all of these are indications of an uncommon and multiple personality.

Nevertheless, heterogeneity is only an appearance, and multiplicity is only the effect of the refraction of a basic phenomenon that participates in anguish. Metaphysical anguish of man in front of a god that his intellect refuses, but he senses it all around him as well as in the depths of his affections, and he tries to rationalize it in forms that are more credible, at least for him - parapsychology, for example; the anguish of the pioneer who trembles with impatience before the magnitude of the ground to be cleared; the anguish of the humanist anxious to perpetuate the flame and multiply it.

Anxiety without pessimism, for how can one set about the task if one does not believe in advance in the value of the result? Sinclair had read Thoreau and Emerson. Better still, he had lived through their experiences, Thoreau's in the solitude of the St. Lawrence, Emerson's in the constant optimism of daily struggle - an optimism that was not blissful, which was rooted in the mere fact that man and the world exist.

For Sinclair, everything started from this simple fact. He left philosophical concern to the refined, the idle. As for him, he refused to allow himself the suspect luxury of doubt. Man, according to him, was magnificently integrated into the order of a universe where only the presence of God, by its intrinsic mystery, left, as it should, spectral zones. This essential integration of man is by definition a triumph, and in this Sinclair joined the Transcendentalists in his own way. This existential optimism made him an early nineteenth-century man.

There was, however, a problem, but one whose nature only served to insert Sinclair's personality more closely into the texture of the century in which he was born. This problem was that of the relationship between man and society, the necessity of adapting society as perfectly as possible to man, society thus becoming the emanation of reason, the illustration of human intelligence. All his life, Sinclair did nothing but strive to solve this problem, adopting solutions which, from socialism to anti-communism, had no other concern than to ensure man his share of happiness.

In 1952, Van Wyck Brooks rightly associated Sinclair with the Brook Farmers, and the community experiment undertaken by Sinclair – Helicon

Hall² in 1906 immediately comes to mind. Sinclair was indeed a Brook Farmer who had read Kropotkin, Blatchford, Reed, Veblen, Lloyd, Shaw, and, of course, Bellamy. There was more. There was in Sinclair that Adamic candor, that ever-renewed wonder at things and at the phenomenon of their mutation, which he would strive to control.

There was, always open, the free field of a frontier in perpetual becoming, and which could only cease when man's hope ceased, since the Frontier was ultimately man's own. Eden, for Sinclair, did not belong to the

² Helicon Hall: former. Boys' school located in New Jersey. Sinclair bought it at the end of 1906 with the profits from *The Jungle* and established the Helicon Home Colony. The building burned in March 1907

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biblical past, it was just around the corner. It was potentially in the man who sought it.

Therefore, Adam had not incurred disgrace and was therefore not on the run, but was on the threshold of Whitmanian America. The sin, if there was to be a sin, was to give up, to give up the struggle, or to enjoy Daddy's dollars while watching others work. For Sinclair, work was above all the domination of man over matter, and as such, a noble act which lost its significance in the capitalist autocracy whose harmful and immoral character was thus revealed by antinomy.

Sinclair believed passionately in the goodness of man and in his potential for power. Survival of an outdated Rousseauism perhaps? Or, more simply, immersion in the optimistic and humanitarian, democratic current of the 18th century? In any case, Sinclair was close to the French philosopher in his innate faith in man, in the quasi-religious notion of the social contract. As for the potential of power, one can think of Nietzsche, Carlyle, and more obviously of Emerson.

From Emerson, too, Sinclair retained, in addition to the egalitarian mysticism sublimating into human brotherhood, the antithetical and yet logical vision in Emersonian terms, of an elite destined to open up the paths of progress, of “representative men” of whom he hoped to be one of the incarnations.

Although a natural generosity fostered by reading the Utopians led Sinclair to turn to the poor, he remained fundamentally a gentleman, believing that his duty, like that of every gentleman and knight, was to help the widow and the orphan. At the sociological level, the concept of the gentleman considerably alters things, particularly in that it transforms the Marxist class war into a gallant joust between individuals of equal lineage, if not strength, in a closed field off-limits to the rabble. That's why, even in

coming to the aid of the disfavored, Sinclair preferred to speak to the privileged (Rockefeller, Ford, Wilson, et al.) as equals, rather than kick down the doors with the crowd. He tried to convince, at the risk (weighed and agreed) of being convinced himself.

Sinclair was occasionally criticized for being more interested in the rich than the poor. And undeniably, he was interested in the people in power. It was not the money that attracted him, but the power that these men possessed, the myth that was attached to them. In this way, they were able to isolate themselves in a charismatic aura. Like it or not, they were "representative men". Deep down, he felt like one of their kind, he had the same will to power. Like many of them, he had made himself. His studies, sufficient as they had been, had not prepared him for economics, politics, or literature, and certainly not, he was quick to say, for socialism.

Sinclair had to fight alone as a writer, and as a socialist too, after a youth spent writing hundreds of works for food as a literary proletarian. Having thus acquired his independence and the power, he could have; he feared the competition of those whose equal he had become in a sense. By means too often immoral and dishonest in his opinion, they possessed the privilege of manipulating the masses, and it was a challenge they threw at him.

The attraction he felt is also explained by a feature that has to do with the very nature of the Sinclairian dialectic. Rock Feller, Ford, or Wilson were faces, individualities. On the other hand, the crowd was, at best, an abstraction, at worst, noise and fury, violence, even potential violence. On the one hand, the calm, the deepening of the person; on the other, the tumult, the individual overwhelmed by the torrent of a revolt. Instinctively Sinclair had made his choice. He had mingled with the crowd at the I.W.W.'s political happening at Madison Square Garden in 1913.

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Subsequently, he had avoided this kind of demonstration, preferring individualistic, and even theatrical initiatives, such as the silent protest organized for a week in front of the Standard Oil offices on the occasion of the Colorado miners' strike in 1914, and which had earned him three days' imprisonment in the Tombs.

It was not until 1934 that Sinclair appeared on stage again, but it was precisely to contain the pack, to channel the discontent, to prevent abuses, whether by the industrialist or his workers. One might wonder what the worker meant to Sinclair. For him, he was above all the element of a mass. And, in the face of this mass, which he considered indispensable to educate, and therefore to constrain, and, if possible, to control, Sinclair remained essentially individualistic. All the crusades Sinclair undertook bear witness to this individualistic bias in that they were generally situated away from, if not against, the current of political parties and union organizations.

A socialist in 1913, he broke with his party in 1917 to join the interventionist line. When the war was over, he returned to the socialist ranks and in 1933 he adopted the etiquette Democrat. Yet the EPIC (End Poverty in California) campaign was not strictly speaking a Democratic enterprise, and it did not win Roosevelt's support. It was not really a political venture. It was not a union enterprise either.

This political formation was neither a party nor a union, but a compromise, an amalgam, denigrated by both socialists and communists. During the second war, Sinclair led a bitter struggle against Hitler, but there again, he appealed to all goodwill without exclusion, dissociating himself once again from the socialists to rap with the communists, but also with the democrats, and, in a way, with the Democrats more generally, of all those who wanted the end of fascism.

The same process took place in the years following the end of the war, but this time against Stalin. Sinclair's anti-communism in the 1950s was more an affair of the heart than a political determination in the narrow sense of the term, and while he worked assiduously against the Reds, while associating himself with many anti-communist organizations, Sinclair refused to support a McCarthyism whose excesses he feared. As a citizen of the "free world" he stood up against the totalitarian image of communism, just as he had stood up against the despotism of the trusts at the beginning of the century.

The vocabulary had hardly changed, and the man remained identical to himself. It was still the revolt of the individual seeking to preserve his individuality at all costs. Faced with the perils of totalitarianism, Sinclair had turned to socialism because he saw in it the only way to ensure the freedom of each individual within the community through a contract defining the limits, but also necessarily the possibilities, of the freely consenting individual.

Sinclair is the triumph of the individualist do-it-yourself, the pioneer in the realm of books. He wanted to stand alone, as a symbol and an individual, against the establishment - the fascists, the communists, the alcoholics, and even the socialists if he had to.

Sinclair wanted to stand alone, as a symbol and as an individual, against the establishment the fascists, the communists, the alcoholics, and even the socialists if need be. In short, he perfectly illustrated, in the field of his own experience, the spirit of free enterprise whose perversions he denounced, because he remained deeply attached to it.

The Sinclair criticisms of capitalism focused on the abuses committed in the name of a free enterprise that no longer existed because of the power of the trusts. But free enterprise in itself did not seem to him to be really harmful. It was for him inscribed in the Declaration of

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Independence, in the Constitution, in Lincoln's speeches; it was involved in "the Pursuit of Happiness", and had no other limits than those imposed by the necessity of his own existence.

The point is important because, seen from this angle, Sinclair's dynamism is defined not in terms of socialism or democracy, but in terms of liberalism, "I personally never care anything about labels," Sinclair declared in the 1960s. What does the label matter? Trying to circumscribe Sinclair under the term socialism is no more satisfying than applying the label communist or anti-communist to him. Generous, aware of the injustices perpetrated by capitalism, he turned to the socialist remedy, or rather, he discovered socialism in the instinct of his own generosity.

For a while he expected something from the communist ideal, just like the angry young men of the twenties and thirties. But while the latter compromised themselves, and, if we are to believe the later accounts, alienated their personalities for the sake of the social concept, Sinclair remained, as always, aloof, yet passionate, and occasionally took up the (vigorous) defense of the U.S.S.R., even in 1938, for example, when, with the Moscow trials, a veritable hemorrhage thinned the ranks of the communists and fellow travelers. However, he remained essentially free, as if isolated in his freedom.

The liberal character of his ideology seems to appear only after the Second World War, when he joined the great mass of Americans in the anti-communist epic. But such evolution was only the consequence of a logical path, especially if one considers that liberalism in the United States passed at once by the socialist temptation, and even by the communist temptation in the thirties.

Sinclair's attitude was, in fact, modeled on that of the liberal intelligentsia which, having taken a bite, sometimes to good effect, out of the communist apple, was driven out of Utopia by the Stalinist wrath.

Sinclair's "crusade" against the Reds was in the same Manichean perspective as his earlier "crusades" against the rapacity of capitalists, the dictatorship of the Black shirts, or the Brownshirts. It simply happened that American liberalism, shaken by the war, frightened by the nuclear threat, and in a way put to the wall by the extension of communism in the world, retreated into an epidemic anti-communism, and that, having also returned from his move to the left, Sinclair could no longer afford moderation, and began to howl with the wolves, all the while feeling that his voice was different from that of the pack.

2. CONCLUSION

Overall, if we consider that the safeguarding of individuality represents the major goal of a life devoted to an ideal of justice, Sinclair has succeeded perfectly, with a fighting spirit, efficiency that is crowned (it is essential) by a success confirming the value of an individual dualism that never doubted itself; attachment to the liberties defined once and for all in 1776; search for a pragmatic Happiness for oneself and (magnanimity or supreme luxury) for others, under the eye of a benevolent Creator, in a legality that arrogates to itself the right, even if it means making it a duty, to take over a despotic government in order to perpetuate an American democracy; This is how the character can be summed up, the embodiment, for better or for worse, of the "American Dream" that determined him.

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