

The Debate Goes On! A Graphic Portrayal Of The Sinclair-Taylor Editorial Dialogue

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An editorial debate between Frederick Taylor and Upton Sinclair appeared in the American Magazine approximately a century ago. Taylor and Sinclair debated the merits of 'scientific management' versus the exploitation of the workforce as exemplified by Sinclair's highly controversial novel, The Jungle. This paper provides a 'graphic' retelling of the enduring perspectives espoused by Sinclair and Taylor, and highlights contemporary manifestations of the issues and worries noted by both parties that are prominent in both management practice and organizational scholarship today.

Upton Sinclair's classic book, *The Jungle*, was originally published in 1906. It is known that the book highlighted some of the most abhorrent practices in the meat packing industry found in the United States at the turn of the century. What is also well known is that the popularity of the book and its widespread revelations led to the establishment of the Food and Drug Administration. What is less well known is that Sinclair's primary purpose for writing *The Jungle* was to advocate Socialism as an answer to the troubles found in the tumultuous United States at the turn of the century. Sinclair hoped to convince his readers that Socialism could help right the ills caused by the cold and calculating capitalist machine that seemed to systematically use up, then discard human capital found in the meatpacking plant and related industries highlighted in his book.

A few years after Sinclair's work first appeared, another classic work began to be highly disseminated that would have an equally strong effect on American society and the field of management in particular. That work was Frederick Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, first published in 1911. Taylor's work outlined a rejection of the rules of thumb that guided many business practices and sought for a systematic incorporation of more guided and measurable principles. Taylor's book was the basis

of Drucker's concept of management by objectives, and served as the first legitimate 'pop' management book.

In 1911, Frederick Taylor and Upton Sinclair engaged in an editorial debate in *The American Magazine*. The content of this debate had far reaching implications that spur discussion as relevant today as the dialogue between Sinclair and Taylor nearly a century ago. Both Sinclair and Taylor provided graphic depictions of how they saw the world in the early 1900s. To commemorate their debate, I provide a retelling of their debate in graphic novel format, using excerpts from the graphic novel *Atlas Black: Managing to Succeed* (Short, Bauer, Ketchen, & Simon, 2010). I conclude with a brief summary of how their classic works serve as enduring legacies for both men.





In fact, these words were spoken by Frederick Winslow Taylor, a mechanical engineer at the turn of the century.

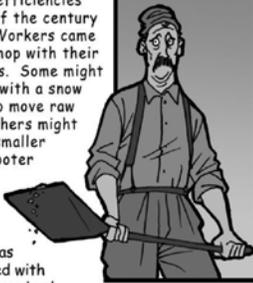


His classic book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, was published in 1911, a year before Harvard founded their graduate school of business.

About that time...

- 1907 - Oklahoma becomes 46th state
- 1908 - Ford debuts Model T / first passenger flight on airplane
- 1909 - William Howard Taft becomes 27th U.S. president/ Indianapolis 500 race track opens
- 1910 - British miners strike for 8 hour work day/ China ends slavery
- 1911 - *The Principles of Scientific Management* published
- 1912 - Titanic sinks/ New Mexico and Arizona become states
- 1913 - 16th Amendment (Federal income tax) ratified
- 1914 - World War I begins

Taylor noticed great inefficiencies in turn of the century shops. Workers came to the shop with their own tools. Some might show up with a snow shovel to move raw iron. Others might bring a smaller sharpshooter shovel.



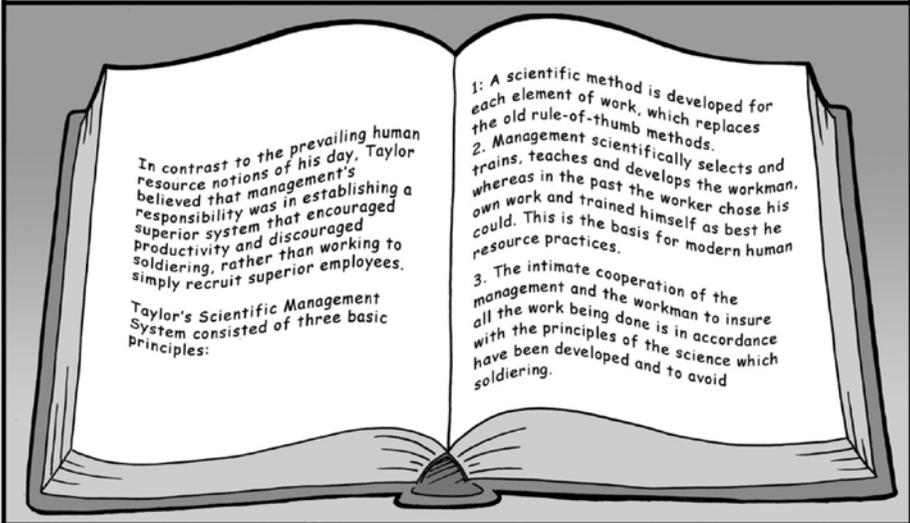
Taylor was concerned with poorly conceived "rules of thumb" managers and employees used to carry out tasks. To combat this practice, Taylor used early film technology to conduct time studies.



He wanted to examine the most efficient methods for performing such tasks and provide a systematic means to establish scientific "principles" that should guide production.



Taylor was also concerned with employee "soldiering": a term used when workers systematically collaborated to reduce output by agreeing to work at a certain rate that was less than optimal. Researchers today continue to study the problem of "rate-busting" and this work was also foundational to research in groups.

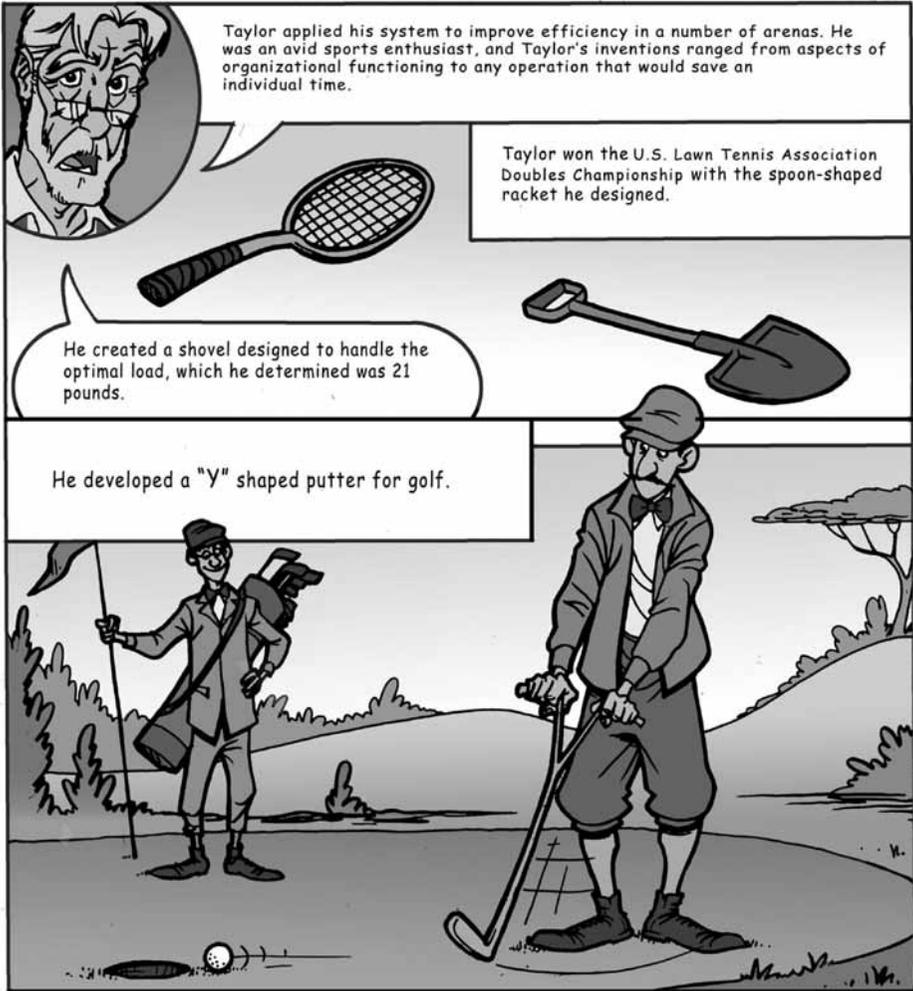


Taylor's system was said to have saved the railroad industry a million dollars a day almost one-hundred years ago.



Taylor's system also offered higher wages for workers than the old piece-rate system.

Taylor received widespread publicity for his system and he testified before a congressional investigation to defend the scientific management system a number of times between 1911 and 1912.



Of course, advances brought about with technology are always accompanied by critics. In the same year Taylor published *The Principles of Scientific Management*, he engaged in an editorial debate with Upton Sinclair whose book, *The Jungle*, led to the establishment of the Food and Drug Administration.



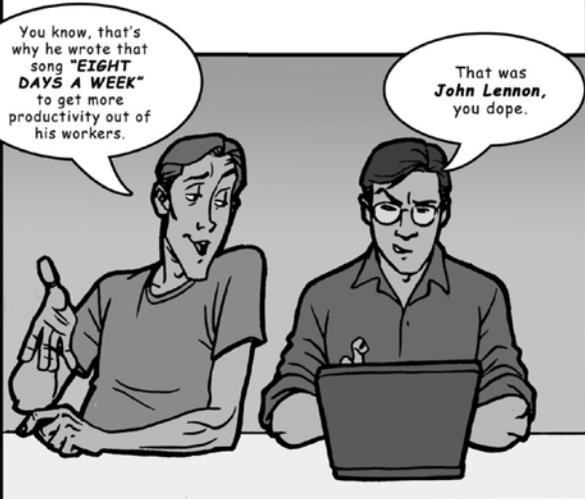
Sinclair was undeniably the Ralph Nader of his day. He felt that Taylor's methods exploited the worker since they increased efficiency by over 350%, but increased pay by less than 20%.



The Jungle chronicled poor work conditions in turn of the century meatpacking plants.



The Jungle was actually written to promote socialism - and Sinclair may have hoped that the book would promote an outcry to overthrow factories and uplift the common worker. Somewhat ironically, Lenin was a proponent of scientific management and wrote about the need to apply Taylor's system to Russia.



You know, that's why he wrote that song "**EIGHT DAYS A WEEK**" to get more productivity out of his workers.

That was **John Lennon**, you dope.

When assessing public response to *The Jungle*, Sinclair noted, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit in the stomach." In the end, capitalism largely won out over the socialistic ideas that were prevalent at the turn of the century, but many challenges evident then remain with us today.

A number of controversial issues relevant to management today can be traced back to problems that have existed for more than a century. A few years before Frederick Taylor published *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911, Upton Sinclair's book *The Jungle* outlined many of these enduring issues in 1906.



The Jungle followed Jurgis Rudkus and his family of Lithuanian immigrants as they worked to survive in the stockyards of Chicago at the turn of the century.

The book highlighted some of the most abhorrent practices in the meat packing industry found in the U.S. at the turn of the century. Sinclair notes these practices in graphic detail.



"There was never the least amount of attention paid to what was cut up for sausage. Old sausage, that had been rejected, would come back all the way from Europe. This moldy and white old sausage would be dosed with borax and glycerine, dumped into the hoppers and made over again for home consumption. There would be meat that had tumbled off onto the floor landing in the dirt and sawdust where the workers had trampled and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs. There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms. Water from leaky roofs would drip all over it and thousands of rats would race about it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of dried rat dung. These rats were nuisances and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them. They would die and then dead rats, bread and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy tale story and no joke. The meat would be shoveled into carts and the man who did the shoveling could not be troubled to lift out a dead rat even if he saw one."



The popularity of this book and its widespread revelations led to the establishment of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the U.S.

Sinclair's primary purpose for writing *The Jungle* was to advocate Socialism as an answer to the troubles found in the tumultuous U.S. at the turn of the century.



Sinclair Writes in *The Jungle*:

"The Socialists were organized in every civilized nation; it was an international political party...the greatest the world had ever known!"



"The people were tremendously stirred up...but nobody had any remedy to suggest; it was the task of Socialists to teach and organize them and prepare them for the time when they were to seize the huge machine called the Beef Trust and use it to produce food for human beings and not to heap up fortunes for a band of pirates. It was long after midnight when Jurgis lay down upon the floor...and yet it was an hour before he could get to sleep for the glory of that joyful vision of the people of Packingtown marching in and taking possession of the union stockyards!"

Sinclair hoped to convince his readers that Socialism could help right the ills caused by the cold, calculating capitalist machine that seemed to systematically use up and then discard human capital found in the meatpacking plant and related industries highlighted in his book.

Challenges about tradeoffs between organizational efficiency and how that affects individuals continue to be sources of fear as well as inspiration for workers, managers, entrepreneurs and job seekers. In 1911, Frederick Taylor and Upton Sinclair, two men with very different points of view that have equal lasting effects on the way we see workers, business, and industry engaged in an editorial debate in *The American Magazine*. Taylor and Sinclair each felt strongly that their views would work well for the good of all, but their unique perspectives continue to be at the heart of a debate that continues to this day.



Sinclair was also concerned about drastic job loss because seven out of eight men lost their jobs under Taylor's system.

Sinclair argued that more of the wealth gained through scientific management should be distributed back to society. He suggested that Taylor write a book that would help utilize the full population of the United States rather than one out of eight workers.



Sinclair suggested that if Taylor wrote such a book and then priced it at 50 cents instead of \$5, Taylor might sell 2 million copies rather than ten thousand.

Taylor felt that Sinclair unfairly misrepresented the scientific management system.



He argued that Sinclair only cared about the workman, but society overall did gain in his system due to lower prices. Taylor believed that society actually benefited the most from scientific management.

Taylor also noted that workers did not improve performance based on their own initiative. Improvements were only made because better methods were taught to them by someone else.



Taylor concluded by noting that the most successful societies were the ones where individual workers were the most productive.



Conclusion

A century has now passed since the debate by Sinclair and Taylor. Yet, the concerns and challenges noted by both authors still have a marked, profound, and lasting effect. Their thoughts continue to be a source of fear, as well as an inspiration for future opportunities, for workers, managers, entrepreneurs, and job seekers. Taylor's desire to more efficiently and effectively manage all areas of business production continues to inspire practitioners and scholars in the field of management. Yet, uncertainty about how innovative business practices may displace jobs as well as quality of life continues to provide concern for employees worldwide. Sinclair's perspective that the collective treatment of individuals should be a core value at the societal level still sparks interest in debates involving the interaction of government and business, and such perspectives can be seen in research areas such as social responsibility and social entrepreneurship. His world view also continues to fuel fierce debate, as evidenced in the passionate dialogue leading to recent health care reforms in the U.S. No doubt the ideas of these two great thinkers will continue to be as relevant to management thought in the next century as they have been for the last 100 years.

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