

Steve Casburn
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History 563 – Kerr

Lincoln Steffens: The Sympathetic Reformer

“It is dangerous to reason about politics and government; it is safer to go and see.” – Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography*, Part III, Chap. XV

Joseph Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) – known throughout his life by his middle name – was a reformer whose charitable desire to seek causes and solutions rather than to merely expose and scold wrongdoers was the trademark of both his successes and his failures. He was an active writer throughout his adult life, but his greatest period of success and influence came from 1893 to 1911, a time when Steffens benefitted yet stood apart from the Progressive reform movement that was peaking during those years.

Steffens spent his childhood in Northern California, growing up in Sacramento and attending college at the University of California, in Berkeley. His father, a merchant, was wealthy enough to allow young Steffens to grow up with ample time and opportunity for leisure. As a boy, Steffens was a dreamer, who “would remount [his] pony and be Napoleon, or Richard the Lion-Hearted, or Byron,”¹ creating worlds in his imagination which he would live within for hours or days. His realization at age 16 that he was not a hero but a poseur started Steffens on his

¹ Steffens, Lincoln. *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*. Harcourt, Brace and Company: New York City: 1931. Pg. 28

life-long quest to find the truth beneath the poses he saw in himself and in others.²

After receiving a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Berkeley in 1889, Steffens spent three years in Europe studying and sight-seeing. Steffens' particular interest was in the widely touted advances being made in ethical and psychological theory in Germany; accordingly, he spent most of his European sojourn in Berlin, Leipzig, or Heidelberg. After listening to and critiquing the methods and reasoning of his German professors, Steffens came to two conclusions that were to have a profound effect on his future career: first, that their ethical systems had no foundation; second, that if he wanted to understand ethics, he would have "go into buisness or politics, and see, not what thinkers thought, but what practical men did and why."³

Upon his return from Europe, the 26-year-old Steffens set about finding a job to support himself, his wife (an American he had met in Leipzig), and his mother-in-law. After several months, he took a job as a reporter at the *New York Evening Post*, and began to study the field of practical ethics.

Steffens' first big break came shortly before the Panic of 1893, when he was asked to fill in for the *Post's* regular Wall Street reporter, who had taken a year's leave. On Wall Street, Steffens honed the method that he was to use successfully throughout his career: Boldly asking bosses and principals for their help in understanding a situation. He found that once bankers realized that they could trust him, they were eager to explain their methods and reasons to him "off-the-

² *Autobiography*, pgs. 106-09

³ *Autobiography*, pgs. 139, 165

record,” even if, at first, Steffens and the bankers seemed to be working at cross-purposes.⁴

After the regular Wall Street reporter returned, Steffens moved from the financial beat to the police beat. As a police reporter, Steffens used the same methods that social workers such as Jane Addams were using at about the same time: rejecting *a priori* moral ideas about the causes of poverty, crime, and corruption in favor of going to the scene of such things, gathering evidence, and talking to the people involved about what they were doing and why.⁵

It was during Steffens’ time as a police reporter that he struck up a lifelong friendship with Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was named to a reform police commission, which he dominated with his energy and ambition. Roosevelt relied on “wise” police reporters such as Steffens and Jacob Riis to give him the information and recommendations that he would act upon. Steffens remained a welcome guest and adviser to Roosevelt (though the two often quarreled) throughout Roosevelt’s two terms in the White House.⁶

(A side note: Steffens and Roosevelt each came up with the phrase with which the other is most associated. . .and each meant for the phrase to be an insult! Roosevelt coined the word “muckrakers” from a passage in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* which criticizes those who are so busy raking muck that they never look to the sky.⁷ Steffens came up with the term “square deal” to describe Roosevelt’s politics: Roosevelt, Steffens said, didn’t want fundamental reform, he

⁴ *Autobiography*, pgs. 183-85, 195-96

⁵ *Autobiography*, pgs. 210-14, 223-24, 239-46

⁶ *Autobiography*, pgs. 257-65, 502-15

⁷ Smith, Page. *America Enters the World*. McGraw-Hill : New York : 1985. Pg. 99

only wanted people to have a square deal.⁸ Each man bore his “insult” proudly.)

In the course of gathering his information about corruption in New York City, Steffens got to know several of the ward leaders and bosses there, including the head boss, Richard Croker. Croker impressed Steffens with his intelligence, his wisdom, and his honesty – Croker knew and admitted that the system was corrupt, but he explained that that was the only way for the system to work at all.⁹

Dealings with bosses such as Croker led Steffens to have growing doubts about the efficacy of the reformers’ solutions to the problems of municipal corruption. Reformers looked at corruption from the standpoint of morality: that where bad government existed, it must be the result of bad men running it. Therefore, the solution to corruption was to put good men (such as themselves) in office, to set up a government based on sound business principles, and to carry out structural reforms (e.g. city charter, strong mayor) that would reduce the influence of the bosses and the boodlers.

Steffens, still looking for a system of practical ethics, rejected these solutions because he saw they did not work in practice. “Reform politics was still politics,” Steffens observed, “only worse; reformers were not so smooth as the professional politicians, and it seemed to me they were not so honest.”¹⁰ The “good men” elected to office usually turned out to be either inept or corrupt, the methods of business were not always appropriate for politics, and political bosses usually found

⁸ *Autobiography*, pg. 506

⁹ *Autobiography*, pgs. 235-38

¹⁰ *Autobiography*, pg. 257

ways to turn structural reforms to their own advantage.¹¹ Besides which, any reforms that were made could be reversed whenever the corrupt machine won an election. Steffens also explicitly refuted the widespread belief among reformers that corruption was the product of “foreigners” or “lesser stocks” such as Germans or Scandinavians when he exposed the corrupt dealings in old Anglo-Saxon areas such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Rhode Island.¹²

Steffens chose to study the problem of corruption existentially rather than morally. He believed that starting with a fixed idea of what men could and should do was a mistake: “A theory which has grown into a conviction is a hindrance rather than a help to the observing mind...a theory is only a working hypothesis.”¹³ His hypothesis about corruption was that it was the product of a System managed by a combination of businessmen and politicians.

By the end of his muckraking career, Steffens had come up with a definition of this System. The System was “an organization of the privileged for the control of privileges, of the sources of privilege, and of the thoughts and acts of the unprivileged.” And yet, as Steffens saw over and over again, “neither the privileged nor the unprivileged, neither the bosses nor the bossed, understood this or meant it.”¹⁴ Each businessman and politician was intent on his own scheme or boodle; none had stopped to examine the overall effects of the corruption of which they were a part.

¹¹ *Autobiography*, pgs. 180, 411-13, 597

¹² *Autobiography*, pgs. 400, 467

¹³ *Autobiography*, pgs. 717-18

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, pg. 591

In practice, what the System meant was that those with influence or connections – “pull” – were full citizens who could count on the help of their local government. Vice was regulated by the police so that it would not affect these people: if their houses were robbed, the stolen goods would be returned; if saloons or whorehouses were keeping illegal hours, they could have the places shut down; if they were being blackmailed, the blackmailer would be told by the police to cease and desist. Criminals were willing to be regulated in this way because the police allowed them to prey relatively unhindered on everyone else.¹⁵

But the System wasn’t limited to police vice – it extended to politics as well. Anyone who wanted a public franchise or license was expected to pay the boss and his henchmen for it. Croker explained to Steffens why this was necessary:

It’s because there’s a mayor *and* a council *and* judges *and* – a hundred other men to deal with. A government is nothing but a business, and you can’t do business with a lot of officials, who check and cross one another and who come and go. . . a business man wants to do business with one man, and one who is always there to remember and carry out the – business.¹⁶

This corrupt System was widely supported because it was reliable. If you were wealthy or had the right connections, then you could be assured the privilege of dealing with a stable government that was able and eager to help you. Not only did “good men” also benefit from and support this government, but they were often the first to criticize any meaningful reform – when Theodore Roosevelt was a

¹⁵ *Autobiography*, pgs. 222-23, 288

¹⁶ *Autobiography*, pg. 236

police commissioner in New York City, he was amazed at “the kind of people who are coming here to intercede for proven crooks.”¹⁷

So Steffens came to realize what the reformers did not: that reform was more than a matter of replacing the corrupt people in power. He realized that corruption ran much deeper and would be much harder to root out than many reformers thought. Many of the most corrupt people did not even realize that they had been corrupted; they saw themselves as merely working for their self-interest. Many of America’s most talented public leaders were boodlers, who did not see how their activities were betraying the trust of their constituents.¹⁸ And most reformers did not have the political savvy required to guide reforms through the political system and ensure their enforcement.¹⁹

But reform was necessary if the United States was to be a self-governing nation of citizens equal before the law, and Steffens tried throughout the decade of the 1900s to convince Americans to take back their government. In the course of Steffens’ muckraking career, he had three books published, all of which sold widely. Each book was a compilation of articles that Steffens had written for various magazines (usually *McClure’s*), with a philosophical preface to tie the articles together. Through these books, we can trace Steffens’ muckraking efforts.

Steffens began by exposing the cities. Between October 1902 and November 1903, he published seven articles about six different cities (St. Louis was treated twice) in *McClure’s*. In each city, he found a corrupt alliance between business and government to swindle the

¹⁷ *Autobiography*, pgs. 396, 261

¹⁸ *Autobiography*, pgs. 419, 616

¹⁹ *Autobiography*, pgs. 412, 426-29

public. In the preface of his first book, Shame of the Cities, which was a compilation of these articles, Steffens argued that this commercial influence on government could be a good thing: “If our political leaders are to be always a lot of political merchants, they will supply any demand we may create. All we have to do is establish a steady demand for good government.”²⁰

As Steffens did his exposés of municipal corruption, he realized that the System he was trying to uncover did not stop at city limits; it also reached into state legislatures and into business.²¹ He then began to expose state-level corruption in six states (including Ohio), an effort that he chronicled in the articles that became Struggle for Self-Government, published in 1906.

Steffens argued in Struggle for Self-Government that Americans choose not to rule themselves, showing that he had lost much of the optimism he had while writing Shame of the Cities. He addressed the preface of the book to Czar Nicholas II of Russia, assuring the Czar that even if his people were to gain a Constitution and the franchise, there was no reason why an autocracy could not continue in Russia just as it was continuing in the United States.

Sire, the American citizen does not understand self- or representative government, and does not demand it. . .The American people are asking for “good government.” All they mean by this is clean streets, well lighted and honestly policed by a police force which, if it must blackmail vice and protect crime, shall do so quietly so as not to annoy and scandalize the good folk. . .I declare, Sire, that your people

²⁰ Steffens, Lincoln. *Shame of the Cities*. Hill and Wang : New York : 1957. Pg. 5

²¹ Steffens, Lincoln. *Struggle for Self-Government*. McClure, Phillips & Co. : New York: 1906. Pg. 4

really want not self-government. . .but only the appearance of justice and an orderly administration of public affairs.²²

By 1906, Steffens was tiring of muckraking – every city and every state seemed the same to him in its corruption, and the people were not being aroused to effective action by his exposures. What was needed was not more evidence that a problem of corruption existed; what was needed was a solution to this already well-defined problem.²³ In his book Upbuilding, published in 1909, Steffens presented examples of people who were having success in battling corruption.

Steffens laid out what he saw as the foundation of reform in the Foreword to Upbuilding:

Wherever the people have found a leader who was loyal to them; brave; and not too far ahead, there they have followed him, and there has been begun the solution of our common problem; the problem of the cities, states, and nations – the problem of civilized living in human communities.²⁴

Ultimately, though, several of these “upbuilders” that Steffens profiled were defeated in their efforts to make lasting reform, and the rest could not replicate their successes beyond their own bailiwicks.²⁵ But the idea that a strong, wise leader was needed to guide reform seemed to stay with Steffens through the rest of his career.

Steffens made two final attempts at municipal reform. He was invited to Boston by philanthropist E.A. Filene in 1908 to devise a plan which, by including and appealing to all citizens, would give the people

²² *ibid.*, pg. xv

²³ *Autobiography*, pgs. 581, 596

²⁴ Steffens, Lincoln. *Upbuilders*. Doubleday, Page & Co. : New York : 1909. Pg. vii.

²⁵ *Autobiography*, pg. 500, 520.

of Boston an ideal yet attainable vision of the future and thus unite them in a common effort to spurn corruption and work together to make that vision reality.²⁶ This “Boston 1915” plan, which never achieved a consensus and so was never tried, was similar to later efforts (“Five-Year Plans”) in the Soviet Union to unite the population into a common cause of achievement.

In 1910, after a bomb exploded at the offices of the reactionary *Los Angeles Times*, killing 21 workers and outraging the nation, Steffens put together a syndicate of newspapers which paid him to cover the trial of the accused McNamara brothers. But what Steffens really went to Los Angeles to do was to test his theory of “applied Christianity”: that if people realized that the Golden Rule was in their best interests, then they would follow it in everything they did. Steffens persuaded the McNamaras to confess their guilt, but the prosecution reneged on its promise of mercy.²⁷

These two failures cost Steffens much of his public influence and popularity.²⁸ His faith in reform was also diminished. Steffens had begun to believe after his failure in Boston that only revolution could change the system, and that economic democracy was the only way to bring about political democracy.²⁹

Steffens now began to look for strong men who would carry through a revolution against the corrupt system. He had already theorized that the world was divided into two sorts of men: not good men and bad men, as the reformers thought, but strong men and weak

²⁶ *Autobiography*, pgs. 613-27

²⁷ *Autobiography*, pgs. 659-89

²⁸ *Autobiography*, pgs. 690-91

²⁹ *Autobiography*, pgs. 631-32

men; principals and heelers.³⁰ The strong men were the ones who made decisions and got things done; they were the ones who had to be persuaded and dealt with. Also, Steffens had long seen a romance in incorruptible men who stood bravely alone in their fight against bribery and boodle: The Rev. Charles Pankhurst, Theodore Roosevelt, Joseph W. Folk, Robert LaFollette, Oliver McClintock, Tom Johnson, and many others. He had seen these men called “demagogues,” and began to believe that “whenever a man in public life was called a demagogue, there was something good about him, something dangerous to the system.”³¹

Steffens began in 1914 to travel the world, looking for revolution. He first went to Mexico, where he became an adviser to Venustiano Carranza, one of the revolutionary leaders during the Mexican Revolution.³² In later years, he also spent time talking to and writing about Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.³³

After World War I, Steffens moved from New York City to Europe. He had relationships with a number of women, but, at age 58, finally married Ella Winter, a 26-year-old Englishwoman pregnant with his son, in August 1924. His first and only child, Pete Stanley Steffens, was born three months later.³⁴

Steffens returned to the United States in 1927, shortly after beginning work on his *Autobiography*. He settled in Carmel, California, a town on the Pacific coast about 150 miles southwest of Sacramento.

³⁰ *Autobiography*, pgs. 518, 627

³¹ *Autobiography*, pg. 474

³² *Autobiography*, pgs. 717-32

³³ *Autobiography*, pgs. 795-99, 812-20

³⁴ *Autobiography*, pg. 820

After the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s and the publication of his *Autobiography* in 1931, Steffens regained his former renown, and was in great demand for lectures and articles. His active intellect was slowed by a heart attack in December 1933 that left him bed-ridden, and stilled altogether by his death on August 9, 1936.³⁵

Lincoln Steffens, despite frequent disillusion and defeat, never gave in to the cynicism and polarization that was the trademark of his age. He chose throughout his life to rise above the factions of his time in order to seek and encourage the good in them all. Where others saw inevitable war – between capital and labor, between reform and corruption, between Russia and America – Steffens sought a peace that would result from mutual understanding. His exceptional sympathy and tolerance for the limits of humanity earned him a lasting reputation.

³⁵ *New York Times*, August 10, 1936