

The Public Good and the Problem of Pluralism in Lincoln Steffens's Civic Imagination

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Lincoln Steffens as a crusader “marching embattled ‘gainst the Saracens of Graft,” from a caricature of muckraking journalists in *Puck*, February 21, 1906.

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# The Public Good and the Problem of Pluralism in Lincoln Steffens's Civic Imagination<sup>1</sup>

by James J. Connolly, Ball State University

The decades surrounding the opening of the twentieth century saw one of the most significant shifts in the character of American public life. A political order dominated by decentralized parties and a limited state gave way to one defined by interest group activism, weaker parties, and more vigorous government. Scholars argue over the degree and extent of these changes, but few quarrel with the claim that public life looked substantially different by the end of the Progressive Era. Americans accepted interest group pluralism in principle and in practice by the 1920s, and the ideal of a politics devoted to an undifferentiated common good lost much of its persuasive power.<sup>2</sup>

That these new arrangements took root in the wake the Progressive Era is one of the central ironies of American political history. Progressivism, however defined, was distinguished by a powerful impulse to advance the public interest over special interests. Reformers and politicians of the day loudly pledged their devotion to “the people”—a monolithic entity—in its battles against trusts and corrupt bosses and promised to pursue the common good. “This is a movement springing from the needs and the hearts of the people of the United States,” Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed as he campaigned for the Presidency on the Progressive Party ticket in 1912.

<sup>1</sup>Research for this essay was funded with a Gilder Lehrman Fellowship in the History of American Civilization, Gilder Lehrman Institute. Thanks to the *JGAP*E referees, Elaine McDonagh, Alan Lessoff, Dave Burns, participants in the Faculty Seminar of the Ball State History Department, and the staff of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>2</sup>Key accounts of this transformation include Richard L. McCormick, *From Realignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893-1910* (Ithaca, 1981); Walter D. Burnham, “The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe,” *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 7-28; Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986); Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York, 1982); Elisabeth S. Clemens, *The People's Lobby: Organizational Innovation and the Rise of Interest Group Politics in the United States, 1890-1925* (Chicago, 1997); Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (New York, 1994) and *idem*, “The Metropolis and Multicultural Ethics: Direct Democracy versus Deliberative Democracy in the Progressive Era,” in *Progressivism and the New Democracy*, eds., Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur (Amherst, 1999): 192-225. On the rhetorical dimensions of this phenomenon, see Daniel Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (New York, 1987), 176-211.

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“The business of government is to organize the common interest against the special interests,” his principal opponent, Woodrow Wilson, declared. Roosevelt and Wilson both used such rhetoric, as did a multitude of office seekers and activists during the Progressive Era. Yet their efforts yielded a politics in which the idea of the common good seemed more elusive than ever.<sup>3</sup>

Research attempting to explain the origins of modern American politics fails to engage this paradox. It overlooks the connection between the assumption of consensus embedded in many reform initiatives and the splintering of the American body politic. Early-twentieth-century reform advocates believed that good citizenship meant devotion to the common good above individual or group interest. Most of them were so wedded to this idea that they failed to consider the possibility that people with different values, backgrounds, and interests could define that concept in different, even contradictory, ways. Drawing on a traditional republican vocabulary but neglecting republicanism’s rhetorical emphasis on deliberation and aided by the growing power of a mass circulation press, Progressives infused American public culture with the language and imagery of a clash between “the people” and “the interests”—words that became what Daniel Rodgers has called the “rhetorical skin” of the era. In doing so they left open the definitions of these terms, fueling the mobilization of many versions of the people battling various interests instead of one.<sup>4</sup>

Muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens occupied a central place in this ironic transformation, and an examination of his ideas and their impact can help us understand it. In a series of articles, books, and civic endeavors he dedicated himself to sparking popular demand for reform—“to sound for the pride of an apparently shameless citizenship” as he put it.<sup>5</sup> He succeeded, striking a nerve that catapulted him to prominence as perhaps the most celebrated critic of American politics during the first decade of the twentieth century. His writings called for a politics dedicated to pursuing the public interest but rarely contemplated the possibility that the public could be constituted in multiple ways. When it was, the many undertakings encouraged by Steffens’s formulations diverged, feeding the narrow, pressure group tactics he decried. A closer look at his civic imagination and its implications suggests the outlines of a broader dynamic that fueled the interest group activism that has characterized modern American public life.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, Speech at Infantry Hall, Providence, Rhode Island” in Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Wilson quoted in Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 178.

<sup>4</sup>Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 187.

<sup>5</sup>Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York, 1904), 1.

<sup>6</sup>My ideas about multiple publics are derived in particular from Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in



Lincoln Steffens. From *McClure's Magazine*, November 1904, p. 111. Courtesy of Ball State University Library.

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Journalism provided Steffens a path to political prominence. Born in 1866, the son of a Sacramento banker and politician, he graduated from the University of California and studied art history and psychology in Germany. But he failed as an academic and moved to New York City in 1892, where he landed a position as a city reporter for E.L. Godkin's upper-crust newspaper, the *New York Evening Post*. Steffens proved a talented writer and

*Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, 1992): 109-42; Mary P. Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 259-88; and Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Calhoun ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 289-339. For a different perspective on the relationship between muckraking and political change, see Thomas C. Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (New York, 1986), 193-221.

quickly became one of the paper's best reporters, but he chafed under Godkin's conservative journalistic ethos. In 1897 he became editor of the moribund *Commercial Advertiser*, which he quickly turned around by hiring reporters with a literary bent who generated stylized accounts of city life that appealed to middle-class readers. The experience of working as a reporter and editor developed in him an economical writing style and knowledge of city affairs that would serve him well as a muckraker. But his on-the-job training as a journalist would not make him a rigorous political thinker.<sup>7</sup>

Steffens nevertheless made his mark writing about politics, especially city politics. Hired as an editor for the popular *McClure's Magazine* in 1901, he began a series of articles on municipal corruption. Published in 1902 and 1903, these articles proved so successful that he continued with another series investigating wrongdoing at the state level and a series of articles for newspapers on political problems in Washington, D.C. He also compiled his municipal articles into a popular book, *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), and the pieces on state politics into a second volume, *The Struggle for Self Government* (1906). Answering critics who charged that Steffens spent too much time exposing problems and too little proposing solutions, he published a series of articles featuring successful reformers, which he collected in his third book, *The Upbuilders* (1909). Steffens also wrote in support of numerous reform-minded office seekers and undertook a yearlong study of Boston with the intent of completing a book-length analysis of its civic problems and their solutions.

Urban politics at the turn of the century offered fertile ground for reform-oriented political journalism. The machine style of politics exemplified by New York's Tammany Hall now flourished in many American cities, and urban party organizations were more centralized and more powerful than ever. Dissatisfaction with this state of affairs had been building since the Tweed Ring scandal of 1871, stoked by genteel liberal reformers such as Godkin. By the 1890s the brazen city boss and the corrupt political machine had become stock elements of the American political imagination. The 1894 launching of the National Municipal League, a network of civic reformers from around the country, signaled the emergence of urban political corruption as an enduring national concern. Steffens thus found a receptive audience for his work.

Steffens's goal was to create a public opinion that insisted on honest, efficient government. "All we have to do is establish a steady demand for good

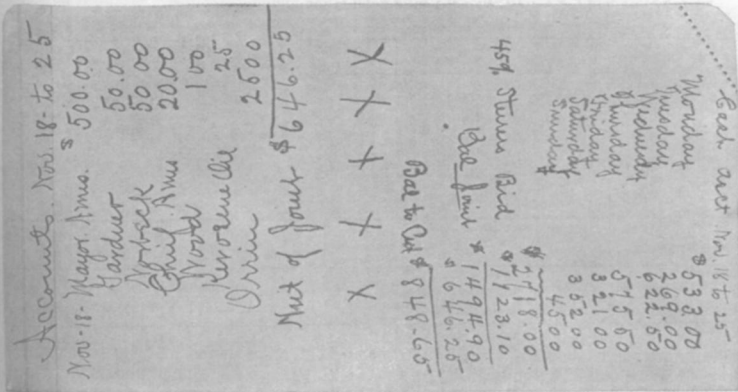
<sup>7</sup>On Steffens's career, see Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens: A Biography* (New York, 1977), esp. 82-88. On his approach to journalism see Christopher Wilson, *Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens, 1985), 168-91.

# McClure's Magazine

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## THE SHAME OF MINNEAPOLIS

The Rescue and Redemption of a City that was Sold Out  
BY LINCOLN STEFFENS



FAC-SIMILE OF THE FIRST PAGE OF "THE BIG MITT LEDGER"

At account kept by a swindler of the dealings of his "Joint" with City Officials, showing first payments made to Mayor Ames, his brother, the Chief of Police and Detectives. This book figured in trials and newspaper reports of the exposure, but was "lost"; and its whereabouts was the mystery of the proceedings. This is the first glimpse that any one, except "Cheerful Charlie" Howard, who kept it, and members of the grand jury, has had of the book

WHENEVER anything extraordinary is done in American municipal politics, whether for good or forevil, you can trace it almost invariably to one man. The people do not do it. Neither do the "gangs," "combines," or political parties. These are but instruments by which bosses (not leaders; we Americans are not led, but driven) rule the people, and commonly sell them out. But there are at least two forms of the autocracy which has supplanted the democracy here as it has everywhere it has been tried. One is that of the organized majority by which, as in Tammany Hall in New York and the Republican machine in Philadelphia, the

boss has normal control of more than half the voters. The other is that of the adroitly managed minority. The "good people" are herded into parties and stupefied with convictions and a name, Republican or Democrat; while the "bad people" are so organized or interested by the boss that he can wield their votes to enforce terms with party managers and decide elections. St. Louis is a conspicuous example of this form. Minneapolis is another. Colonel Ed. Butler is the unscrupulous opportunist who handled the non-partisan minority which turned St. Louis into a "boodle town." In Minneapolis "Doc" Ames was the man.

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Steffens published evidence of graft in the administration of Minneapolis Mayor A.A. "Doc" Ames, *McClure's Magazine*, January 1903. Courtesy of Ball State University Library.

government," he wrote in the introduction to *Shame of the Cities*. Voters should vote only "for the city, and the State, and the Nation," he argued. If they did this, they would force politicians to respond to popular desires. The role of reform leaders—Joseph Folk in St. Louis, the men of the Municipal Voters League in Chicago, Robert LaFollette in Wisconsin, Mark

Fagan in Jersey City—was to cultivate this demand by presenting the issue clearly. Steffens praised Chicago’s reformers for creating in local public life “only one line of demarcation: special interests versus the interests of the city.” At times Steffens was pessimistic about the prospects for sustained popular demand for effective government even when the issue was put so clearly, but he rarely ventured beyond this model of reform in his writings before 1910.<sup>8</sup>

In condemning a politics of private interest and reasserting the primacy of the public good, Steffens evoked the republican vocabulary that had animated political reform efforts through the nineteenth century. His repeated condemnation of the businessman as the main cause of corruption and business values as the antithesis of good citizenship echoed the traditional republican lament that commercialism corrupted public life by undermining civic virtue. Steffens introduced *The Struggle for Self Government*, with an acidly sarcastic “Dedication to the Czar,” in which he suggested that American constitutional democracy differed little from the despotic government offered by Russia’s beleaguered ruler, a comparison that drew on the traditional contrast between democracy and monarchy. And his constant warnings about the growth of an “oligarchy representative of special interests” paralleled republicanism’s fear of power concentrated in the hands of the few.<sup>9</sup>

Steffens also attacked parties as devices that allowed corrupt businessmen to accumulate power at the expense of the people, a formulation reminiscent of the republican fear of faction. When Steffens argued in *The Struggle for Self-Government* that the people were losing their power to special interests in a hidden revolution, he claimed that “the medium of the revolution is the party.” Parties provided voters the appearance of choice but not the substance. In city after city, state after state, Steffens reported that party differences were a sham and that the bosses cooperated privately in pursuit of spoils. Even at the national level they “stood . . . for special interests and graft.” Partisanship was “idiotic,” a “superstition to be discarded in favor of

<sup>8</sup>Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, 5-6, 179

<sup>9</sup>Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, 4-5, 17; Lincoln Steffens, *The Struggle for Self Government: Being an Attempt to Trace American Political Corruption to its Sources in Six States of the United States, With a Dedication to the Czar* (New York, 1906), iii-xxiii, 42. For overviews of the literature on republicanism see Daniel T. Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11-38; James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York, 1998), 59-70. On republicanism and Progressivism see John Patrick Diggins, “Republicanism and Progressivism,” *American Quarterly* 37 (Autumn 1985): 572-98; Richard L. McCormick, “The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism,” *American Historical Review* 86 (April 1981): 247-74; James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York, 1990), 126.



independent citizenship," he insisted, echoing Gilded Age liberal reformers. "Vote for the good of the whole country," Steffens urged, "not for party, neither 'the' party nor 'a' party; neither his father's party, nor his friends', nor his own."<sup>10</sup>

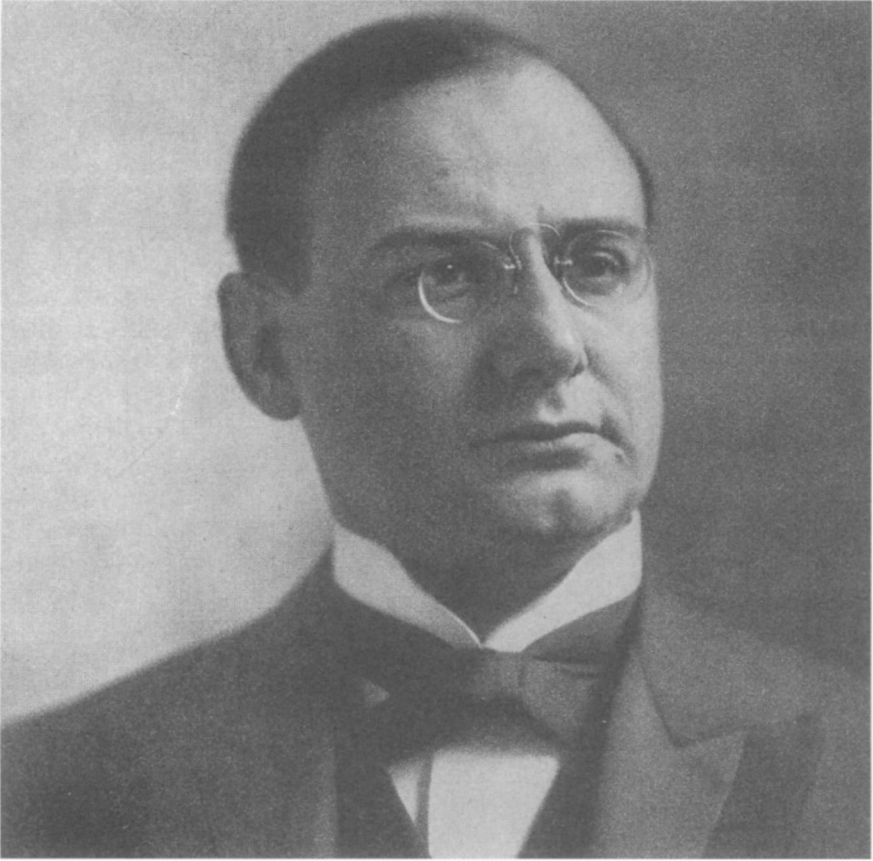
While Steffens derived much of his framework for understanding political corruption from republican thought, he was not partaking in republicanism itself. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the republican ideal of the common good had been shorn of its emphasis on the exchange of ideas among equal, independent citizens (an emphasis that had long been honored in the breach as often as not). As Peter Hansen has argued, muckrakers drew on an "etiolated republicanism that maintained some of the rhetorical power, if few of the communitarian convictions, of a prolonged discourse on public virtue in American social thought." In the hands of Steffens and most of his contemporaries, the public interest had become something to assert rather than a product of democratic discussion. They insisted that the political problems of the day were driven by the selfishness of a few and the apathy of the many. The solution to this difficulty lay in prodding the people's shared, albeit dormant, desire for good government.<sup>11</sup>

Embedded in this formula was a gendered understanding of good citizenship as devotion to the public good and vigorous resistance to corruption. The heroes in Steffens's stories were invariably men who took their responsibilities as citizens or public officials seriously and acted aggressively. He introduced Joseph Folk as "one man, working all alone, but he is the Circuit (district or State) Attorney, and he is 'doing his duty.'" The grand jury in Minneapolis that brought down the Ames machine was able to do so because "there was a man among them who was a fighter." (Local boss "Doc" Ames, in contrast, emerged in Steffens's telling as a kindly but weak-willed man who allowed corruption to flourish). The problem of reform in Chicago came down to finding the right man: "All they needed was a fighter. So it was moved to find a man, and let this man find eight other men, who should organize the 'Municipal Voters' League.'" Along with Robert LaFollette, the great hero of Wisconsin politics was A.R. Hall, of whom Steffens wrote: "I have seen in my day some seventeen men, real men, and none of them is simpler, truer, braver than this ex-leader of the Wisconsin Assembly."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Steffens, *Struggle for Self Government*, 42; *San Francisco Bulletin*, March 11, 1906, clipping in Lincoln Steffens Papers, Series I, Scrapbooks Box 8, Folder 2, Columbia University, New York; Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, 74, 132; Lincoln Steffens, "Advice to the First Voter," Steffens Papers, Series I, Manuscripts, Folder 2.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Hansen, "Muckraking," in *A Companion to American Thought*, eds., Richard Wrightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Oxford, 1995): 473.

<sup>12</sup>Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, 19, 57-58, 42, 167, Steffens, *Struggle for Self Government*, 95.



Joseph Folk of St. Louis, Steffens's archetypal urban reformer. From *McClure's Magazine*, March 1903. Courtesy of Ball State University Library.

This masculine language helped rehabilitate the idea of reform but also limited it. In celebrating the bravery and vigor of his citizen-heroes, Steffens countered the popular Gilded Age claim that reform was chiefly a feminine exercise, the province of “long-haired men and short-haired women” as the phrase went. He was hardly the first to do so—his friend Theodore Roosevelt was a pioneer of a political style that married masculinity and reform—but Steffens certainly helped make reform consistent with late Victorian ideals of manhood. In doing so, however, he also promoted a model of citizenship that stressed action over contemplation. Chicago's successful reformers were “not thinking of principles and methods. Work was their instinct and the fighting has always been thick.” The exercise of reason and the exchange of ideas—core elements of the participatory model of democracy—were lost in the rush to create a more pragmatic, virile persona for his heroes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, 169. On gender and nineteenth-century politics, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1962), 185-96; Alan Trachtenberg,

Steffens's formula dominated reform during the Progressive Era, but it was not the only one. There were a handful of activists and thinkers who imagined a society animated by many sets of values and interests. The most significant was John Dewey, whose ideas and writings influenced many reformers, including Jane Addams, Edward Ward, and Mary P. Follett. Each sought to create institutions, social spaces, and practices that fostered civic dialogue between various groups. In Cleveland, Frederic Howe and Tom Johnson established open tent meetings and public forums that allowed citizens to exchange ideas and reach a consensus about the issues of the day. The aim of all these efforts was to create a politics that pursued the common good by recognizing and accommodating differences.<sup>14</sup>

Steffens knew about these alternatives. He and Howe became close friends, and Howe drew on Steffens's muckraking in his own book on municipal reform, *The City: The Hope of Democracy*. But Howe's "economic analysis," which pinned the blame for urban corruption on a specific class of businessmen, had greater depth and precision than did Steffens's more general indictment of civic apathy. Steffens also corresponded with Edward Ward, a Rochester activist who pioneered the Social Center movement, which was designed to provide a setting in which members of social groups that otherwise had little contact with each other could discuss matters of public concern. Ward urged Steffens to write about these ideas in 1908 and even succeeded in luring him to Rochester to inspect his work. Yet Steffens the muckraker never adequately incorporated the essential principle of the Social Center, the acceptance of multiple understandings of the common good.<sup>15</sup>

Steffens did not ignore the class and group differences increasingly evident in turn-of-the-century America. He made a point of rejecting group-based explanations of the country's political ills, because he sought to blame the people as a whole for their tolerance of corruption. *The Shame of the Cities* emphatically dismissed past attempts to link political malfeasance to im-

*The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982), 163-65; Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620-44, n. 27; Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York, 1997), 153-58; Melanie Susan Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854-1924* (Urbana, 2001).

<sup>14</sup>Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Republic: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, 1998), 36-47.

<sup>15</sup>Frederic C. Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (orig. pub. 1905, repr. Seattle, 1967). On Howe's friendship with Steffens see Frederic C. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer* (orig. pub. 1925, repr. Chicago, 1967), 182-84; Lincoln Steffens *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, vol. 2 (New York, 1931), 470-81; Edward Joshua Ward to Lincoln Steffens, November 17, 1908, December 29, 1908, November 11, 1909 in Steffens Papers, Series I. Correspondence.

migrants: "The 'foreign element' excuse is one of our hypocritical lies that save us from the clear sight of ourselves." Philadelphia was the worst governed city in the country according to Steffens and also one of the "most American." One of the city's few credible reformers, he added parenthetically, was an immigrant. "No one class is at fault," he insisted, "nor any one breed, nor any particular interest or group of interests." But if Steffens acknowledged the presence of group differences, he aimed to overcome them rather than accommodate them, and he never conceived of an ideal of citizenship that took multiple values and priorities into account.<sup>16</sup>

Steffens's inability to develop more subtle ideas about the character of American politics reflected the quality of his thought. Having failed as a historian and philosopher, he had prospered in the more superficial world of late-nineteenth-century popular journalism. Steffens's early years as a journalist had inculcated in him a sense of the popular interest in the underside of urban life and a vigorous, accessible writing style, but they had not encouraged a depth or rigor in his social and political thought. Working with S.S. McClure, a master at appealing to middle-class tastes, reinforced this tendency. Walter Lippmann, who spent a year after college as Steffens's research assistant, remembered him as a kind-hearted but intellectually lazy iconoclast, someone who relied more on style than substance. Christine Stansell's description of the distinctive voice Steffens created for the *Commercial Advertiser* during the 1890s, one that relied upon "softening and domesticating rather than playing up social differences," applies to his muck-raking work as well.<sup>17</sup>

The closest Steffens came to allowing for the possibility of competing yet legitimate formulations of the public good was in brief endorsements of party rehabilitation. He praised Robert LaFollette for organizing a personal machine in Wisconsin and working inside of Republican Party lines as a practical approach to reform. In the *Struggle for Self Government* he argued that if voters acted independently instead of as partisans they would force parties to "represent good citizenship." That is, they would develop different but morally valid positions on "broad questions of public policy" and thus "would both stand, as they do not now, for the public interest." Although the public interest remained for him a singular term, Steffens at least broached the possibility of multiple approaches to achieving it. But this insight never went further. Even in *The Upbuilders*, written well after his exposure to the ideas of Johnson, Howe, and Ward, Steffens expressed a vague

<sup>16</sup>Steffens, *Shame of the Cities*, 2-3, 134-35, 139.

<sup>17</sup>Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (Boston, 1980), 37-38; Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York, 2000), 20.

faith in “the common people” and a definition of good leadership and citizenship as devotion to a simplistic understanding of the public good.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his shortcomings as a political philosopher, Steffens sought and gained wide influence. Steffens's political muckraking was both a creator and product of the mass literary marketplace that emerged around the start of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Carefully written to appeal to an expanding magazine readership, it aimed to attract attention, encourage reform, and sell magazines. In every respect Steffens succeeded. Not only did the circulation of *McClure's Magazine* grow during its muckraking years (during which it featured not only Steffens's writings but also the work of Ida Tarbell and Ray Stannard Baker, among others), but the commentary his articles fueled in local newspapers and their republication in book form multiplied his audience and amplified his arguments. Within a few years of his first *McClure's* article on “Tweed Days in St. Louis,” Steffens had garnered substantial credit for shifting public opinion in favor of reform throughout the country and became an authority on the state of American politics.

The power of Steffens's exposés flowed from the careful construction of his articles. The material he used was almost entirely public knowledge, as he himself admitted, and his ideas were for the most part unoriginal. But unlike the elitist Mugwump accounts of political corruption written by E.L. Godkin, English scholar James Bryce, and their peers, his articles featured narrative drive, dramatic tension, lively dialogue, and humor. Directed at the broad, middle-class audience of *McClure's Magazine*, their freshness derived from the storytelling skills Steffens had developed as a reporter and editor and short story writer during the 1890s. S.S. McClure, a pioneer in the field of mass-market magazines, also edited Steffens's early work heavily, frequently restructuring it to give it clearer narrative flow and greater drama. He urged Steffens to connect each article to its predecessors and provided the provocative title for the second series of muckraking articles, “Enemies of the Republic.” The result was an expression of traditional ideas about civic declension in an innovative format designed to reach a wide readership.<sup>20</sup>

Steffens's ability to command popular attention stemmed to a substantial degree from the platform *McClure's* provided. Launched by S.S. McClure in 1893, it was among the first and most successful of a new breed of cheap

<sup>18</sup>Steffens, *Struggle for Self Government*, 115, 141; Lincoln Steffens, *Upbuilders* (orig. pub. 1909, repr. Seattle, 1968), ix.

<sup>19</sup>On the emergence of the mass literary market and Steffens's experience with it, see Wilson, *Labor of Words*, 168-91.

<sup>20</sup>On Steffens's writing, see Robert Stinson, *Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1979), 45-82; on McClure's role, see Peter Lyon, *Success Story: The Life and Times of S.S. McClure* (New York, 1963), 219, 225-26.

magazines that extended periodical readership well beyond the levels that the elitist publications of the Gilded Age achieved. By 1903 its circulation was 370,000, and it rose to 414,000 by 1906. *Shame of the Cities* sold 3,000 copies and *Struggle for Self Government* another 1,000. But these numbers do not do justice to the reach of Steffens's investigations. Newspapers routinely echoed his critiques, particularly when they focused on their own cities, and reform politicians constantly reiterated his charges on the stump.<sup>21</sup>

One can trace the development of Steffens's influence in the reactions of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* to his revelations about that city. His initial accounts of local political corruption, "Tweed Days in St. Louis" (published in October, 1902) and "The Shamelessness of St. Louis" (published in March, 1903), met with a defensive response. The paper labeled Steffens's account "intemperate" and urged local voters to refute the charge that they tolerated corruption and cared little for the public good. Part of the paper's commentary may have stemmed from its Democratic sympathies, since the principal target of the exposés was that party's leadership. But even Joseph Folk noted the anxiety provoked by Steffens's writings and cited a broad campaign in the city to discredit his claims. A year later, after the "Shame of the Cities" series was complete and Steffens had moved on to an examination of state politics that included Missouri, the response was markedly different. The *Post-Dispatch* praised Steffens's work and even accepted the terms he used to frame his discussion of corruption. When Folk indicted Democratic boss Ed Butler, the paper celebrated the occasion as a "lesson St. Louis needs" to arouse the city from the "fatalism and apathy" that had long characterized it. The paper's about-face partly reflected the growing power of Steffens's voice. By 1904, nobody spoke about the problems of American politics—particularly urban politics—with more authority than Steffens.<sup>22</sup>

Testimony from reformers around the country suggested that Steffens's ideas and rhetoric had penetrated popular discourse. Pittsburgh reformer Oliver McClintock reported to Steffens that the local press had cited his expose of that city's politics in a manner that implied "that the general public was supposed to have read it." Others reported similar patterns, even in cities not featured in his articles. Cleveland's John Siddall noted of Steffens's municipal series, "People here are intensely interested in it. It is fun to observe how your phrases keep creeping into newspaper editorials and correspondence." San Francisco reformer James Causey told Steffens

<sup>21</sup>Stinson, *Lincoln Steffens*, 63, 78.

<sup>22</sup>*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 24, 1903, March 11, 17, 1903; Joseph W. Folk to Steffens, March 19, 1903 in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 2, 23, 1904.

that “everywhere I go among the leaders I hear you quoted.” Visiting Oregon after the publication of Steffens’s profile of Portland reformer William S. U’ren, Frederic Howe reported “that the men are talking about it a great deal and it will do a lot of good.” A New York preacher even wrote in 1906 to tell him that he would be using one of his articles as the basis for his sermon the next Sunday.<sup>23</sup>

Knowledgeable observers thought Steffens had a decisive effect on public opinion. Congratulatory telegrams and letters poured into his home and office in the days immediately following elections. They uniformly assigned him a large share of the credit for reform triumphs and for the pro-reform mood of the country generally. When he featured specific reformers in his articles, often to boost their electoral fortunes, they emphatically attributed their victories to his intervention. Joseph Folk, Brand Whitlock, Tom Johnson, Everett Colby, and Robert LaFollette were among the many politicians who viewed Steffens’s articles as a powerful factor in their success. As LaFollette declared of a Steffens piece that focused on the Wisconsin reformer, “It would have gratified you and Mrs. Steffens to know—though, of course you have found it everywhere—the way in which the article settled things. It was like the decision of a court of last resort.”<sup>24</sup>

Endorsements of this sort, complimentary editorials, and strong reviews of his books combined to make Steffens an authority on the state of American politics. Established reform advocates such as James Bryce and Charles Parkhurst praised his work. Politicians routinely sought his endorsement, a statement of support for a particular measure, an appearance on the campaign trail, or, even better, a supportive article from him. “I believe an article by you as an admitted expert would be the best campaign document available,” pleaded a San Francisco reformer. Steffens was besieged with invitations to investigate various communities, most of which he had to turn down because the demand for his services was too great. But he reveled in the acclaim and cultivated the image of expertise.<sup>25</sup>

It is easy to see how Steffens’s muckraking career both fueled and exemplified the politics of advertising and publicity that emerged around the turn of the century. His articles and books explicitly aimed to arouse popular

<sup>23</sup>Oliver McClintock to Steffens, May 21, 1903; John MacAlpine Siddall to Steffens, June 30, 1903; James H. Causey to Steffens, April 6, 1908; Frederic C. Howe to Steffens, February 29, 1908; Charles G. Sewall to Steffens, February 10, 1906, in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence.

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Folk to Steffens, November 9, 1905; Brand Whitlock to Steffens, November 8, 1905; Tom Johnson to Steffens, November 8, 1905; Everett Colby to Steffens, October 20, 1905; Robert LaFollette to Steffens, November 14, 1905, in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence.

<sup>25</sup>William Kent to Steffens, September 14, 1903 in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence.

support for reform; many of them attempted to influence specific elections, often to great effect. At the peak of his influence, reformers and politicians throughout the country believed that an enthusiastic comment from Steffens deployed in an advertisement or press release could turn an election in their favor. In short, he was at the center of the developing effort to manipulate public opinion that began to displace more traditional, organizational means of mobilizing popular support.<sup>26</sup>

It is less obvious, but no less the case, that Steffens's influential ideas contributed to the growth of a plural, interest-group driven politics, a second major aspect of modern American political development with roots in the Progressive Era. With its emphasis on a single, unified people, Steffens's political creed would seem to have worked against the centrifugal forces at work in American public culture. But despite his attempt to mobilize "the public," Steffens's muckraking mobilized not one but many publics. His work thus encouraged a far more plural, contested civic life than he ever imagined. The Progressive reformers with whom he worked most closely and who were the heroes of his narratives acted in the name of the public interest but came to represent more narrowly defined, particular interests within the specific context in which they operated. Their ultimate demise arose largely from their inability to speak credibly for all the people of their community, a failure that undercut Steffens's reputation and fed the disillusion and radicalism for which he later became famous.

Municipal reform groups gained the most sustenance from Steffens's muckraking. He worked closely with leaders of these organizations and derived from much of what he knew about local affairs in Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Chicago from them. In turn his articles presented these men and their associations in a flattering light. In other cases, Steffens advised local leaders on how best to organize nonpartisan civic bodies or how to pursue beneficial reforms. But while they claimed to be nonpartisan organizations pursuing the best interests of the community as a whole, they developed into pressure groups representing distinctive segments of the city.<sup>27</sup>

Closer inspection of specific local contexts can help us see how this process unfolded. In "Half Free and Fighting On," Steffens's article on Chicago for the *Shame of the Cities* series, he presented the men who formed and ran

<sup>26</sup>McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, 138-83.

<sup>27</sup>See for example David P. Jones to Steffens, November 20, 1906, December 20, 1902, January 8, 1903; Charles S. Deforest to Steffens, June 3, 1904, November 7, 1904, November 14, 1908; William C. Bobbs to Steffens, October, 15, 1908, in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence. See Martin J. Schiesl, *The Politics of Efficiency: Municipal Administration and Reform in America, 1800-1920* (Berkeley, 1977), 190 for the long term impact of the nonpartisan ideal on city politics.



the Municipal Voters League (MVL) as pragmatic political activists devoted to nonpartisan pursuit of the common good. Much of the material for the article came from interviews with these men, several of whom read drafts and made suggestions that Steffens incorporated into the published version. They generally approved of the piece because it served their interests and promoted their cause. But what appeared to readers outside Chicago as a clear example of a disinterested movement came to be seen within the realm of Chicago politics as just one of a number of groups with competing visions of reform and of the public interest. As Maureen Flanagan's careful study of Chicago's Progressive-era charter reform campaign has shown, the MVL's rhetoric of nonpartisan devotion to the common good masked the fact that they did not speak for all of Chicago, but only for a well-to-do, pro-Republican element of the city's population. The MVL, Flanagan noted, "made the mistake of assuming that because the voters generally agreed with them in this instance [their campaign against corruption in the city council], they would agree wholeheartedly with them on a whole range of reform issues thereafter." The same could be said of Steffens.<sup>28</sup>

An even clearer illustration of how Steffens encouraged varied rather than unified action can be seen in subsequent responses to his ideas in other quarters of Chicago. While the MVL reveled in Steffens's praise, other reform groups also perceived his ideas as compatible with their agendas. Labor activist Margaret Dreier Robbins urged Steffens to return to Chicago in 1906 in order to investigate local school politics. She was alarmed by what she saw as the growing influence of businessmen—"the privileged interests of the city"—on the Board of Education and expected Steffens to be sympathetic to her point of view. Less than two years later a Chicago businessman wrote to Steffens urging him to expose the corruption of "leading politicians" in that city so that "men 'higher up' in the business world" could take their place at the helm of city government. (The correspondent evidently ignored what was by then routine criticism of businessmen in Steffens's muckraking.) Despite their diametric opposition to each other, both correspondents read in Steffens's work support for their agendas, testimony to the vagueness of his ideas and their capacity for fueling contradictory political activity.<sup>29</sup>

A sharper version of the same pattern developed in Boston, where Steffens spent a year investigating municipal conditions and preparing a

<sup>28</sup>Maureen Flanagan, *Charter Reform in Chicago* (Carbondale, 1987), 68. See also Thomas Pegram, *Partisans and Progressives: Private Interest and Public Policy in Illinois, 1870-1922* (Urbana, 1992), 115.

<sup>29</sup>Flanagan, *Charter Reform*, 79; Hartzell to Steffens, January 28, 1908, Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence.

solution. Reacting to criticism that he and other muckrakers spent too much time criticizing and not enough time seeking solutions, Steffens resolved to put his ideas to the test. Several cities offered him the chance to come and study their situation and propose reforms before he settled on an offer from Boston retail magnate Edward A. Filene and the city's Good Government Association (GGA). They paid him \$10,000 to spend a year in Boston investigating its problems, publishing his findings, and proposing constructive responses to existing difficulties. His experiment went badly, largely because Steffens's ideas about creating a politics dedicated to a monolithic public interest were no match for the complexity of metropolitan life.

The Boston opportunity attracted Steffens not only because it was the most lucrative but because it offered him the fullest chance to go beyond criticism to constructive reform. By 1908 the muckraking movement had waned, weakened by the complaints of Theodore Roosevelt—who coined the derisive epithet ‘muckraker’—and many others that it did little more than wallow in the corruption and failures of American life. Steffens bristled at these charges, insisting that while he had “‘raked’ much ‘muck’ as they are pleased to term it,” he had “written about more good men than I have exposed bad ones. They who apply the term ‘muckraker’ seem to forget that.” Boston gave him a chance to engage in “the constructive side” of the effort “to restore self government,” as his wife put it a press release trumpeting his investigation there. Filene put it even more dramatically: “The work here as it is outlining itself bids fair to be one of the most important ever done in this country, and might well be made to rank in importance with anything that has been done either nationally or in any state or city within our memory at least.”<sup>30</sup>

The careful study of a single city would allow Steffens to develop and implement his ideas about civic reform. Here was the test of his claim that an intelligent, united public opinion could be cultivated that would force political leaders to act for the common good. “I have come to Boston looking for good,” he noted upon his arrival in the city, expressing confidence that “some feelings for and some conscience about the common problems of community living” already existed there. His task would be to energize and enlarge that collective “conscience” and direct it toward productive ends.<sup>31</sup>

The Boston sponsors gave their muckraker-for-hire two specific charges.

<sup>30</sup>*Colorado Springs Gazette*, January 9, 1907, clipping in Steffens Papers, Series I, Scrapbooks, Box 34, folder 2; Josephine Steffens, “Publicity Release about Lincoln Steffens, ca. 1909;” Edward A. Filene to Steffens, June 6, 1908, in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence.

<sup>31</sup>Steffens, “Statement about Boston,” in Steffens Papers, Series I, Manuscripts, p.1.

The Good Government Association agreed to pay half of Steffens's salary for the year in exchange for a book-length manuscript that would lay bare the city's political failings. They wanted to publish these findings in an inexpensive volume during the run-up to the crucial municipal election scheduled for January 1910 in the hopes of swaying the election their way. Filene, paying the other half, wanted Steffens to work on the creation of one or more civic organizations that would offer effective, unifying responses to the social, political, and economic problems the city faced. Steffens and his wife moved to Boston in the fall of 1908, and he began the work necessary to fulfill these obligations.

In the first of these endeavors, Steffens failed, at least from the point of view of his employers. The GGA planned to market a five-cent edition of his book just a few weeks before the mayoral election. Its effect would be "psychological," the Association's leaders hoped, swaying popular opinion against Irish Democrat John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald and in favor of elite Yankee reformer James Storrow. The GGA expected Steffens to do for Boston what he had done so effectively in other cities and states—describe conditions in a way that mobilized the public in support of political reform. But not only did Steffens fail to deliver on time, completing his manuscript more than two years after the election took place, he also failed to provide the indictment of machine politics that the Boston reformers anticipated. Instead he attacked "the ideals of the reformers" who served the interests of "the financial, commercial, and employer classes" but did not to seek "any legislation for labor or humanity."<sup>32</sup>

Steffens's Boston story acknowledged these class differences but went no further, and it had little effect locally or nationally. The GGA refused to publish the book, which appeared in serial form instead in *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1914 to little fanfare. By then Steffens's influence had diminished sharply, the result of a leftward shift in his politics, and he was lucky to get the study published in any form. Even if it had gained a wider audience, it was characteristically vague and had little to offer beyond a general indictment of the business classes. Although it placed far greater emphasis on social reform than his earlier muckraking, it provided little detail about what sort of policies he sought or how class differences might be overcome.<sup>33</sup>

While in Boston, Steffens put most of his energy into the second of his two responsibilities. At the behest of Filene he spent the year encouraging and helping to formulate civic action throughout the city. He spoke to labor

<sup>32</sup>James J. Connolly, *The Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism: Urban Political Culture in Boston, 1900-1925* (Cambridge 1998), 133-34.

<sup>33</sup>Lincoln Steffens, "A Cure for Corruption," *Metropolitan Magazine* (March, 1914): 13, 68.

organizations, neighborhood improvement societies, church groups, and a range of other bodies, encouraging each to enter public affairs more vigorously and to make their influence felt. He also had a direct role in the creation of two new organizations, the United Improvement Association (UIA), a federation of neighborhood civic associations, and the Boston-1915 campaign, an attempt to establish a “city movement” that would unite the city behind a comprehensive program of reform. While this direct engagement with urban life would force Steffens to accept in principle a more plural vision of society, he would continue to press for political action in the name of a singular “people.”

In helping launch the United Improvement Association, Steffens emphasized the role of its constituent groups, the neighborhood associations, as the voice of the people. Formed as nonpartisan organizations during the 1890s and early 1900s, these groups typically cast themselves as alternatives to self-interested, corrupt party politics. Steffens visited many of them during his year in Boston, praising their efforts and urging cooperation among them. As he explained to members of one such body, they brought “a consciousness of the ward as whole” to their work and were thus in a position “to express the demands of the people” more effectively than were machine politicians. Effective representation required someone “loyal to the community as a whole,” he told another civic group. The idea behind the formation of the UIA was to create a nonpartisan vehicle through which to express the collective desires of these communities.<sup>34</sup>

But while these groups employed the rhetoric of the public interest, they acted more narrowly. The membership of these organizations invariably came from the uppermost slice of the socioeconomic scale. In most instances, a handful of upper- and middle-class businessmen ran these associations and set their agendas. The UIA thus emerged as a suburban lobbying group, carrying the desires of these middle-class associations to city hall and the state house. During its first years in existence it pressed for faster street construction and improved municipal and utility service in outlying neighborhoods, lower property taxes, and more vigorous regulation of telephone rates. These concerns were most clearly relevant to suburban homeowners and far less important to working-class ethnics in other sections of the city.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup>*Brighton Item*, November 21, 1908; *East Boston Free Press*, January 23, 1909, clipping in Steffens Papers, Series I, Scrapbook 2.

<sup>35</sup>Unidentified Typescript, box C36, folder 19, Allen-Lane Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, Mass., 3-4; Benjamin Lane to H. Findlay French, April 5, 1915, box C36, folder 18, Allen-Lane Co. Collection; *United Improvement Association Bulletin* (October, 1910), 3; Connolly, *Triumph of Ethnic Progressivism*, 112.

While Steffens cannot be held solely responsible for these developments, he certainly encouraged them. Part of the problem was his conception of how the public interest was constituted. When forced to articulate his ideas beyond vague generalities about the people, he accepted the increasingly common assumption that the public interest represented an accumulation of group interests, which would magically coalesce into a unified, consistent whole. As he explained to one of the neighborhood civic associations he addressed in Boston, "If your representatives here at City Hall were your representatives, you could get anything you wanted and make Boston purer, cleaner, safer and more beautiful than any city in the world." The naiveté of the assumption that "anything you wanted" would include only public-spirited desires is topped only by the notion that such demands, in all their variety, would readily lead to a "purer, cleaner, safer, and more beautiful" city. By encouraging this kind of thinking while speaking as an authority on American politics, Steffens contributed substantially to the clamor for satisfaction emanating from so many different quarters in early twentieth-century America.<sup>36</sup>

The famed muckraker had a more direct role in another attempt at forging civic unity, the "Boston-1915" movement. His idea was to present a "vision of the future of Boston" derived from the efforts of various reform groups. "We'd find out what everybody was trying to do, each by himself, in business, politics, religion, and social reform," Steffens recalled, "and spread out all of these plans as one united Plan for Boston."<sup>37</sup> The centerpiece of the program was a massive exhibit of the work of local churches, unions, civic bodies, settlement houses, fraternal groups, and others. Held in late 1909, the 1915 fair attracted over 200,000 visitors and featured 1,658 organizations. Steffens and the movement's architects hoped that those who attended would be so inspired by its tangible presentation of "the city as it might be made," that they would become better citizens, selflessly devoted to the goals sketched out in the 1915 display.

Steffens came closer in this effort to constructing a formula for bridging group differences than he had in any of his muckraking articles. By this time, Steffens had grown more sympathetic to radical critiques of capitalism, and his proposals reflected this new thinking. As one part of the 1915 movement Steffens urged that "the people of Boston should take up and resolve in a fine spirit of reciprocity questions involving the relations between employers and employees." He expressed particular concern that those outside the business community have a voice in the project, objecting

<sup>36</sup>*Boston Herald*, November 10, 1908, clipping in Steffens Papers, Series I, Scrapbook 2.

<sup>37</sup>Steffens, *Autobiography*, vol. 2, 613-14.

strongly to a proposal to give the Chamber of Commerce the lead role because it was a “class organization.” Inclusiveness was central to Steffens’s vision: “every man, woman and child in the city should be asked the question: ‘what are you willing to do for Boston?’” he declared. He even called for a physical space where interchange and mutual support could be fostered: a headquarters “where every organization and every citizen can get advice and help at all times and each can get the cooperation of all others when times of discouragement come and help is most needed.”<sup>38</sup>

But if Steffens was finally acknowledging the plurality of interests at work in urban society, he developed no mechanisms for resolving the differences among them. He assumed that inclusion was sufficient, that the conflicts between groups would work themselves out once all were incorporated into “the City Movement,” as he called it. This faith in comity reached absurd levels. The part of the 1915 plan devoted to transportation called for “public deliberations between the transportation interests and the public.” These discussions, it added, were “to be guided by the assumption that the true interests of the transportation companies and the public are identical.” Unlike the Social Center movement espoused by Edward Ward and Mary Follett, Steffens’s 1915 idea never fully recognized the importance of dialogue and exchange—it was rooted in the belief that social harmony existed in a dormant state and required only activation in the form of greater civic activism. (The 1915 Executive Committee considered Ward for the Directorship of the organization before settling on another candidate. Perhaps the movement would have developed along different lines had they chosen him.) Steffens was not entirely responsible for the inadequacy of the 1915 vision. He acted largely as an advisor, and his influence waned once he left town and others took charge. But his initial proposal set the course for the movement, one that ultimately failed to grapple with the diversity of the city and the challenges of forging a common civic vision in an urban context.<sup>39</sup>

This failure led Steffens and others in the 1915 campaign to fall back on the traditional notion of a singular people. For all their insistence on the incorporation of many groups into the movement, they still imagined the end result as a morally united citizenry expressing its demands in one voice. “We should find out in great detail the wants of Boston and state them in the form of a general platform,” Steffens wrote in his initial recommenda-

<sup>38</sup>Steffens, “Notes for a Statement to be Presented to the General Committee of the City Movement at its First Meeting,” in Steffens Papers, Series I, Manuscripts; Steffens to R. Bottomly, September 11, 1913, in Records of the Good Government Association, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Steffens File, folder 4.

<sup>39</sup>Paul Kellog, “A Plan for a Boston Plan,” *The Survey* 22:10 (June 5, 1909): 396; Edward A. Filene to Steffens, December 13, 1909, in Steffens Papers, Series I, Correspondence.

tion, assuming that “Boston” was a monolithic entity with a complex but ultimately coherent set of desires. “We shall seize the imagination of the people,” he continued, “and interest them in politics and pledge candidates to support this platform and as far as possible give public officials the satisfaction of knowing what the people really want.” This vision set the direction of the 1915 movement, which according to one observer, was rooted in the idea “that the common impulses of the great mass of the people are in the long run, right, and that if gathered up and organized as never before, these impulses will make up a constructive power in civic life beyond anything now at the command of the agencies of righteousness.”<sup>40</sup>

Such confidence in the sagacity and moral cohesion of the people proved to be misplaced. The 1915 movement fizzled, and the wave of popular enthusiasm it triggered crested quickly. In January 1912, the Executive Committee dissolved the official organization, citing the many groups now carrying forward different parts of the agenda laid out in 1909. Among them were organizations devoted to housing reform, education, recreation, and civic reform. It also cited the work of recently created public bureaucracies, institutional structures that encouraged pressure-group politics far more readily than they did the mechanisms of grass roots participatory democracy. The Committee’s Final Report stressed a “record of united action,” but these words rang hollow as many separate efforts filled the void left by “the city movement” Steffens had originally imagined.<sup>41</sup>

Steffens’s idea proved diversifying in other ways as well. The original Exhibition endorsed and publicized the work of the 1,658 groups it featured, undoubtedly strengthening many of them in the process. The 1915 campaign staged fourteen conferences for groups with common interests; each meeting produced a public report and encouraged formal activities, particularly lobbying. This range of activity testified more to the plurality of interests and concerns at work in an urban context than it did the unity of the city. Steffens got the increased citizen activism he had been seeking from the beginning of his muckraking career, but it never coalesced into the single movement he envisioned because the ideas, interests, and goals of those mobilized varied widely. The legacy of the 1915 movement—and the legacy of Steffens’s call for a more engaged citizenship—was not unity but diversity.

Steffens largely abandoned the muckraking approach after 1910 and his influence on public opinion decline precipitously. His politics had begun to drift leftward by the time he arrived in Boston, a change encouraged by his friendship with Eugene Debs and other radicals. His defense of the

<sup>40</sup>Steffens, “Notes for a Statement,” and Kellog, “A Plan for a Boston Plan,” 383.

<sup>41</sup>“Boston-1915—Final Report,” Steffens Papers, Series II: Printed Materials, folder 4.

McNamara brothers when they were charged with dynamiting the building that housed the conservative *Los Angeles Times* in 1910 discredited him with large segments of the public. He traveled to and reported on the Mexican and Russian revolutions during the 1910s, experiences that reinforced his leftist politics. His name and popularity were revived only with the publication of his autobiography in 1931, at a moment when Americans were far more tolerant of radical ideas.<sup>42</sup> But the emphasis on class conflict that characterized his later thinking was not in evidence during the years when his ideas were most consequential.

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Steffens's decade-long engagement with urban politics helps us understand the origins of the interest-group pluralism that has characterized modern American public life. His powerful voice revived the traditional American assumption that the people shared a common set of values and concerns, rooted in a shared moral vision, and that the public good was in danger of being subverted by the machinations of a few selfish interests. His indictment of ordinary Americans for their apathy did not distinguish his thinking from earlier critics of the nation's civic realm, nor did it mark a sharp break from the customary assumption that the nation's political problems could be reduced to a clash between public and private interests. In his muckraking writings, he failed to recognize the legitimacy of competing interests and of varied understandings of the public good. Even when he encountered the variety and complexity of a modern urban community as he tried to put his ideas to the test in Boston, he proved unable to discard the ideal of a harmonious community and create institutions and processes through which group differences could be worked out in democratic fashion.

Steffens's inability to consider the political significance of social, cultural, and economic differences more fully testifies to his intellectual limitations. A few of his journalistic contemporaries—most notably Ray Stannard Baker—moved beyond simplistic formulations of the public good, but Steffens's thinking changed little during his muckraking years. Despite his growing sympathy for the working class and its champions, he never worked out a way to bridge the class and racial divisions that had come to characterize urban America. Even when exposed to the ideas of Frederic Howe or Edward Ward, reformers who explicitly confronted the plural

<sup>42</sup>Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens*, 183-95, 212-25, 297-300. On the relationship with Debs, *Letters of Eugene V. Debs, Volume I, 1874-1912*, ed. J. Robert Constantine (Chicago, 1990): 270-83.



character of modern urban society, Steffens proved incapable of adjusting his approach. When he finally abandoned his faith in an undifferentiated public, he did not turn to a more democratic means of politics but to disillusion and, eventually, to the authoritarian ideals of communism.

But it was not simply the case that Steffens failed to see the coming of a more pluralistic political order that other, more perceptive observers recognized. His approach to political mobilization helped create that order. The call for a more active, nonpartisan citizenship issued by Steffens and so many other Progressives, amplified by the mass journalism that he so ably practiced, resonated in different ways in different contexts. Many Americans heeded Steffens's call and entered public life in new, nonpartisan ways during the Progressive Era. Many—if not most—saw themselves as pursuing the public interest. But the public they imagined themselves to be part of, and their definitions of its best interest differed widely. The result was a more intensely plural public life, ironically fueled by the attempt to revive a politics devoted to the common good.

Steffens's failure—and the wider failure of so many reformers during the Progressive Era—to think more pluralistically had another consequence. Had Steffens lent his powerful voice to the movement for what Kevin Mattson called a “democratic public,” the campaign for a politics rooted in civic dialog might have gained more traction. Instead, the field remained open for others—most notably and ironically his protégé Walter Lippmann—to articulate a different pluralist ethos. That approach emphasized balancing the interests of well-organized competing groups and largely abandoned the ideal of interchange among people with different backgrounds and concerns. It would become the dominant understanding of how twentieth-century American politics should work, shaping the broker-state strategy of the New Deal and the interest-group liberalism that followed. But it did little to reconcile different groups to each other, and it made the pursuit of the common good seem an almost utopian endeavor.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (orig. pub. 1914, repr. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1961), 96; Arthur Fisher Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Chicago, 1908).