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LINCOLN STEFFENS: AN INTERPRETATION

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WHILE STEFFENS IS, no doubt, still remembered by the older generation as one of the most distinguished journalists of his time, and while admirable work has been done on his contribution to the history of the "muckraking" period,¹ he can scarcely be said to have received his due meed of recognition as a serious student and theorist of politics. While Steffens was admittedly a journalist first and foremost, and an active campaigner who always preferred to study the contemporary conflict from a grandstand seat, it is also true that he was no mere ephemeral pamphleteer. It is, in some ways, a pity that his name is linked by an almost automatic association of ideas with "muckraking," a movement he claimed, with more pride than historical exactitude, to have originated. At the time of his association with *McClure's* at the beginning of the century, he appeared to have established almost a vested interest in corruption; but with the broadening of his political experience under the impact of world war and revolution his views were to develop far beyond his earlier speculations, as any reader of the *Autobiography* and his voluminous correspondence may judge. His muckraking experiences stamped him indelibly as a radical and to this tradition he always remained loyal; but they also lent to a naturally impish flair in his humor, an irreverence which sometimes shocked gratuitously and served to establish him as an irresponsible *enfant terrible* to the respectable. When asked by President Eliot of Harvard whether his proposal to lecture to the undergraduates on social corruption was designed to teach them to avoid such pitfalls, Steffens at once repudiated the idea. "I don't mean to keep the boys from succeeding in their professions,"² was his reply; and that, as he tersely puts it, ended him with Mr. Eliot. The episode is noteworthy for its suggestion of Steffens' method. It was his ambition to uphold the Machiavellian tradition in politics, to confine himself to a wholly unemotional, tough-minded analysis of the facts as he found them. And however one-sided the picture he presented may be, it was not one which could have been formulated by anyone other than a man of unusual courage, integrity, and candor.

What makes Steffens' work so refreshing, in contrast to the more stereotyped approach of the academic political scientist, is the slow emergence of his tentative theories out of the crude experiences culled in the newspaper office, the police court, the east side slum, the hustings, the

¹ See Louis Filler, *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1939), chap. viii. See also C. C. Regier, *The Era of the Muckrakers*, 1932.

² Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931), p. 608.

market place, the brothel, the offices of tycoons, judges, bosses, and statesmen. Steeped in the current orthodoxies imbibed during residence in some five universities of Europe and America, Steffens was remarkable for his refusal to permit his mind to harden into convictions based on secondhand knowledge, for his determination to emancipate himself from "the taught ignorance of my day."

Having obtained his first job as a reporter on the *Evening Post* in New York City, he received his first regular assignment in Wall Street. It was there that he acquired that knowledge of the stock market which he subsequently put to good use in securing his own financial independence. It was, however, not until he was transferred to police headquarters as a result of the Rev. Charles Parkhurst's pulpit campaign against police graft that he received his first major shock. Vice, he discovered, even in its more sordid aspects, flourished not in spite of the law enforcement officers, but through their organized connivance. Graft, in other words, was not incidental to the system; it *was* the system, openly recognized within the police force from the chief to the lowest cop on the beat. Steffens, behind the scenes, played a major part in uncovering the facts and forcing the authorities to institute an official inquiry. The Lexow Police Investigation of December, 1894, was the result. Steffens had started on his career of muckraking — a career which led to firsthand investigations covering every aspect of municipal government in some seventeen cities and thirteen states of the Union. With the detail of his findings and with the impact of *The Shame of the Cities* upon contemporary opinion, we are not here concerned. But it was on the basis of this evidence that Steffens came to the conclusion that while the pattern of organization might vary in detail, the essential underlying structure was always the same.

Reduced to its basic elements, the system of government as it worked in practice could, according to Steffens, be described in the following terms. The people directly or indirectly elected their representatives, their executives, their legislators and judges. Once elected, however, the officeholders were responsible not to the people but to the *political* boss, an unofficial figure in control of the political machine who derived his power from the nonenforcement of the law at a substantial price to those who would profit by such dispensations. Nor did this exhaust the chain of command. The political boss was, in his turn, responsible to the *business* boss, whose function it was to serve business interests by selling important and lucrative franchises, judicial decisions, and tariffs to the railroads, the public utility companies and other privileged business. According to the Constitution of the United States, the American system of government was a political democracy, in which the representatives of the people were elected by them to act in their interests. Actually this was, he charged, simply an outward form by which powerful, privileged interests sought to serve their own ends.

The problem, stated in these terms, was not, as reformers like E. L. Godkin believed, simply a question of devising the means of checkmating the activities of grafters. Reform of the civil service, though in itself desirable, was no remedy. Such schemes implied that the problem was essentially a peripheral one occasioned by the perverse behavior of a minority of antisocial individuals who required a sharp lesson. What this superficial view overlooked was the universality and persistence of a malaise which argued a crisis in the moral standards of a society which had not had time to adjust to changed social and economic conditions. The moral sense of the people was alive to the stigma attached to personal sins of a character which anyone familiar with the Ten Commandments would at once recognize. It was not yet attuned to like abhorrence of social and political conduct the consequences of which were on a far larger and more disastrous scale; but they were indirect and hence indiscernible to human beings, avid by inclination and unimaginative by nature. To beat a child is cruelty; to stunt his growth by premature employment was often defended and practiced by otherwise humane men on the grounds of the sacredness of the natural right to freedom of contract. To rifle your neighbor's till is theft; to water stock could be, and was, defended as priming the economic pump. The situation was almost exactly paralleled by a corresponding cultural lag in Britain of the thirties and forties of the last century, when the social conscience had not yet been fully aroused to the random onslaught of the Industrial Revolution. Steffens was not alone in obtaining such insights, in seeing beyond the comfortable superficialities of the analysis of men like Godkin, Eliot, or even Theodore Roosevelt. Henry Demarest Lloyd, Lester Ward, E. A. Ross, Thorstein Veblen, to cite only the more distinguished, were shrewd enough in their diagnosis; but none rivaled Steffens in vividness of presentation of the problem. The impact of Steffens is unforgettable because of the skill with which he pursues the autobiographical method. Identifying himself with the author, the reader feels Steffens' involvement and bewilderment as his own. Steffens' dilemma is the American people's dilemma, and as the back cloth broadens, it assumes the quality of all great art as it embraces no less than the problem of man himself. Steffens' suspense is at times strangely moving; and, as the pages of the *Autobiography* turn, we are conscious of a mounting excitement as he deals with the problem of evil and the source of the moral nature of man. Steffens' *Autobiography* will remain a part of the literature of the world because of the unblinking sincerity with which it probes, albeit on a much humbler plane, the problem which Dostoevski poses in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The simple solution of the reformers — that the crooks in government should be dismissed and replaced by men of honesty and integrity — Steffens rejected on two grounds. In the first place, his own experience

had convinced him of the ineffectiveness of reform. In New York City, and in Cincinnati, he had seen reform administrations elected on a wave of public indignation, only to watch their subsequent impotence or, alternatively, their replacement as a result of public apathy and the manipulation of the machine by the established boss. Moreover, he was not at all convinced that the people who most indignantly urged the exposure of corruption were really willing to pay the price of its elimination. Joseph W. Folk, prosecuting attorney in St. Louis, had shocked the machine by doing his duty, and the public had supported him. But as Folk proceeded to draw his net tighter, enthusiasm for reform rapidly diminished so that when he ran for governor he could not even have been elected mayor.

Secondly, Steffens scorned the reformist assumption that men were divisible into the upright and the crooked. For the so-called "crooks" he came to have a great respect. He once wrote to a friend that "since there was so much good in bad people, there must be some good in good people."³ From "good" men, he contended, little was to be hoped, because they tended to be tainted with self-righteousness, were often weak personalities, and were generally incapable of the intellectual honesty required to see through the gulf between their protective ideals and actual goals to which they were committed. The "bad" men, the bosses, on the other hand, the corrupt men on whose heads Steffens had brought down the wrath of an outraged public, these were strong men with no illusions, no cant. They were natural leaders whose talents and imagination had been prostituted by the needs and opportunities of a system which they had not created and which, for the most part, they did not question. Steffens, with his disarming honesty and freedom from pharisaical righteousness, won at once their respect and their trust. Witness his conversation with Iz Durham, the Philadelphia boss, where "as one artist to another," he shows the professional politician a cheaper and more effective way to control elections by using graft with minorities of both parties. And it was Durham who at the end of the interview posed the harassed, pathetic question, ". . . just what is it that I do that's so rotten wrong?"⁴ In Boston, where Steffens was invited by leading citizens to report on, diagnose, and prescribe a remedy for corrupt machine politics, he won the loyalty of the toughest boss in the city, Martin Lomasny, who together with his henchmen proceeded to discuss alternative possible solutions whereby their own methods might be outlawed. In short, the relevant distinctions between men lay not between the upright and the crooked, between good and bad, but between strong, imaginative men of vision and weak men; between, in Steffens' phraseology, "principals" and "heelers."

³ Ella Winter and Granville Hicks (eds.), *Letters of Lincoln Steffens* (2 vols.; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938), I, 299.

⁴ Steffens, *op. cit.*, p. 414.

In other words, it was not only futile to complain that human nature was what it was, it was also unintelligent. The shortcomings, such as they were, arose from the defective social environment. Political corruption was a symptom of a defective system. Tinkering with the works by substituting reformers for grafters was bound to be ineffective. Nor was it any use looking to small business as against big business, nor to labor as against the employers. One of the most scandalous administrations within Steffens' experience was the labor government of Abe Ruef in San Francisco. Witness, too, the experiment of his friend, E. A. Filene, the inveterate philanthropist, who pleaded in vain with his employees to use the constitutional powers he had given them to take over his business and manage it for themselves. Nor could the people, whom Bob LaFollette was deifying in Wisconsin, be appealed to as the saving force of incorruptibility. In Rhode Island, where one-eleventh of the people elected more than half the Senate, the voters were bought with cash at the polls. And there were no complaints. "Political corruption," Steffens repeats, "is not a matter of men or classes or education or character of any sort; it is a matter of pressure. Wherever the pressure is brought to bear, society and government cave in."⁵

As his horizons broadened with his studies of the internal conditions of the West European democracies, first as a news reporter and later as a free-lance investigator, he felt that his diagnosis of American political ills was capable of generalization. He became convinced that the malady afflicting his own society was symptomatic of a problem chronic to contemporary democratic, capitalist society as a whole. The problem was cultural rather than national in its dimensions. Of England, for example, he wrote in a letter from London in 1914, ". . . graft here is a vested interest; a reward of merit, and, sought by all, is highly respectable. England is on a lower stage of corruption than the U.S."⁶ With liberal solutions to the problem, such as MacDonaldisms in Britain or the idealist internationalism of Wilson in Europe, he did not attempt to hide his impatience. With the French he was more sympathetic, since they at least had the merit of not deluding themselves, of being honest enough not to conceal from themselves the dishonesties they daily practiced. The contrast between the French and American approaches to political realism, he sees sharply pointed in the clash of figures like Clemenceau and Wilson. The Tiger, sensing that Wilson was not prepared to implement the implications of his anti-imperialist internationalism, waxed, Steffens felt, justifiably cynical at the expense of Wilson's self-deluding sincerity.

⁵ Steffens, *op. cit.*, p. 469.

⁶ Winter and Hicks, *op. cit.*, I, 340.

So Steffens comes back, as always, to his belief that intellectual integrity as opposed to "morality" is the first step towards emancipation from the consequences of corruption in the domestic sphere and of imperialism in the international domain. So long as people cling to a protective shell of idealism, so long will their morality serve as a cloak to conceal the truth concerning the gulf that exists between mythical ideals and actuality. In this he does but echo the great Bishop Butler, who wrote: "Things and actions are what they are, and their consequences will be what they will be; why then should we seek to be deceived?" Nothing could be achieved without self-knowledge. To confront the problem in terms of conventional moral categories was like trying to stem the floodwaters of Niagara with one's fist. It was to ignore the universality of the pressures undermining the social potentialities of man within all existing societies. "Neither in this, nor in prostitution generally, nor in the strikes," he wrote, "is there any right — or wrong. . . . It was, it is, all a struggle between conflicting interests, between two blind opposite sides, neither of which is right or wrong."⁷ Elsewhere he deplores the fact that people in general still react to the frustration of their hopes by asking not *what*, but *who* is responsible for war, crime, poverty, or corruption. The attempt to fasten on personal guilt not only arouses destructive emotions, but serves to conceal the real, impersonal causal factors. When asked by a Boston Brahmin, troubled by a sense of guilt stemming from his inheritance of a number of brothel properties, whether he should salve his conscience by selling out, Steffens, with a characteristically Shavian explanation, advised against it. "In the first place, I argued, it would put some other good man into that bad business; and in the second, it would deprive him, the present owner, of the value to him of the consciousness that he was what we all are unconsciously, in on the evils we abhor."⁸

There is, however, a major difficulty — an inescapable one for Steffens — in this position. He is, as he himself confesses, unable to practice what he preaches. He does not have the courage of his own logic, for there is a fundamental confusion at the back of his mind. It is all very well to say that "even bad things were only good, natural forces uncurbed, undirected. There was, indeed, no good and no evil, and . . . we were led astray by the use of ethical terms to characterize physical and economic forces which are neither good nor bad, but just forces."⁹ The erosion of moral values, implicit in this, soon becomes explicit in the form, "it's all right to do wrong, if you know it's wrong."¹⁰ And on the basis of this precept, he advises some businessmen in Mexico City, who are troubled enough in

⁷ Steffens, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

⁹ Winter and Hicks, *op. cit.*, I, 299.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 368.

conscience to seek his advice, to go ahead in their project of entering a spurious oil company. But when asked to join them, he refuses, affirming that he does not practice what he preaches, because his vanity requires that he remain the only honest man in the world. But the quip does not conceal from himself the poverty of the answer. "I wish," he says, "I could understand it all myself." Steffens' was far too candid a mind to be unaware of the inconsistency in his position. "I have some perceptions that are clear," he wrote to his sister in 1919, "but I notice contradiction in my conversations. Others don't; I can put my ideas over on men, but myself I cannot fool."¹¹

The position from which Steffens is seeking to disentangle himself is admirably illustrated by Mark Twain's story, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." A stranger, passing through Hadleyburg, a town renowned for its pride in its probity, receives an offense and determines to avenge himself by setting a trap to test the honesty of its nineteen leading citizens. To the public humiliation of Hadleyburg, all are found wanting except one, who is duly feted as the one honest man in the town. He, in fact, turns out to be doubly guilty, since he not only knew his guilt but kept silent when it seemed safe to do so. Superficially, this diagnosis may appear to run parallel to Steffens' conviction that corruption is universal. But for Mark Twain, the problem of Hadleyburg was the problem of evil, incarnate in the nature of man; whereas for Steffens the problem was one of handling natural forces that had been perverted by men to accomplish narrow ends incompatible with their broader aspirations. Yet Steffens cannot escape the moralist in himself. He attempts to found a rational system of values on the basis of natural laws operating in human societies. In a letter to his brother-in-law he writes, "Our purposes and Nature's get crossed; our ethics run counter to her physical laws, and so our bubbles break. But my interest now is to find out her ways, not mine, and more and more I want what she wants. Nor is this reverence or religion. It's the scientific spirit."¹²

Steffens was a keen amateur student of psychology; in his youth he had studied under Wundt at Leipzig. "The laboratory where we sought the facts and measured them by machinery was a graveyard where the old idealism walked as a dreadful ghost and philosophical thinking was a sin."¹³ His studies, confirmed by his practical experience, left him with the belief that the character of the individual was the product of hereditary and early environmental factors. Whence he concluded that no one was logically entitled to pass judgment upon his fellows—a view which coincided with the moral insights of many of the greatest religious prophets

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, 477.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 348.

¹³ Steffens, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

and philosophers. Asked on one occasion if he were an anarchist, he replied, "Oh, I am worse than that. . . . I believe in Christianity."¹⁴ The most effective short story he ever wrote was entitled "The Least of These" (*Everybody's*, January, 1909), of which he wrote, "Not only my mind, the whole of me went into the writing of it." It is a true account of the love inspired among prison down-and-outs by the service of a man who, by virtue of his inability to conquer his own moral vice and his resultant humility, was able to succeed with the moral outcasts of society when everyone else had failed. In the McNamara case in Los Angeles, when the McNamara brothers were being tried for dynamiting the *Times* building on October 1, 1910, Steffens was instrumental in persuading the defense counsel, Clarence Darrow, to advise the defendants to plead guilty. His object was to cut the ground from under the feet of society's demand for retribution, to obtain understanding of the social pressures that had driven men like the McNamaras to arson and resultant bloodshed, and through understanding to obtain leniency and the redress of the workers' grievances. It was a conscious experiment in what he termed the Golden Rule, and its failure in this instance left a scar on his conscience as long as the younger McNamara's imprisonment.

The difficulty lies in defining these values in naturalistic terms. To suppose, as Steffens did, that they can be established as deductions from the empirical findings of modern psychology is to be guilty of an elementary error in logic. Steffens came closer than many to practicing the Christian ethic. "Mr. Steffens Liked Everybody" was the shrewdly ironic title of an article by Michael Gold in *New Masses* (June, 1931), on Steffens' philosophy. But his Christian ethic was derived from no theology, no revelation, no authority. It was a scientifically grounded ethic, he claimed, an ethic that lay "beyond good and evil." Now this is not altogether nonsensical, but it is certainly confused, as he himself realized. Even if we grant the radical hypothesis concerning the determinism of human behavior, it does not follow that we should refrain from passing judgment on our fellows unless we assume an ethic of intention, as opposed to an ethic of consequence. Yet Steffens sometimes argues that men are justified in dishonesty provided that they are conscious of what they are doing, since self-realism is the first pragmatic step to the elimination of the conditions which occasion the dishonesty.

What Steffens is really trying to say is that while we must appraise in terms of social values the social consequences of the acts of individuals, it is "unjust" to condemn one's fellows for acts for which they bear at most only a partial responsibility. But this is to beg the question. In emancipating himself from the shackles of a morality which he rightly perceived to be

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 700.

inadequate in the face of problems created by an expanding industrial society, he yet never succeeded in reconstructing a valid ethic. Steffens nowhere demonstrated that he was aware that the source of our moral values lies in our capacity to recognize that we are by virtue of our existing psychophysical structure "political animals," and, as such, members one of another. But he was quick to recognize that where love is, vengeance is impossible and of forgiveness there is no need. Mr. Steffens liked everybody: fully aware of his own moral deficiencies, he felt no need to be censorious about those of others. Having no use for moral indignation or any form of righteousness, his emotional energies were free to back his relentless urge to satisfy his curiosity concerning human beings and their mutual relations.

His moralism, in constant conflict with his amorality, sometimes led him into an inadequate realization of the means-ends relationship with consequent misjudgments in the field of politics. Realistic enough to be able to see that Theodore Roosevelt's "trust-busting" was a strategic defense of the status quo, or that Wilson's internationalism was in the strict sense utopian, he finally came to such despair of all liberal remedies that he was prepared to see the possible hand of progress even in Mussolini's Fascist revolution, and in the trust-merging activities of the German industrialist, Hugo Stinnes. To be sure, he himself had no liking for this type of development, but he thought that it might be exploited to good effect, if men sought to understand what was happening, instead of permitting emotional hostility to substitute for rational understanding. "I agree with you," he wrote to a friend in 1925, "that a dictatorship like Mussolini's is bad, but it is neither backward nor forward. . . . The thing to do then is not to judge it, not to say it is good or bad, but, foreseeing that it will occur, be ready to use or to be it."¹⁵

The Russian Bolshevik revolution, of which he saw something at first hand, he readily welcomed, and towards the end of his life, while far too inveterate an individualist ever to be tempted to join the Communist party, he clung more firmly than ever to the belief that in Russia lay the main hope for a threatened civilization. He it was who coined the famous aphorism, "I have looked into the future and it works." And yet the irony of it is that he not only remained a liberal to the end but he had no illusions as to the nature of the methods being employed by the Bolsheviks. He was a liberal as far as ends were concerned, but believed that liberalism had given ample demonstration of its futility as a means to realizing those ends. In a letter to his nephew in 1920, he wrote, "But there must be liberalism. The English have it in its finest form. The Socialists haven't it at all, and they will need it most of all, as Russia shows."¹⁶ Determined

¹⁵ Winter and Hicks, *op. cit.*, II, 692-93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 536.

not to sit in judgment on social processes, which he sought merely to understand in order to exert some measure of control, he was blinded to the fact that illiberal means do not, in view of historical experience, succeed in realizing liberal ends. To get impatient with the ineffectiveness and weaknesses of liberals may be understandable enough; but such impatience does not justify resort to men and movements whose strength has been purchased by authoritarianism and intolerance. The weakness in Steffens' political judgment arose directly from his confusion on the moral issue, from his failure to resolve the conflict between his tough-minded realism and the profound idealism from which he never escaped.

This was a conflict of tragic proportions, for it was not personal to Steffens. It is his claim to greatness that he never lacked the courage that is required of an essentially catholic mind determined upon complete intellectual integrity; and in the resulting mental conflict he reflected more sharply than many of his more distinguished contemporaries the dilemma of his generation. He was not a disciplined, systematic thinker, but he set a fine example by independence and intolerance of half-truths. Standing at the watershed where the comfortable optimism of the nineteenth century met the onset of a sudden vast increase both in wealth and in knowledge that it was ill-equipped to assimilate, Steffens realized the urgency of the need to re-examine the premises on which the attitudes of the old society were founded. His principal error lay in a tendency to exaggerate the role of power in human affairs and a corresponding liability to underestimate the long-term influence of emotions and good intentions, which if not always rational, are fortified by the strength of tradition. In his reluctance to place much faith in the deep-seated wisdom of common men, given access to the evidence on which to form a judgment, he perhaps reflected the impatience natural to a people whose memories of the struggle to wrest civilization from an untamed continent are still fresh. In his rationalism, his optimism, his determination to make his moral values reflect some intellectual order, he was a typical child of the European enlightenment and of the American nation. In his willingness to countenance the exposure of himself and his kind to the slings and arrows of enemies as well as friends, because he found intellectually intolerable the gulf which reached between ideas and ideals, he was, perhaps, uniquely American. "I would like," he wrote towards the end, "to spend the evening of my life watching the morning of a new world." And in this he must speak for all men who have fought for human values in this twentieth century.