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MUCKRAKING LINCOLN STEFFENS

By STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

SO ferocious was the reputation of the warriors who swept out of the steppes in the 13th century that the appearance of a single Mongol horseman at the gates of a city might be enough to compel its surrender.

In the early 20th century, a lone journalist could, by his very presence, induce American cities to submit as well. Their leading inhabitants disclosed to him their clandestine mingling of business and political affairs, their techniques for corrupting the polling booth and courthouse and police station. So awesome did the journalist's fame become that civic organizations begged him to document their shame, to publicize their failures of democracy. Then he went on to muckrake the states, and then to study the Federal government, and then to witness revolutions in Mexico and Russia. In 1931, in *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*, he muckraked himself and produced a classic of American letters.

In a republic whose Declaration of Independence had professed "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," Steffens raised the sights of our journalism even as he dragged his rake. Walter Lippmann and John Reed were among his protégés, and William Randolph Hearst called him the best interviewer he ever met. Herbert Bayard Swope of the *New York World* "looked up to him as a demi-god," and Max Eastman of the *Masses* considered him "a very brilliant and boldly inquiring reporter." President Theodore Roosevelt even wrote a card addressed "To any officer of or employee of the Government: Please tell Mr. Lincoln Steffens anything whatever about the running of the government that you know (not incompatible with the public interests) and provided

only that you tell him the truth—no matter what it may be—I will see that you are not hurt.” In 1905, when reform candidates were elected throughout the country, a future Chief Justice, Harlan Fiske Stone, wrote the journalist: “You more than any other one man may take credit for the result of the elections wherever ‘boss or no boss rule’ was the issue.” His *Autobiography*, Granville Hicks recalled two decades after its publication, was “possibly the most influential book of the 1930’s.” Another endorsement came from Edmund Wilson, who discerned in Steffens “a philosophical point of view which few newspapermen have.”

Indeed, he presented himself as more than a reporter. Steffens wished to be the journalist as thinker, propelling himself beyond the modest tradition that began with the testament of “Benjamin Franklin, printer” and that included the unpretentious newspaper days that marked H. L. Mencken’s early recollections. The *Autobiography* records the hunches he stretched into hypotheses, the generalizations he tested and discarded, the attempts to delineate a system. To be sure, Steffens shared the trade’s hunger for facts, yet he was not appeased by nothing-but-the-facts. He traced the pattern of events; building upon his initial exposure of municipal corruption, he sketched the interlocking relations between business and government and then plotted the grand coordinates of history. Conversing with the boss of Philadelphia’s political machine, for example, Steffens provided Israel Durham with “a philosophic view of politics, an objective look at himself and his business,” as though a symposium had been conducted. Though some of Steffens’s acquaintances, like Sherwood Anderson, detected in him “a queer trickiness of thought,” historians and biographers have generally taken him at his own evaluation, from Louis Filler’s standard *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (1950) down to Justin Kaplan’s highly informative *Lincoln Steffens* (1974). As a result, the political ideas that affected two generations of American liberals and radicals have rarely been placed between the cross-hairs of critical analysis.

Steffens was an elusive figure to size up and too ambiguous a writer to pin down, for he came upon his contemporaries from odd and unexpected angles. Named after the 16th President the year after the assassination, he was born and died in California; he witnessed the passing of the frontier and reported on the formation of an urban nation. Though a supremely American figure, he looked like a Russian, according to William Bullitt, who accompanied him on a secret mission to Moscow in 1919. In the coarse ambience of the New York press at the turn of the century, Steffens was a cultivated gentleman, a dude in British clothing who had studied at Berkeley, Heidelberg, Leipzig, and the Sorbonne. Backroom politicians were later surprised to be interviewed by a sort of bohemian, a self-proclaimed "artist." As a cub reporter in New York, he considered himself "almost a Jew," nailing a *mezzuzah* on his office door, fasting and attending High Holy Day services in East Side synagogues. Yet Steffens became a heterodox born-again Christian, re-reading the Gospels (this time "as news") and once adopting "Christian" as his pseudonymous byline. Professionally committed to "letting the light in," he hoped to keep secret his engagement to one woman (Gussie Burgess), his marriage to a second (Josephine Bontecou), and his divorce from a third (Ella Winter, to whom his *Autobiography* is dedicated).

II

Particularly bemusing was his radicalism, which flowed from a style of living that was hardly plebeian. The tips he picked up covering Wall Street served him very well as an investor of funds from several inheritances. Without breaking stride, Steffens went from Greenwich Village, where he imbibed radical egalitarianism from Wobblies, to his Greenwich, Connecticut country home and servants. And when he sold his house to the chairman of the board of General Electric, he moved to a villa on the Italian Riviera, complete with cook, maid, and gardener. Of course the canons of respectability

then required a servant class; even Karl Marx, pleading for money from Engels, had proved how desperately impoverished his household was by complaining that the two servants were reduced to eating a few potatoes.

But the Bolshevik revolution had presumably raised the ante of radicalism, issuing a stern challenge to bourgeois comfort. It did not inspire confidence in Steffens's sincerity that his 1932 appeal to support the Communist ticket and platform came after intending to pre-enroll his son at Groton. Nowhere is it stipulated that radicals must be insolvent, but the credibility of Communist sympathies is not enhanced by such attachment to privilege. He could exalt the patient dedication of a young Bolshevik militant like Whittaker Chambers, and he could foresee a future that excluded democratic capitalism. But he refused to live in the Soviet Union, although he considered expatriation when the comrades—knowing their man—hinted at first-class accommodations. Another ardent fellow-traveller, Lion Feuchtwanger, was once asked why he didn't move to the country he praised so regularly; and the novelist replied, "What do you think I am—a fool?"

Steffens was no fool either; and it might be argued that he was not even a hypocrite, for he felt his background in the old order disqualified him for utopia. He was reminded of Moses, alert enough to see but too old (and ill-prepared) to enter the promised land. An uncritical supporter of Soviet policy, Steffens could not bring himself to join the party that most unswervingly supported its aims. He thus pleaded guilty before the bar of history: he could welcome the revolution but not help make it. But confession is always appreciated and can draw attention from more grievous faults, as Steffens himself once cannily advised Theodore Roosevelt; and *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* deserves a fresh reading with that cue in mind. For its author is vulnerable to a different indictment: Steffens, for all the ideas that teemed from his head, was incapable of clear and precise thought. A devilishly smooth interviewing technique and a repertoire of ready

paradoxes have disguised a flaccidity of mind most characteristically shown in his desire to have things both—or all—ways. Indiscriminate in his susceptibilities, Steffens cheerfully acknowledged that he liked to change his mind. But his flexibility was not primarily a gift for adapting to altered circumstances, a receptivity to signals from the *Zeitgeist*, for his writings need not be analyzed diachronically. On the contrary, his inconsistent ideas were espoused concurrently; and his reputation for complexity should be seen as a mask for confusion. Pretending to dissolve opposites, he avoided discriminations and choices. To apply a phrase Steffens might have heard translated for him on the East Side, he wanted to dance at all the weddings.

The standard version of his career makes Steffens a journalistic palladin of the Age of Reform, and it is not inaccurate. The Progressive mind was, according to Richard Hofstadter, essentially journalistic, with reality veiled behind the smoke of backrooms and likely to be more sordid and conspiratorial than democratic idealism might suggest. Politics was not what was projected from rostrums but what went on behind keyholes; and it was the obligation of reformers—"the best men"—to ventilate these smoke-filled rooms, to widen popular knowledge and participation in civic affairs. As a muckraker, Steffens indeed admired Robert La Follette of Wisconsin and Mayor Tom Johnson of Cleveland. He praised their administrative innovations and sophistication, their rectitude and energy, their promise to abrogate privilege, their devotion to the common weal, and their effort to promote representative government. The favorable article Steffens wrote on La Follette in 1904 "was like the decision of a court of last resort," the triumphant governor told him.

But Steffens also admired the Progressives' enemies and wrote with genuine affection about the bosses—Durham of Philadelphia, Richard Croker of Tammany Hall, George Cox of Cincinnati, Abe Ruef of San Francisco, Martin Lomasney of Boston's Ninth Ward. He relished the companionship of the men who ran the big city machines, but that is not

surprising: most of those who had dealings with these politicians could not help but like them. But Steffens also trusted them, and his reminiscences neither criticize the frauds they perpetrated nor trace how they dishonored the ideals of public service. One explanation is that they had power, for Steffens gravitated toward strength, toward “principals” rather than “heelers.” He went into a city to meet its masters, and even his imprimatur of La Follette characterized him as “a dictator dictating democracy.” His strategy was not only to shame the cities but to name the rascals who ran them; yet since they were practical, effective, and prepossessing, Steffens raised no principled objections to their rule. He would have appreciated the last of their breed, the late Richard Daley of Chicago, whom Adlai Stevenson III, running as a reformer for the Senate, labeled a “feudal chief.” Later, after Stevenson worked amicably enough with the Cook County machine and was asked about his campaign charge, he denied ever calling Daley a *bad* feudal chief. Steffens would have liked that disclaimer too.

A second reason for authorial admiration of the bosses is that they were candid about their corruption, untainted by the righteousness that afflicted reformers. So repellent did Steffens find the moralism of “the best men” that he exaggerated the attractiveness of immorality; the more corrupt the politician, the more lavish Steffens’s affection. He told Boston reformers in 1915 that “the leading grafters themselves should be the leaders in this ‘reform movement.’” Misreading history in a manner that was barely corrigible, he added that “good people and the best men had been tried all through the world’s history and especially in Boston; and they had failed. . . . Let’s give up the good men and try the strong men.” He also recognized the claim of a resident of Folsom Prison that the most hardened criminals should be the first released, because their promise to keep parole could be trusted. This descent into the penology of the absurd suggests how eagerly Steffens wished to shock his readers by playing the Good Bad Boy. It is almost as though he intended his book

to extend the American tradition of criminal confessions, which until the mid-19th century were the most popular autobiographies after religious narratives. Philadelphia's boss Durham especially endeared himself to Steffens by calling him "a born crook that's gone straight." But the old pol's remark was hardly perceptive, since the cultured son of a wealthy businessman had no need for the security of status that ex-cons proverbially long for. Steffens wanted privilege without respectability; reformers valued respectability while attacking privilege. He was sometimes with them but not much like them.

His opinion of the bosses was complicated but intelligible; his attitude toward businessmen was simply inconsistent. Steffens shared the Progressive presumption that whenever rich representatives of private interests courted public officials, it usually wasn't Dutch treat. But he blamed bribery on favor-seeking businessmen rather than on the grafters themselves; for Steffens it was more blessed to receive than to give. *The Shame of the Cities* (1904) is a corroborating document for Arthur Schlesinger's view of American history as a combat zone between liberals and commerce, which is "the spirit of profit, not patriotism; of credit, not honor; of individual gain, not national prosperity; of trade and dickering, not principle." Steffens concluded that "the typical business man is a bad citizen." In a manuscript probably written in 1934 but not published till 1937, a year after his death, Steffens recalled that by the turn of the century, "the rule I adopted was to find out what and whom the 'good businessmen' were against, and stand for that. For I had learned that business was back of every party, gang, graft, crime, and 'evil' in our civilization. Every crook in politics was their man, every reformer of character and power was their enemy. So I learned to trust where they distrusted."

This "rule" positing a monolithic business community unerringly pursuing its own interests collided with Steffens's own experience and contradicted other views he expressed. In 1906, when that rule should have been fresh in his mind, he

apparently voted for Hearst for governor of New York over the scourge of the life insurance industry, Charles Evans Hughes. He ignored Tom Johnson, a street railway magnate, and Charles R. Crane, the plumbing fixtures millionaire who was La Follette's financial angel and who invited Steffens into Russia in 1917. He apparently forgot Edward A. Filene, the eccentric merchant prince who saved Steffens's Carmel home in 1935. The *Autobiography* treats J. P. Morgan ("the boss of all the bosses") and Elbert Gary of U. S. Steel without rancor and praises Henry Ford as "the industrial leader in a land of industrial pioneering . . . a prophet without words, a reformer without politics, a legislator, a statesman—a radical."

The rule Steffens claimed to have adopted was jettisoned in the 1920's, the decade when Allan Benson, the anti-war Socialist candidate for President in 1916, published a favorable biography of Ford; when Ida Tarbell, who remembered Steffens as the "most brilliant" of her colleagues on *McClure's Magazine*, produced a sympathetic study of Judge Gary, and when Bruce Barton's best-selling *The Man Nobody Knows* depicted Jesus as a go-getter going about His Father's business. Sinclair Lewis later claimed that the eponymous hero of *Babbitt* was intended to be a likeable character. And when Al Capone moved from Cicero to Miami, he tried to join the Rotary Club; perhaps he too really liked George Babbitt. To boost America was to mean business; and Steffens was also swept into the national mood, insisting that the proper "distribution of wealth was within sight in my amazing country."

III

Even though he was less hostile to big business as a "revolutionist" than he had been as a reformer, his stance in the twenties was hardly consistent. Steffens repudiated his earlier opposition to businessmen in politics and called government just another business, which wasn't so bad after all. Advocating more businessmen in control in Washington, he also apparently read Thorstein Veblen and called for the removal

of businessmen from the boardroom. He hoped that managers devoted to production would replace investors hungry for profits; and he welcomed the administration of Herbert Hoover without understanding his Presidency as Veblen gone haywire—an engineer trying to save the price system. Steffens believed that Hoover would strengthen the polity by unifying its economic and political purposes. On the other hand he predicted failure for Hoover—and that was good too, since the worse the crisis of capitalism, the better the chances for revolution.

Steffens was so adept at the reconciliation of opposites that he formulated what Sovietologists call the convergence theory. Knowing how much Russian leaders marvelled at “Fordism,” Steffens speculated that “the United States of America, which the Russians recognize as their chief rival, is, however unconsciously, moving with mighty momentum on a course which seems not unlikely to carry our managing, investing, ruling masters of industry, politics, and art—by our blind method of trial and error—in the opposite direction around the world to the very same meeting place. . . .” It was typical of him to assert that “Bolshevik Russia and the mass machine-making United States were more alike, essentially and politically, than any two countries I have seen.” Fascinated by technique, he separated the ideal of efficiency from other questions of value, which he assumed were decisively shaped by impersonal economic forces anyway. Returning from Russia in 1919, he compressed American pragmatism and American optimism into his one memorable line, though he had been polishing “I have seen the future and it works” even before entering the future from Sweden. Such theorizing simply dismissed facts; but in a way it did not matter, since the privately-owned American industries were working too. The *Autobiography* quotes Ella Winter with approval: America “has what the socialists in Europe have always said they wanted, and more.”

Fascination with how the present works also drew Steffens toward the machine politicians, who opened up to him be-

cause he neither preached nor accused. He shared an interest in their craft, presenting himself (in David Riesman's distinction) not as an indignant but as an inside-dopester. He showed Durham, for example, how Philadelphia's techniques for buying voters and legislators were less proficient than the system elsewhere. The boss then "wanted to know how it was worked out in detail . . . I became enthusiastic. . . . To Durham, a politician, the methods elsewhere were fascinating, and forgetting his use for them, I talked on like an enthusiast to a willing listener, as one artist to another." And so Steffens continued, encouraged in the belief that he had what it took to catch a thief.

He was a hard-boiled egghead who stressed the disparity of effect between the intellectual and the man of action. Regarding his own academic training as top-heavy, Steffens had contemplated entitling his autobiography *A Life of Unlearning*. He envied bold, practical men like Ford. Kerensky was an intellectual; Lenin was not, and therefore triumphed. D'Annunzio was an intellectual—and got as far as Fiume; Mussolini was not an intellectual—and marched on Rome. He who can, does; he who cannot, interviews—preferably a "romantic figure" like Il Duce (Steffens knew everybody). Mussolini dumbfounded the journalist by telling him that he had learned nothing from the war and its aftermath, for only action mattered. The "divine Dictator" proved, apparently to Steffens's satisfaction, that the world could be changed by subverting theories, just as Einstein told Steffens in Berlin that the world could be better understood "by challenging an axiom." The *Autobiography* concludes with the credo that "as for the world in general, all that was or is or ever will be wrong with that is my—our thinking about it." Perhaps an echo was intended of Marx's injunction to change the world instead of describing it. If so, it is hard to accept such advice from Steffens, whose claim to preeminence among journalists lay in his flair for propounding axioms.

As a muckraker he found "something wrong with our ideals"; and he suspected that "morality, democracy, hon-

esty, individual achievement . . . won't take us very far." But Steffens himself made little measurable advance in envisioning what might replace these ideals. The *Autobiography*—itself an individual achievement in whose popularity Steffens took pride—chastises Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Mexico's Venustiano Carranza for having "no economics"; but his own economics, apart from his belief in the inevitability of collectivism, was hardly crystalline. In his "life of unlearning," he became a baccalaureate of the Bolshevik revolution—but got no further. Steffens had a cause but not a case that was astringently reasoned, a faith but not a sensible and internally consistent justification for it, an image of a workable future but not a vocabulary exact enough to prevent collapse upon inspection. He neither specified the meaning of those elastic terms like democracy, honesty, or morality, nor did he reflect upon the substitution of other values.

Steffens was scarcely a democrat, if the term refers to an advocate of maximal participation in the affairs of state. He showed no genuine sympathy for the common people, nor did he identify himself with their fate. His support of the bosses was not due to their popularity but to their power, and he was more interested in how cities might be run than in how the masses might be represented. He neither savored the flesh-pressing, crowd-pleasing instincts of the bosses, nor did he criticize those Progressives whose views narrowly reflected the class interests of the well-born. Such inoculation against the infectious spirit of democracy differentiated Steffens from most of his fellow citizens.

While he did not ordinarily call himself a democrat, he often described himself as a liberal, a term the *Autobiography* deprecates. The effort to determine what Steffens meant by "liberal" is not rewarding, however. He was less interested in validating the claims of liberalism or in revitalizing its traditions than he was in venting his disenchantment and his frustration with its failures. Before a California audience in 1933, his semantic confusion (and his activist fervor) bubbled quickly to the surface: "I am introduced to you as a tired

liberal. I am not a liberal, but I am tired . . . of liberalism. I mean that I am tired of this open-mindedness, this willingness to consider the facts of history and of the present and the next thousand years. We haven't got a thousand years. I think as a liberal [*sic*] that we have come to the time when we must stop thinking and decide and do it." But if liberals differed from Communists in their hesitation to board the locomotive of history, then it made no sense three years later (in *Soviet Russia Today*) to call Lenin "that liberal among the Communists . . . one of the greatest of the liberals . . . who knew that there was a time for everything."

But if a liberal is defined as a champion of freedom within the rule of law, either in seeking to maximize private economic rights or in defending civil rights and liberties, especially of the underprivileged, then Lincoln Steffens was not a liberal. Claiming to be "tired of this open-mindedness," he in fact exuded the receptivity and tolerance associated with the liberal temper. But he also had a most-favored-nation policy, minimizing the importance of civil and political rights in the Soviet Union while condemning the violation of those rights in the United States. He was satisfied with Lenin's assurance that liberty in Russia would require "two or three generations" but was impatient with the pace of economic justice in America ("we haven't got a thousand years"). After the Communist revolution failed in Hungary in 1919, Steffens blamed its failure on Bela Kun's refusal to unleash the red terror. He also justified the Soviet purges that began with the Kirov murder in 1934, though Steffens did not live long enough to gauge the full cost of the Stalinist *Walpurgisnacht*. He replied to criticism of Soviet tyranny by pointing to American workers, "a whole class that haven't [got] liberty." Consistency would have required condemnation of terror in both the United States and the Soviet Union, but Steffens was as selective in his "liberalism" as he was in his reserves of patience. He thus exemplified what Sidney Hook called "totalitarian liberalism," which combined leftism on domestic issues with subservience to Russian policy and propaganda.

Further evidence of his repudiation of the ideal of liberty as “false, a hangover from our Western tyranny” can be found in his ambivalent treatment of Italian fascism. Steffens granted that the divine dictator “abolished free speech, free thought, free assembly, a free press.” But even though fascism was highly oppressive, it was, like Bolshevism, alleviating economic insecurity. Having resided in Italy during much of the twenties, Steffens recalled the “bracing sight” of “young black shirts walking through the streets, into an inn, or down the aisle of a railroad train, heads up, shoulders back, in command of the world.” Against such assured force, thought was impotent; and Steffens, who had earlier been sickened by the bloodied skulls of strikers in New York, raised no fundamental objections to a police state abroad.

IV

For all his insistence that honesty was as limited in value as democracy, “the moral advantage of self-awareness” was one of the few ideals he held with any constancy and tenacity. If only for professional reasons, Steffens appreciated candor; but honesty defined as the absence of boodling held no appeal. Instead he cherished the freedom from illusion based on obedience to the Delphic injection. He told an unconvinced Harvard president, Charles W. Eliot, that students should not become crooks inadvertently: “Intelligence is what I am aiming at, not honesty.” The emotional center of the *Autobiography* is therefore the chapter in which the author muckraked himself. Having given the idea for an article on a labor union scandal to a *McClure's* colleague, Ray Stannard Baker, Steffens found his own reporting overshadowed; and Josephine Steffens objected to her husband's excessive generosity. He replied that “it didn't matter who wrote the article”; besides, Baker would remember to whom credit was due. His wife suspected otherwise. “She invited him to dinner,” Steffens recalled, “and asked him how he came to write that article. He told her the genesis of it, with no mention of me! She won,

smiled, and I felt—yellow. . . . My wife, who had presence of mind, knew me better than I knew myself; and all she had to do was to scratch the surface and there it was: envy, jealousy, and all the rest.” He resolved henceforth “to be intelligent, rather than good,” fearing the supreme humiliation of being taken for a sucker (and, trusting foresight rather than conscience, became a dupe instead).

Steffens never explained why being right is incompatible with doing right. He never discerned self-knowledge in anyone but crooks and bosses, whose minds were uncluttered by cant. Only the old pols are presented in the *Autobiography* as unfettered by illusion, their roguish charm enhanced by their willingness to tell the truth (except under oath). Steffens felt compelled to exalt political and business behavior only when, like Mae West’s diamond, goodness had nothing to do with it. The result was, once again, baffling. Part of the difficulty is semantic, since the repudiation of moralism does not in ordinary discourse extinguish moral categories. For example, when Steffens proposed a substitute for the system that necessitated corruption, he asked his readers to imagine “an environment in which men would be tempted to be good.” And when he underscored the value of “self-awareness,” he was obliged to define it as a “moral advantage.” Nor does the advocacy of clarity in itself answer the riddles of ethics. Clarity about what, if not ultimately about what human beings should desire and emulate? To fathom one’s own character does not thereby silence the claims of conscience or resolve problems of conduct that are inescapably framed in the language of morality.

Steffens’s attack on morality also collided with his acceptance of Christianity. In the wake of the dynamiting of the Los Angeles *Times* building in 1910, he became a star witness in one of the subsequent trials, during which the prosecuting attorney asked if Steffens were not “an avowed anarchist.” It so happened that the journalist did consider himself an anarchist, a label which, with characteristic insouciance, he pinned on anyone disrespectful of the judicial system. But he

told his interrogator that he was "worse than that . . . I believe in Christianity." The witness explained that he was "a muckraker, and I tell you that things are so bad in this world that justice won't fix them. It's too late for that. I believe that nothing but love will do the job. That's Christianity. That's the teaching that we must love our neighbors." In an atmosphere of deeply troubled labor relations, Steffens played the picaresque saint, calling not for justice but for mercy, which he considered "scientific, as Christianity is." The conclusion of its most dedicated adherents that Christianity makes exorbitant demands upon humanity did not occur to Steffens, for whom the goods of this world were all interchangeable. Nor did he quite explain how the punishable sin could be completely separated from the absolved sinner. "The doctrine of forgiveness instead of punishment for the sinner," he asserted, "is sound, scientific, and—it is natural."

It would be just as natural to wonder why Steffens did not urge upon Bolsheviks the doctrine of forgiveness but called for a reign of terror instead. The salient issue here is not only the discrepancies that can be located in anyone's life and thought; what is remarkable is Steffens's habitual failure to make the discriminations essential to intelligible discourse. He defied plausibility, if not the Aristotelian law of identity, in making Christianity and communism synonymous. "I believe that nothing but love will do the job," he announced from the witness stand in Los Angeles. After visiting Russia he believed that "only revolution could do the job"—but nowhere does the *Autobiography* suggest that the earlier view was abandoned. "The Acts of the Apostles showed them practicing Communists!—as if . . . they could not practice Christianity under the system; they could not love one another under our intense competition." (Never mind that Steffens admired the scientific resourcefulness he claimed was common to both industrial capitalism and primitive Christianity.) Jesus "had evidently tried not only to preach Christianity, but proposed also a scheme to make it possible!" Best of all, like the future, "it worked."

This was the pragmatist's ultimate accolade. But since Steffens argued that the municipal machines and the capitalist enterprises also worked, the advantages of Christianity/communism in this context become less impressive. He eventually chose the Bolsheviks over the bosses because they looked like winners—and in the world of Lincoln Steffens, nice guys never finished last. A year after Lenin's seizure of power, an article signed "Christian" reported that "the revolution in Russia is to establish the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth, now; in order that Christ may come soon; and coming, reign forever. Forever and ever, everywhere." The contributor to the *Nation* seemed only dimly aware of the practical difficulties in reconciling the brotherhood of man with the dictatorship of the proletariat; but insofar as he made a choice, he preferred to be cruel in order to be kind. A revolutionary situation, he wrote in 1933, imposes a dilemma "whether to be nice socialists or—socialists." Since the Apostles were really Communists, Steffens reasoned that the Communists were really up-to-date Apostles; and armed with this exculpation, it was easy to be hard.

"Nothing that I used to think," he wrote in 1926, "could stand in the face of that Russian experience." Consistent support of the Soviet Union did not sharpen his thinking; instead, during the Great Depression, it only widened his influence. His certitudes, which terminated the doubts of young leftists like Granville Hicks "like a blast of machine gun fire," cloaked a restless, table-hopping mind. But neither the perverse ironies he concocted nor the canniness honed in the backrooms could assuage an indomitable will to believe. The paradoxes he spun so recklessly simply outpaced the responsibility to resolve them, the imperative to make sense. Here Steffens was reminiscent of Henry D. Lloyd, the *ur-muckraker* who called himself "a socialist-anarchist-communist-individualist-collectivist-cooperative-aristocratic-democrat." Such impossible containment of multitudes suggests that attacks on American capitalism are unlikely to be sustained by thinkers too diffuse to understand it; and despite

Steffens's mockery of intellectuals, revolutions elsewhere have often been led by men who spent time in libraries. Twentieth century America has been replete with insurgents whose purposes became obscure, with tired liberals and totalitarian liberals, with socialists who were not radicals, with panthers who turned out to be pussycats. But Steffens's career is singular in the incorporation of this history in one man, and his thought is circular in the futility of its effort to grasp what he was against and ultimately who he was.

Call him a muckraker—and he calls himself a revolutionist instead. Call him a radical—and he calls himself a Christian. Probe his Christianity—and he praises crooks. Call him a defender of corruption—and he reserves his highest esteem for the La Follettes and the Tom Johnsons. Call him a reformer—and he wants the strong to rule instead of the good. Call him an apologist for tyranny—and he defines self-awareness rather than force as the supreme virtue. Call him a philosophical journalist—and he derides intellectuals. Call him a shoddy thinker—and he scorns theory in favor of what works. Ask if the revolutionary future works—and he replies, “Russia proves that you can change human nature sufficiently in one generation. . . . I believe they will make a race, the meanest of which will be as noble as the best men of our day.” Ask if Christianity works—and he responds, yes, that too, so long as we are unencumbered by “honesty” or “morality” or distaste for Fascist and Bolshevik thugs. Ask him if capitalism works—and he answers, yes, so long as businessmen refrain from corrupting politics, or, alternatively, so long as they are allowed to centralize and rationalize the state apparatus. Then ask if democracy works—and he replies, yes, so long as we “understand . . . what a part dictatorship has to play in a democracy.” Ask if he is therefore a democrat—and he calls himself a liberal. Ask what he means—and he calls Lenin a liberal, and Henry Ford a radical, and himself an anarchist, and the world no larger than our imagination. And then, like the Cheshire cat, he disappears, leaving behind only a wicked grin.