

The Rise and Fall of the Muckrakers



The Occupy movement and the Bernie Sanders campaign spotlighted once again the fact that a fairly small number of very rich people dominate the major economic and political institutions of the country.

This was well known and publicly acknowledged as far back as the populist era in post-Civil War days. It was encapsulated in presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan's famous "cross of gold" attack on vested interests at the Democratic Party convention of 1896. The idea was reiterated in President Eisenhower's farewell address on January 1, 1961, when he warned the country of the undue influence of the "military-industrial-congressional complex" (in the original draft of the speech) even as his administration was riddled with Wall Streeters.¹

Long before sociologist C. Wright Mills² paved the way to modern studies of power, a group of writers termed "muckrakers" was hard at work digging up the dirt on our American oligarchy. They did it in various literary forms: journalism, book-length nonfiction, cartoons, novels, even poetry. From just before the Progressive Era (about 1904 to 1920) to the mid-1930s, the muckrakers were a critical force in bringing to public light the evils inherent in plutocratic rule. By the time the muckrakers were through, no literate person could doubt the reality that a vast swamp of corruption stemming from the linkages between business and government was a historical fact. Nor could anyone doubt the terrible

consequences of this system for human lives in a time of untrammelled corporate greed.

Penny Papers Covering Millionaires

By the 1830s, the gradual development of industry had led to such technological innovations as inexpensive printing, which led to a more literate population. Although the press generally hewed to establishment politics, there were labor and radical newspapers as early as the "Jacksonian" era (Andrew Jackson was elected as a populist in 1828). Cheap "penny papers" began to appear, aimed at a mass audience. Their content often included sensational stories about the (evil) doings of the rich. The *New York Sun* exposed influence-peddling and bribery in the judicial system, and it crusaded against slavery. The *New York Herald* under James Gordon Bennett and the *New York Tribune*, edited by Horace Greeley, both originally penny papers, similarly attacked corruption. Greeley was a fervent abolitionist. Slavery narratives (the most famous was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* [1845]) were followed by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). This best seller was one of the most important muckraking novels of all time, a half-century before the term became known.



The Invisible Government of the United States.

[1914 Appeal to Reason cartoon by Ryan Walker]

Slavery was the most important issue of the time, but not the only one. The temperance movement got a significant boost when the second best seller of the time, *Ten Nights in a Barroom and What I Saw There*, by Timothy Shay Arthur, was published two years after the Stowe novel. Today virtually unknown, it is the story of a man who is swindled out of his business, turns to drink, and after the accidental death of his daughter, reforms. Later it was turned into several silent films, one of which, renamed as *A Prince of His Race* (1926), was produced by the Colored Players Film Corporation of Philadelphia with an all-Black cast.

In the post-Civil War period, illiteracy continued to decline, down to about 17 percent in 1880, just before massive immigration from Eastern and Southern European countries

brought many illiterate country people. There was an insatiable demand for reading material. State laws soon required minimum years of attendance in the gradually improving public school system, at least for whites outside rural areas. New high schools were opening every day. James Aronson reports that "in 1830 there were more newspapers with a greater readership in the United States than anywhere in the world." This trend continued as the growth of industry was accompanied by the growth of cities. By 1880, "there were 850 daily newspapers in the English language; in 1890 there were 1,967."³ Exposés were a leading feature of this growth.

Vast social changes during the decades after the Civil War were mirrored in wide-ranging debates about the meaning of these changes, the problems they caused, and proposed solutions. Social Darwinists, generally pro-imperialist and advocates of laissez-faire capitalism, clashed with those who attacked the ruthlessness of competition and "opposed the growth of military and naval force and the imperial path" that would eventually lead to the Spanish-American War.⁴ Populist farmers "were the first to speak openly of the dangers of plutocracy. ... Out of the suffering of the farmers ... streamed a new and aggressive political consciousness."⁵ Although much of this protest would eventually lead to only minimal reforms, it also presaged the rise of a mass socialist movement in the early 1900s.

As always in U.S. history, the social ills of the time generated some best-selling utopian books, including Henry George's runaway *Progress and Poverty* (1879). His solution was the Single Tax, which would tax land, but not the improvements on it, so as to prevent profit arising from any increase in land values due to speculation. "[It] was only one book among many which passionately protested against the encroachment of great aggregates of wealth on the ordinary individual."⁶ Several utopian communities were founded on George's

principles. He went on to run for mayor of New York City on a Labor ticket, but lost. There was also Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888). "No book since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had appealed so widely to American idealism," wrote historian Merle Curti. Within three years, 162 "Nationalist Clubs" advocating his statist model of utopian "socialism" had been organized.⁷ Within ten years the book had sold 500,000 copies.

Attacks on corruption were a constant feature of daily newspapers such as Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner* and *New York Journal*. At the *World*, Elizabeth Cochran, under the name of Nellie Bly, "got herself committed to a mental asylum in order to write about the squalor and inhuman conditions in [New York City's] mental health system."⁸ In the manner of today's Barbara Ehrenreich, Cochran worked numerous jobs to report on sweatshop conditions. Rheta Childe Dorr, also working a variety of jobs, sent her notes to the magazine *Everybody's*, which published them in 1908. "My great object," she wrote later, "was to demonstrate that women were permanent factors in industry, permanent producers of the world's wealth, and that they must hereafter be considered as independent human beings and citizens." Her first book, *What Eight Million Women Want* (1910), sold a half-million copies.⁹ Jack London also had a brief undercover career: He lived in the tough East End of London and wrote up what he observed in *The People of the Abyss* (1903). Less well-known is a Princeton graduate, Walter A. Wyckoff, who hit the road and worked his way across the country, holding many jobs. He wrote up what he saw in a series for *Scribner's Magazine* in 1897, which was published in two volumes as *The Workers* (illustrated, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898). His description of the sweatshop as an economic institution was ground-breaking sociology, a field that barely existed at the time. He went on to become a professor of political economy at Princeton, where Norman Thomas was one of

his students. Thomas was, however, unable to convert Wyckoff to the socialist cause.¹⁰

Pulitzer, Hearst, and other newspaper publishers, although contributing to the push for reforms during the Progressive Era, were of course capitalist enterprises themselves, and they did not challenge the fundamental premises of the system responsible for the ills that were being exposed. But there was also the *Appeal to Reason*, founded in 1895. Initially supporting the Farmers' Alliance and the (populist) People's Party, it soon moved to Girard, Kansas, and after 1901 became what would be the largest-circulation socialist paper in U.S. history. It played a major role in the muckraking movement.

Magazines soon competed with newspapers in featuring exposés of the wretched living and working conditions prevalent at the time and scrutinizing the nefarious activities of leading corporations and the political machines to which they were linked. The more notable magazines were the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Everybody's*, the *Arena*, and *Cosmopolitan*. In 1893 *McClure's Magazine* was founded. It published Jack London, Willa Cather, and Theodore Dreiser among many others. Then, in 1903, it turned to muckraking. Samuel McClure hired Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, who were soon among the leading muckraking journalists of the era. "Muckraking popularized as nothing else had done the awareness of the power of corporations, their ruthlessness and antisocial practices, their corrupt relations with government," as Curti put it.¹¹

The Cause and the Industry

The term "muckraking" was apparently coined by President Theodore Roosevelt. *Cosmopolitan* had published a series of articles on corruption in the higher circles of politics (specifically focusing on the U.S. Senate). After he became president following the assassination of William McKinley in 1901, Roosevelt attacked the exposés, which he thought were

overly broad. Brasch says Roosevelt was "referring to the 'man with the muckrake' in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*" when he told the Washington Gridiron Club that there was too much mucking going on.¹² Ida Tarbell, the investigator of Standard Oil, claimed in her autobiography that Roosevelt "was afraid that [the muckrakers] were adding to the not inconsiderable revolutionary fever abroad, driving the people into socialism."¹³ Lincoln Steffens said in his *Autobiography* that he "was not the original muckraker; the prophets of the Old Testament were ahead of me. ... I did not know I was one till President Roosevelt ... pinned it on us."¹⁴

Steffens, a former Wall Street reporter, had been sent by *McClure's Magazine* on a multi-city tour during which he described the corruption rampant in the big cities and in several states. His series began in 1902 with "Tweed Days in St. Louis" and went to "Philadelphia, Corrupt and Contented," to "New York: Good Government in Danger," and others.¹⁵ His reportage was turned into a book, *The Shame of the Cities* (1905). "Soon muckraking became a major industry," the literary historian Alfred Kazin noted.¹⁶ Steffens gradually became disillusioned by all the corruption he saw. In his chapter "The Shame of Minneapolis," he shared with his boss Samuel McClure the sentiment that "democracy was a failure and that a good dictator was what was needed."¹⁷ Later he covered the Mexican Revolution and events in the young Soviet Union. On his return, he made the oft-quoted remark, "I have seen the future, and it works." He also admired Mussolini's efficiency in stabilizing, so he thought, the Italian economy in the 1920s.

Upton Sinclair, perhaps the most prolific of the muckrakers, began his career as a writer of "pulp-wood fiction." He wrote a series of historical novels, and then he discovered socialism, which

came to him as more than an intellectual conviction: It came as a magnificent discovery ... [and] also as a stimulus to action in the form of an assignment from the *Socialist Appeal to Reason* to study the Chicago stockyard area. ... Out of his studies there, and also out of the emotions born of his own bitter struggle with poverty, came *The Jungle* (1906), the most powerful novel associated with the muckraking movement, and one of the very few actuated by forthright proletarian sympathies.¹⁸

(It had first appeared as a series in the *Appeal*.) His would not be the only exposé novel of the period, but it was probably the most influential one. Jack London called it “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of wage slavery.” Sinclair thought that following the facts would inevitably lead the muckrakers and their readers to the conclusion that they must revolt against the entire capitalist system. To his chagrin, “the public appeared more interested in the problem of a corrupted meat supply than in that of the exploited worker.”¹⁹ The book contributed to the passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. In his later nonfiction *The Brass Check* (1919), Sinclair viewed the reform as merely cosmetic. He told a colleague, “Not a week passes that I don’t get a letter from some of the men ... telling me things are bad as ever.” The *New York Herald* sent Ella Reeve Bloor to the stockyards disguised as a Polish woman, and she confirmed what Sinclair’s informants said. (“Mother” Bloor would become an active Communist beginning in the 1920s.)

Sinclair, almost alone among the muckrakers, remained true to the cause. In 1906 he founded a utopian community, Helicon Home Colony, in Englewood, New Jersey. It closed a year later. He was the founder of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, which organized student socialist clubs until the mid-1920s. He ran for public office as a Socialist and in 1934, in California, as a Democrat under the rubric “End Poverty in California,” which was basically the Socialist Party’s

platform, but lost after a vicious red-baiting campaign bankrolled by the usual suspects. Sinclair wrote a long list of exposés often barely disguised as fiction. They include *The Brass Check* (1919), which describes the prostitution (hence the brass check²⁰) of the newspaper industry; *King Coal* (1917), a novel about the 1913 Colorado coal strikes, written just after the Ludlow Massacre (a follow up, *The Coal War*, was not published until 1976); *The Profits of Religion* (1918); *The Goose Step* (1923) and *The Goslings* (1924), on education; and *Oil* (1927), a novel in which the Young People's Socialist League actually appears. The film *There Will Be Blood* is very loosely based on it, naturally without Sinclair's politics. He also wrote *Boston* (2 vols., 1928). It is the story of the Sacco and Vanzetti case, told in great detail within the thin veneer of a novel.

While Sinclair's nonfiction aimed at large targets such as politics, education, religion, and the media, most investigative journalists focused on specific corporations. The Standard Oil Corporation and its founder, John D. Rockefeller, drew muckrakers' attention early on. In 1880 the *Atlantic Monthly* published William Demarest Lloyd's story of the ways Standard Oil came to lead the industry despite mountains of evidence of its crooked ways. His 1894 book-length follow-up, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*, called for government control over monopolies. Next in line to take on Standard Oil was McClure's Ida Tarbell. McClure's spent some \$50,000 on Tarbell's five-year investigation, which resulted in a nineteen-part series beginning in November, 1902. "It was a penetrating series into the nature of power and greed, a series that laid open America's greatest monopoly. ... Every fact Tarbell reported was fully documented."²¹ The series became a book, *The History of Standard Oil* (1905). Rockefeller went full out to attack Tarbell, using a number of magazines and journalists sympathetic to, and/or subsidized by, himself, including *The Nation*! The campaign was coordinated by Ivy L.

Lee, who is considered *the* pioneer of the public relations industry. Nevertheless, Standard Oil of New Jersey, as it was called by then, ran afoul of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, and in May, 1911, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered that it be split up into 34 smaller corporations. This had no effect on Rockefeller's fortunes, since he owned stock in many of them.

Muckraking was by its very nature a marketing feature of the newspapers and magazines of the period. Their writers focused almost entirely on corruption, whether political (such as what is today termed "pay to play") or business (for example, patent medicine quacks).²² Although Sinclair tackled entire social institutions, even he, a socialist, did not attempt a larger-scale dissection of "the system," except in the concluding chapters of *The Jungle* in the form of a lengthy speech by a socialist orator. The muckrakers "generally had no social philosophy. They had little historical curiosity, and the nature of the capitalist state remained as mysterious and inscrutable as Melville's white whale," Alfred Kazin commented.²³ This would contribute to their demise quite soon.

Occasionally the extravagant behavior of one or another of the super-rich was spot-lighted, as when the editor of the *Arena* in February 1891 accused the country's 4,000 or so millionaires of being "idlers who eat, drink, dance, and are consumed in a butterfly existence [while surrounded by] the gaunt, hungry, hollow-eyed millions to whom life is an awful curse," or when the *New York World* in 1905 told readers how Equitable Life Insurance executives were "squandering the premiums on personal frivolities, including parties and liquor."²⁴ But there was very little understanding of the broader culture of the upper class and how it reinforced the very corrupt practices the muckrakers deplored. Economist Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) did provide a devastating cultural critique of the habits of the

super-rich, but these were not indictable offenses, no one was prosecuted, and no laws against “conspicuous consumption” and “conspicuous leisure” were passed.

One of the few muckraking works to take on the entire robber-baron class was Gustavus Myers' *History of the Great American Fortunes* (1910, reprinted by Modern Library in 1936). In three volumes covering early land fortunes, colonial times, and contemporary capital, particularly the railroads, he dissected almost every major capitalist enterprise and their leaders at the time, including Henry Clay Frick (steel and railroads), J.P. Morgan (banking), and Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroads). After being turned down by a series of publishers, the volumes came out under the auspices of Charles H. Kerr & Co., the great socialist publisher. Myers was active in the Socialist Party for many years but defected, as did numerous other writers including Upton Sinclair and John Spargo, when the party opposed U.S. entry into World War I. Spargo was one of the founders of the party in 1901, and had written two exposés, one of child labor (*The Bitter Cry of Children*, 1906), and a parallel work put out by Charles H. Kerr in that same year, *Underfed School Children*.

From Editorializing to Moral Philosophy

The muckraking nonfiction writers were surely important during the Progressive Era's campaigns for reforms, no matter how limited the effects of those reforms may have been. But it was when, with “all the essential optimism of their times, they moved exuberantly from journalism into fiction” that they had their greatest influence.²⁵ It wasn't that the journalists stuck strictly to just the facts; they did plenty of editorializing along the way. But when they moved into fiction, editorializing rose to a new level, that of moral philosophy. In Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the message is one of hope, where people can take destiny in their own hands and change the world. The hero, Jurgis, endures horrifying poverty

and a series of catastrophes, but then runs across a socialist lecturer. He “had never been so stirred in his life—it was a miracle that had been wrought in him. ... He knew that in the mighty upheaval that had taken place in his soul, a new man had been born.”²⁶

But for “naturalists” like Theodore Dreiser, the protagonists are the victims of social (and biological) forces beyond their control. The strong rise until their greed leads to disaster, and the poor go by the wayside, unless, by overcoming conventional morality, they edge their way into “decent” society, where they duly become victims of their own folly. In Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893), the poor daughter of drunken parents tries desperately to escape her circumstances, but eventually fails, descending into prostitution. In Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), a scandal for its time, Carrie puts aside conventional morality to move in with a man who can provide the better things of life, then marries a richer man who embezzles but eventually descends into homelessness, while she finds success in the theater but still fails to find happiness. Real soap-opera stuff by today’s standards.

The muck that is being raked in these and similar novels is the poverty that destroys families (often via drink), a poverty that leads individuals to desperate measures that cannot prevail over social circumstances. Frank Norris’ *The Pit* (1903), or Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912), takes us into another milieu, that of big business and the men whose obsession with acquiring wealth and power leads to their downfall. Some, due to their inner strengths, are able to make a new start. *The Pit* takes us to the trading floor of the Chicago Board of Trade, where the protagonist becomes so obsessed with the wheat market that his attempts to corner it lead to his ruin. He and his faithful wife, however, survive and move west. In *The Financier*, the first of a trilogy, Frank Cowperwood (based on Chicago railroad financier Charles T.

Yerkes) is a streetcar magnate in Philadelphia, but soon moves into finance and corrupt politics. He uses city funds to speculate and is caught out when the stock market crashes; he is tried and jailed. He recoups his fortune and vows to go straight, moving with his mistress (now wife) ... west! For Dreiser, Cowperwood embodied the Social Darwinian drive that is the hunger for power. "In this quest, the strongest win out; the weak are crushed."²⁷ The muck that is being raked by Norris and Dreiser illuminates the corrupt connections between businesses and politicians. *The Financier* is virtually a textbook on how finance worked in the post-Civil War era. "Shorting the market" didn't begin in 2008.

In *An American Tragedy* (1925), perhaps Dreiser's best-known novel (turned into the 1951 Academy Award-winning film, *A Place in the Sun*, with Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, and Shelley Winters), the protagonist, Clyde Griffiths, is a weak man. He intends to marry the attractive daughter of a wealthy factory owner but is thwarted by the pregnancy of an earlier girlfriend. On a boat trip with her she accidentally drowns, but circumstances point to him. He is arrested and eventually executed. Spiller summarizes: He is "a victim of the social and biological forces which operate upon him."

For the naturalists, only the strong, like Dreiser's Cowperwood, can survive. In Jack London's dystopian novel *The Iron Heel* (1907), a man named Ernest Everhard (!), described by his future wife as "a superman, a blond beast such as Nietzsche has described," leads an uprising against an oligarchic dictatorship.²⁸ Though it is bloodily suppressed, his memory lives on. In the early part of the book there is considerable conversation, in the literary style of the time, about slavery, organized religion, the courts, and other capitalist institutions, with Everhard leading the attack on them all and making a case for an alternative socialist society. But for London, who called himself a revolutionary socialist, the socialist paradise was not for everyone. Kazin

quotes London's letter to a friend: "Socialism is not an ideal system devised for the happiness of all men; it is devised so as to give more strength to these certain kindred favored races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races." No wonder Kazin calls him "a prototype of the violence-worshiping Fascist intellectual if ever there was one in America."²⁹

Success and Repression

The zenith of the muckraking movement was in 1912. It was also the beginning of its demise. At least in part, like many social movements, it became the victim of its successes: "Laws to clear slums, protect women and children, curb monopolies, supervise insurance companies, free the public lands, save the forests, frustrate corruption, and safeguard the ballot box crowded the statute books."³⁰ A kind of corruption fatigue apparently set in as the public tired of endless, repetitive exposés. The entry of the U.S. into World War I also diverted attention away from corporate shenanigans. Then the relative prosperity (at least for urban whites) of the "roaring '20s" further marginalized muckraking as a significant component of the media. Corruption, of course, continued all the same. The biggest scandal came in 1921. President Warren Harding's interior secretary, Albert Fall, took bribes from oil companies in exchange for contracts to process U.S. Navy oil reserves, one of which was at Teapot Dome in Wyoming (hence "the Teapot Dome Scandal"). Harding died in 1923, and his successor, Calvin Coolidge, for a time refused to pursue the matter, but eventually congressional hearings were held. A journalist working for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Paul Y. Anderson, helped in the conviction and imprisonment of Fall and several others. He won a Pulitzer in 1929.

Most of the muckrakers "were reformers only fortuitously and few of them were inspired by ideals or sustained by convictions,"³¹ hence they had no answer to "what next?" unless

they were socialists, and during the Woodrow Wilson administration (1913-1921) the socialists would have their own problems. Lacking a framework with which to understand their tenuous hold on the public mind, most of the muckrakers gradually disappeared from the ranks of reform movements. John Spargo, for example, once a crusader on behalf of poverty-stricken children, later opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal anti-poverty reforms.

Meanwhile, the muckrakers' successes came at a price for their periodicals: They had, in the words of historian Robert Spiller, "frightened the business community, while at the same time they had become dependent on advertising and bank credit. When the advertising was withdrawn ... and the loans called in, as if on a concentrated signal, they had to stop their investigations or go out of business."³²

This strategy proved decisive. Throughout the muckraker era there had been a constant drumbeat of official and unofficial moves to repress them. As Upton Sinclair also observed,

The industrial autocracy very quickly awakened to the peril of these 'muck-raking' magazines and set to work to put out the fire. Some magazines were offered millions, and sold out. Those that refused to sell out had their advertisement trimmed down, their bank-loans called, their stockholders intimidated—until finally, in one way or another, they consented to "be good."³³

The boycott of the muckraking magazines by bankers and advertisers led to their shakeup when it did not end in their closure. In 1912, for example, *McClure's*, deeply in debt, was sold to a group of financiers. It eventually became a romance magazine, and by 1929 it was gone. The crusading editor at *Collier's* was forced out. Banks refused loans to *Hampton's*, and the owner was forced to sell. *Everybody's* became a "family magazine" and in 1929 was merged with *Romance Magazine*.

In 1909 President Taft, who had been attacked by various muckrakers for virtually giving away federal land in Alaska to corporate interests, maneuvered a large postage increase for periodicals. "The administration's actions were just another shot of a volley that would kill the muckrakers."³⁴ At the state level, one example is particularly striking because the press fought back: The Pennsylvania legislature passed an "anti-cartoon bill" in 1903 aimed at a Philadelphia paper, the *North American*, which had attacked the governor and his political machine backers in print and in many cartoons. The law clearly violated the Pennsylvania and U.S. constitutions and was repealed in 1907.

The Great War, which the United States finally entered on April 6, 1917, was the final blow to the movement, though of course muckraking has continued sporadically to this day. The run-up to the war pushed any criticism of industrialists, who were indispensable to the war effort, to one side. At the same time, super-patriotism, including a virulent attack on anything German, sparked a slew of organizations dedicated to "Americanism." There soon existed an atmosphere of hysteria about foreigners and radicals that makes the anti-communist mood of the Truman era in the 1940s, as carried forward by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, look relatively mild (although its victims might not agree). A series of federal and local laws that virtually criminalized any expression of opposition to the war, especially after April, 1917, soon led to restrictions and sometimes the outright suppression of the critical, including the socialist, press. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 outlawed virtually any written or spoken word that could be interpreted as "insubordination," "disloyalty," obstructing the draft or recruiting efforts, advocating resistance to the government, or even criticizing the Constitution.

The federal government quickly went to work, utilizing the postal authorities as its first line of attack. The *Appeal to*

Reason, firmly opposed to the war, changed its tune after its June 10, 1917, issue was held up in the mail; its editor, Fred Warren, was replaced and the *Appeal* lined up in support of the war effort. Postmaster General Burleson authorized the denial of full mailing privileges to whatever publication he thought violated the Espionage Act, so that, for example, the *New York Call* had to pay first-class rates. The same happened to the *Rebel*, organ of the Tenant Farmers Union. Late in 1917 the Post Office stopped delivering even first-class mail to the *Milwaukee Leader*. "By the end of the war nearly every Socialist newspaper and periodical had run afoul of Postmaster General Burleson."³⁵ The Justice Department also played its role in the attack on the critical media: The editors of the literary left magazine *Masses* were twice tried under the Espionage Act. Both trials, fortunately, resulted in hung juries. Despite criticisms of these violations of established civil liberties, President Wilson supported Burleson. Publications not dependent on capitalist advertising thus suffered losses in readership even when they were not suppressed outright.

The press was not the only institution that suffered from war-time hysteria and the later anti-Bolshevik panic that followed the Soviet Revolution. Hundreds of members of the IWW, the Socialist Party, and other radical organizations were tried and convicted for anti-war speeches and writings. The best-known case was that of Eugene V. Debs, who was indicted, convicted, and sentenced to ten years for a speech he gave at the Ohio state convention of the Socialist Party in June, 1918. His indictment of the ruling class for the violence it inflicted on the people was deemed sufficiently critical as to constitute a violation of the Espionage Act. The repression, especially of immigrants, that followed in the years immediately after the war is beyond the scope of this essay.

The Great Depression focused attention on the victims of that disaster as well as those responsible for it. Examples of

nonfiction include *The House of Morgan* (1930) by Lewis Corey. Corey, an Italian immigrant born as Luigi, later Louis Fraina, had been one of the founders of the Communist Party of America in 1919. Better known were Matthew Josephson and Ferdinand Lundberg. Josephson's 1934 *The Robber Barons: the Great American Capitalists 1861-1901*, covered much the same territory as Gustavus Myers, focusing on the better-known "barons." Lundberg's *Imperial Hearst* (1936) was in the old muckraking tradition of biography, but his *America's Sixty Families* a year later was a macro-level study of the contemporary U.S. ruling class (updated in an 824-page doorstop as *The Rich and the Super-Rich*).³⁶

The Depression also gave birth to "a generation of novelists who had been toughened in alleys, orphanages, logging camps, and mills" and whose gritty writings "of the life of the working class [were] rooted in the memory of their own life in it."³⁷ John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is today probably the best-known of this genre. James T. Farrell (the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy 1932, 1934, 1935) was an active member of the Socialist Workers Party. Michael Gold (*Jews Without Money*, 1930), Richard Wright (*Native Son*, 1940), and numerous others were at some point members of the Communist Party. Gold, a pen-name, edited *New Masses* for several years. *New Masses* published many important left-leaning writers and some outstanding reportage throughout the 1930s.

The Modern Muck

The term "muckraking" has been displaced, in recent years, by "investigative reporting." There was no shortage of it in the years following World War II, despite the repressive atmosphere during the anti-communist hysteria that began, or perhaps better said, resumed, with the Cold War in 1945. Noteworthy among exposé publications were George Seldes' four-page weekly *In Fact*, which specialized in stories the mainstream media suppressed or ignored. It ran from 1940 to

1950, and was succeeded by *I.F. Stone's Weekly* (1953-1971). Today's version is *Extra!*, the publication of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. *Ramparts* magazine (1960-1975) blew the whistle on U.S. atrocities in Vietnam and the CIA's involvement in various ostensibly independent, leftist anti-communist publications and projects. It was succeeded by other magazines in the muckraking tradition, notably *Mother Jones*, the social-democratic *In These Times*,³⁸ and *Rolling Stone*. *The Progressive* has been on the muckraking scene through the years. It was founded by Senator "Fighting Bob" LaFollete of Wisconsin as *LaFollette's Weekly* in 1909. Then there are the many exposé books, such as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1963), and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965).

But it is the documentary film that has perhaps had more of an impact. Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* (1960) was one of the first exposés on a major network. It brought attention to migratory farm workers' terrible conditions and helped the drive toward their unionization. That was followed by numerous network "docs" by Morton Silverman, including a follow-up of Murrow's film. *Controlling Interest* (1978), too radical for a network, covered many aspects of imperialism. The numerous titles produced by Michael Moore are no doubt familiar to readers of this journal. Finally, there are the technological innovations that have produced a Snowden, an Assange, and thousands of others. Hacking has taken muckraking to new heights and not infrequently, lows.

Today we are deluged with stories of scandal and corruption at the top, as well as exposés of immiseration and exploitation at the bottom, in any or as many media as we choose. Yet now as in the past the system does not collapse. The "public" sees, but does not act, except for that sturdy minority of good folks who continue the muckraking tradition. Large numbers of people seem to accept corruption as inevitable.

“They are all crooks,” is the refrain, and political apathy is widespread. Is it any wonder that a very large segment of the population has come to believe, with Lincoln Steffens, that it will take a dictator to clean house? If any lesson is to be drawn from the history of the muckrakers, it is that the reforms they achieved have always rested on fragile ground. Today many reforms are in danger of being reversed by the very person elected to do the housecleaning. Raking the muck is clearly insufficient. It must be linked to a movement for fundamental change.

Footnotes

1. In 1953, an elected reform government in Guatemala nationalized unused land owned by the United Fruit Company. Virtually every government official was involved with that corporation, from director of the CIA to secretary of state (the Dulles brothers), among others. The U.S. armed an invasion, which overthrew the government and imposed a dictatorship. [Jerry Kloby, *Inequality, Power, and Development* (Humanity Books, 2004), 125-126; Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (South End Press, 1979), 276-279.]
2. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford, 1956).
3. James Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (Monthly Review Press, 1970), 12.
4. Robert E. Spiller et al, *Literary History of the United States* v.II (MacMillan Co., 1948), 976-977.
5. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (Doubleday & Co., 1942), 21.
6. Spiller, 989.
7. Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* 2nd ed. (Harper & Brothers, 1951), 628.
8. Walter M. Brasch, *Forerunners of Revolution: Muckrakers and the American Social Conscience* (University Press of America, 1990), 28.

9. Brasch, 112.
10. *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Sept. 23, 2009.
11. Curti, 621.
12. Brasch, 3.
13. Quoted in Brasch, 98
14. *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 357.
15. These reports are reproduced as Part III of *The Autobiography*.
16. Kazin, 81.
17. Steffens, 375.
18. Spiller, 996.
19. Spiller, 997.
20. In brothels of the time, the customer purchased a token from the manager and gave it to the sex worker of his choice, who at the end of a shift would cash in the tokens, or "checks."
21. Brasch, 57.
22. In 1904 *Collier's Weekly* discovered that Lydia Pinkham, whose "tonic" was bought by millions of women, and who answered letters providing "professional advice," had been dead for 23 years.
23. Kazin, 82.
24. Quoted in Brasch, 15, 77.
25. Kazin, 83.
26. *The Jungle* (Signet Classics ed., 2015), 353.
27. Spiller, 1203.
28. *The Iron Heel* (Grayson Pub. Co. ed., 1948), 6. Reprint of the original ed. of 1907.
29. Kazin, 84-85.
30. Spiller, 1109.
31. Spiller, 1111.
32. Spiller, 1125.
33. *The Brass Check*, 229-230.
34. Brasch, 123.
35. David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (Macmillan, 1955), 110.

36. Lyle Stuart, 1968.

37. Kazin, 295.

38. See Christopher Haas, "Muckraking and Troublemaking," in its 40th Anniversary edition, Nov. 2016.