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The (Mis)Education of Lincoln Steffens: Reading the *Autobiography* of a Muckraker

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The autobiography – as a genre – conventionally and inevitably deals to some extent with the times of the autobiographer and his association with them; but mainly occupies itself with the individual who is at once its subject and its architect. Ray Pascal in his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) writes that autobiography “involves the reconstruction of the moment of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived, [. . .] It imposes a pattern on life, constructs out of it a coherent story. It establishes certain stages in an individual life, makes links between them, and defines, implicitly and explicitly, a certain consistence of relationship between the self and the outside world” (9). And in doing so the author is free to limit attention to one of his/her ‘selves’ or s/he may apportion notice among those which have played dominant roles in his life’s course. Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936) wrote his autobiography as America struggles its way through the Depression and the Stock Market Crash. His *Autobiography* has presented his life as simulacrum of modern civilization. The frontier has always been a metaphor for the Americans to confront new experiences with optimism. From his first newspaper *Post* to his last major work, his life-story, his *Autobiography*, Steffens writings reflect this exuberance for the active life of learning. He was first of the muckrakersⁱ and belonged to the tradition of finest journalism in America.

This paper proposes to explore Lincoln Steffens *Autobiography* as one of the most sustained and thoroughgoing indictment of the cult of progress which stressed on details his progress and reform. Part of the paper will focus on the historical and political era that he lived through and then go on to establish how his personal story reflect his times and also is suggestive of the dialogic continuity of pro and con in the national story.

In 1931, in the *Autobiography*ⁱⁱ Steffens muckraked himself and produced a classic of American letters. Throughout his autobiography he has portrayed himself as a student in search of understanding amidst the emerging capitalistic industrialism in America. The working title of the autobiography was “Life of Unlearning,” probably he had Henry Adamsⁱⁱⁱ autobiography in mind. He has divided his autobiography into two parts: in the first section he talks of the boyhood acceptance of the myths about American society and belief in progressivism and the second section depicts the slow, excruciating discovery through experience as a journalist that storybooks were lies and so was the American myth which turned him to be a student of life where he learnt that the world was peopled with ‘bad’ men who seemed good and ‘good’ men who were ‘bad’. In other words, his narrative consists of early illusions, formal miseducation, and long re-education.

The first section is titled as “A Boy on a Horseback,” projected him as a Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn kind of character over the Sacramento river valleys by turns a crusader, a trapper, a Comanche, evangelist and Napoleon (*Autobiography* 26). As he entered then preparatory school his father suggested him to read Tom Brown at Rugby. And then when he was preparing for college, his teacher inspired him

Go to, boy. The world is yours. Nothing is done, nothing is known. The
Greatest poem isn't written, the best railroad isn't built yet, the perfect
state hasn't been thought if. Everything remains to do- right everything.
(*Autobiography* 113)

The section ends with “All Through With Heroism.” The second section began with his imprisonment for violating school's drinking rule and ends in German and French Universities – through Berlin, Heidelberg, Munich, Leipzig and Paris. His pursuit is for a reasonable ethics and the universities of German and French provide none though the journey as full of lessons.

The author's multi-faceted occupational self permeates the rest of the book. He comes back to America as a married “educated” man but deprived of his father's acceptance who unaware of his marriage sent him a letter along with hundred dollars with a suggestion to find his own way in life (169). This tension between the pioneer generation and their overeducated children was experienced by many of Steffens contemporaries. But he did not need his father's name to succeed in New York. He found a frontier of his own — his identity, position and power through muckraking.

Muckraking took Steffens from New York to the national scene. He became “innocent” again: his past made him accept progressivism. He came comprehend the existence of corruption at the national echelon. Out of these experiences emerged his social philosophy learnt from “life as it is lived” (*Autobiography* 231). It took him years to understand that history is not what is taught in books but as the strong men behind the scene shape it. It took him sometime to understand the underlying system of corruption but having understood the techniques of corruption he concluded that the blame of corruption should go to people and not the bosses in power. Revolution, two decades of it – Mexican and Bolshevik, the Mc-Nammara Case, World War I, and the advent of Fascism took him through the last excursion of education. His autobiographical persona made it essential for him to remember most of what the schools had taught him were lies to be unlearned. And in doing so he not only records his occupational self did but what it saw.

The presence of Lincoln Steffens in the city could compel the whole city to surrender to surrender. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote a card addressed: “To any officer or employee of the government: Please tell Mr. Lincoln Steffens anything whatever about the running of the government that you know (not compatible with the public interest) and provided only that you tell him the truth—no matter what he may be—I will see that you are not hurt” (*Autobiography* 515).

There was another angle to his self—the intellectual self. This self plays a conspicuous role in the *Autobiography*. Cochran points out that, “Interacting closely with the occupational self, the third self persistently attempts to extract meaning from what the occupational self does and sees. Once having formulated theories and principles, the intellectual self either submits them to the active self for testing or offers them for the reader's consideration” (*Autobiography* 103).

His autobiographical persona made it essential for him to remember most of what the schools had taught him were lies to be unlearned. Yet he learnt many valuable things: behind the bars for violating drinking rule in school gave him an opportunity to read Darwin and understand naturalism; at Berkley he picked up “economic determinism”; at German universities he developed a generalized faith in scientific method and belief (164); and he started hunting for answers in science and attempted at applying the techniques of scientific investigation to historical investigations and business world. In other words, science taught him like to many other Americans to think in absolute terms. “This: Steffens writes “is revolutionary”:

If this spirit had got out of the science laboratories into business country, it would seal a doom of our old Greek-Christian culture. It would spill over into politics, economics, life. [. . .] A new, the new culture was sweeping down over us, and big business, and the old root of all evil. (*Autobiography* 851-852)

This passage suggest that Steffens had found a new order to replace the old: the dialectical materialism of the Communist party became his personal philosophy and in Communism he found a positive order in an otherwise chaotic situation.

At the end of his European academic career Steffens found himself as just a struggling student, an “American boob” who wanted to cast off his own ignorance, “I was happily unaware that I was just a nice, original American boob, about to begin unlearning all my learning, and failing even at that” (*Autobiography* 166). The older myths acquired from his academic training had to be replaced by the new emerging patterns of industrial America. As Stephen Whitefield observes:

The *Autobiography* records the hunches he stretched into hypotheses, the generalizations he tested and discarded, the attempts to delineate the 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 planned the grand coordinates of history. (“Muckraking Lincoln Steffens” 88)

History never interested Steffens; but the Revolution converted him to a historical determinist. Mexican Revolution made him realize that the historical event gave the Mexicans little choice but to pot for radical transformation of their social and economic system. But it was Russia which gave him the opportunity to complete his study of Revolutions. American liberals greeted the first news of Russian revolution and Steffens too did so. The crisis of Russia became an international crisis and Steffens autobiographical memory of it precipitates a crisis of his own personal struggle to understand human affairs. The Russian revolution was the last affair that tore the remaining shreds of liberalism from the structure of his thinking and ended his muckraking expectation that democracy, reforms, and mere regulations of American business would create a corruption-free America.

The special significance of the *Autobiography*, as Granville Hicks saw it lay in the demonstrating “that there was strictly American path Communist conclusions” (147). Steffens found in Russian revolution the extension of the American dream. He constructed a typological comparison between Russian revolutionaries and American colonialists struggling for independence after his departure from Russia. The Bolshevik taught him that the world was in constant evolution towards a higher order, more perfect forms of society. In his second trip to Russia he remarked: “I have seen the future and it works!” Thus he wanted the Americans to look at Revolution in a new light. He was probably out of step with the radical thinking of that era, but it made him readily adopt muckraking. Invitation to Boston in 1915 to muckrake the city gave him the chance to experiment with “applied Christianity.” His suggestion to revive Boston and end corruption by developing a “vision” – a moral solution, was unacceptable to the Bostonians as they found it frivolous and his attempt proved to be a failure.

Having read Marx and Engels, which by this time had tremendous impact on the American academics, Steffens was one with their belief that the class system was the sole cause of social injustice and also something that his Boston experience had taught him. For the American radicals, Freud was teaching the means to tear away from the suffocating layers of bourgeois culture that was a barrier to human progress. Learning and listening to Freud and Marx Steffens thought about his absurd way of his muckrakers’ description of bad men and good men and the supposition that showing public the facts could influence them to amend their own ways. Freudian premise agreed with the Marxist assertion that to transform men’s mind first called for amend in their surroundings. Made essential by Christianity, a study of Marx and Freud helped Steffens to become a discreet innovatory/revolutionary: he suggested first “a change in the heart.”

Steffens lost some of his innocence – but still retained the mystical faith in man: he believed that the accepted evolutionary social theories sustained his argument that the society was ever advancing – changing itself into some better form. By using the laws of biology and sociology, Steffens sought to recapture the scientific approach that he embraced in his student days. But he could not trace the evolutionary development in America; he could see it in America.

His role in the creation of American self-consciousness dates before the Mexican and Russian revolutions and finds culmination in the writings of his *Autobiography*. Embracing Marx and Engels, whose methods extended back to Hegel and beyond Hegel to Plato, Steffens dialectical materialism circled around a position close to his early idealism. His educational excursion was from California to Europe, to urban and industrial America, to countries in the midst of Revolution, and back to California again. So his intellectual excursion evinces a cyclic pattern.

An evaluation of the *Autobiography* depicts the inconsistencies that pummeled his age: a tension between science and religion, romanticism and naturalism, empirical determinism and

idealism. His methodology led to failure of faith in good men, good government, reform, progressivism, formal Christianity and liberalism. Like other dialectical materialists he tried to reach the truth by a sequence of reductions. He explored for “absolution from history” though it could never determine the contradictions of his era. Although it was a bitter and demoralizing experience of the nineteenth-century moralists, in his version of his experience Steffens gathers the disposition of modern disintegration into the configuration of his autobiography.

As Van Wyck Brooks had pointed out that the American mind was always torn between two types of culture: Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin which represented “dissipated culture on one end and stark utility on the other have created a deadlock in the American mind, and all our life drifts chaotically between two extremes” (qtd. in Hartshorne 86). Steffens was also torn between the two cultures and his ambivalence was the central concern for him. He could comprehend the “tragic conflict” and recognized the growing gap between first and second generations of immigrants. Before Margaret Mead observed this change in American character in the 1940s. The old clung to the tradition and the young refused to accept it and adopted values of the . Steffens epitomizes this change in the national character. Paradoxes inherent in American National Character in that historical era fascinated Steffens all through his career and finds expression in his journalism. But these paradoxes and ambiguities did not drive him to despair. And the abstract of the series of paradoxes that he exposes through muckraking can be put down as such: good men were sources of evil; dishonest men tell the truth; good citizens make bad government and bad men make good leaders.

The American born in the nineteenth-century milieu possessed a sense of responsibility towards the progress of the nation. The autobiography is a testimonial to that culture, which re-nationalized itself in the new Deal. Steffens in the very act of negation “expressed and reaffirmed [. . .] American liberalism” (*Autobiography* 125). For most of his career, he maintained a willingness to look at man, institutions and movements without prejudice. He always wanted to be at the center of action: whether be it the salad city New York of the 1890s or post-revolution Russia, he always wanted to know the story and wanted to share it with his readers.

He approached each new adventure with the same fresh anticipation: his experience, therefore, never ended in cynicism. Steffens thus as an autonomous subject, was promoted by the age of progressivism. In other words he was a prototype of the progressive era. His life too reveals a characteristic bent of activism: in Turner’s term the “restless nervous energy,” which was a characteristic among the frontier Americans. He was never tired of the protean nature of the world and readily accepted every new circumstance as a challenge. Like a true pragmatist he believed that individual experience was the basis of trustworthy knowledge: a true pragmatist indeed. Steffens thus was a kind of midwife in the birth of the new cultural-political framework, which emerged out of the nineteenth-century moral politics. At the end of his career, he saw the wave against liberalism in America. He offered the Americans an alternative to capitalism and Depression in Communism but himself could never become a communist. His life story is thus a story of a man measuring himself as a moral agent. And through his autobiography he has tried

to establish a kinship between the private and public spheres of his life, between political and cultural experiences, and in the discourse reflect the national consciousness.

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ⁱ Lincoln Steffens, was a journalist whose writing was so notorious that President Theodore Roosevelt coined a term for it—muckraking. Muckraking literally means "literature of exposure."

ⁱⁱ Begun in 1925 and completed in Summer 1930; got published in 1931.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henry Adams autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1917) is one of the most popular text of *fin-de-siècle* America. This life story treats ironically the transformation of eighteenth-century unity to twentieth-century multiplicity. It is not sure whether Steffens directly modeled his life story on Adams book or not. But what is clear is that Steffens basic theme is life conceived as a process of "de-education". Many of the learning which Steffens has to unlearn were those Adams repudiated as inherited from the 18th-century culture.