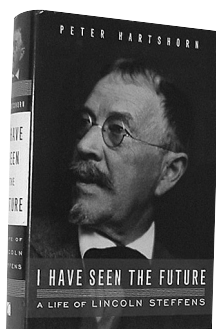


Book Review

The Future's Past



*I Have Seen the Future:
A Life of Lincoln Steffens*
by Peter Hartshorn

Berkeley:
Counterpoint Press, 2011,
517 pp., \$19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by David Cozy

A good biography is never about only the man or woman who is its subject. It is always about the world through which its subject moves. Peter Hartshorn, author of *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens*, understands this, and is fortunate to have taken for his subject a man—now largely forgotten—who moved through a world almost baroque in its richness. Indeed, so packed is Steffens's life with characters and incidents that to follow him through the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century is to be reminded of an American history that has been all but cropped out of the story in favor of excessive attention to the founding fathers and “the greatest generation.”

Who now knows the names Emma Goldman, Louise Bryant, John Reed, John and James McNamara, Robert La Follette: all members of Steffens's circle? If one of those names does cause a bell to tinkle off in the distance, it's probably only thanks to a slogan on a t-shirt—something about dancing—or a Warren Beatty film from the 1980s—something about commies.

It might be argued that figures like Goldman (an anarchist who was born in Russia and died in Canada) and Reed (born in Portland, Oregon, but interred in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis when, a Communist Party functionary, he succumbed to typhus) were too far outside the mainstream to play a significant role in American history. Since history is written by the winners, and since most of the causes championed by Steffens and his comrades were far from entirely successful, it becomes clear that these losers have no place in the story Americans like to tell about their country. La Follette may be emblematic here: he ran for president and lost not once but twice. The best he ever did was as the candidate of the Federated Farmer-Labor Party in 1924 when he took only his home state, Wisconsin, and its thirteen electoral votes.

When Steffens entered public life as a crusading journalist—he was one of those for whom the term “muckraker” was coined—he had a lot in common with La Follette, a respected friend. They both believed that there were problems plaguing America, but also that there were solutions to these problems short of revolution. La Follette, who was at different times governor of, and senator from, Wisconsin, persisted in this oft-disappointed optimism throughout his life. Steffens, on the other hand, came to believe that “democracy cannot be achieved by democratic methods” (368).¹

As wrongheaded, or even deplorable, as one may find this attitude (it's hard to think of dictator who wouldn't wholeheartedly agree), one comes to understand, reading Hartshorn's chronicle, how Steffens came to feel this way. First was all the muck through which he'd dragged his rake. His investigative forays into a number of American

¹ All quotations are from the book under review.

cities gave rise to a series of articles blowing the lid off of American municipal corruption. Collected into a book, *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), these pieces made Steffens a journalistic superstar. Major national and international magazines fought over his work, and “even a cigar company joined the rush to praise Steffens by naming a cigar after him and featuring his face on the box” (114).

Steffens got famous, but that wasn’t all. He also got disillusioned with the American system, began to “unlearn,” as he was fond of putting it, an old truth: the notion that tycoons were the bad guys and the American people the good guys. Instead, getting to know the plutocrats he was writing about, he found that “...bribery and corruption can be done by good men...” (117). He did not excuse the tycoons’ behavior, but he began to include the American people among those he blamed for the sorry state in which he found the country. “The misgovernment of the American people,” he explained, “is misgovernment by the American people” (118).

About one muck-filled city, St. Louis, he wrote:

The stream of pollution branched off in the most unexpected directions and spread out in a network of veins and arteries so complex that hardly any part of the body politic seemed clear of it. It flowed out of the majority party into the minority; out of politics into vice and crime; out of business into politics, and back into business; from the boss, down through the police to the prostitute, and up through the practice of law into the courts; and the big throbbing arteries ran out through the country over the State to the Nation—and back. (116)

His disillusionment with American cities in the early part of the twentieth century, as the final clause suggests, had spread beyond individual cities to encompass the nation.

Disillusionment with the American attempt at democracy, though, is only half of what made Steffens renounce democratic methods. The other

piece of the puzzle was that the revolution in Russia seemed to offer a model of how a society might move quickly from inequality and corruption even ranker than that found in America to an almost utopian state, and do so without the long delays and ineffectual stumbling that Steffens had come to feel characterized attempts at democratic reform. “Only an incurable romantic,” Hartshorn writes, “...could have sincerely believed that a democratic order would evolve from the massive, crippled, dysfunctional state that was Russia in 1917. Steffens believed” (270).

Having watched the rise and fall of communism in its Leninist, Stalinist, and Maoist varieties, and having seen the destruction these systems wrought, one can only conclude that Steffens was not just an “incurable romantic,” but also a fool, though perhaps the terms are synonymous. Americans in our time, who have lived through the Reagan and George W. Bush years and now watch Obama endorse and fortify several of Bush the Younger’s most appalling policies, are generally able to articulate quite convincingly what it is that has been appalling about the rightward shift of the United States. They—we—are generally unable, however, to articulate what a bright alternative future might look like or to explain how we might reach that unimaginable place. We no longer have a “future” like the one Steffens saw in revolutionary Russia, and believed in as fervently when he died in 1936 as he had in 1917.

Even as we pat ourselves on the back for our world-weary skepticism, for being too smart to fall for solutions as simple and flawed as the one embraced by Steffens, we must also confess to a touch of envy. How nice it would be to believe. Hartshorn reminds us in this superb biography that, once upon a time, good people did believe.

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