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Muckrakers and their Impact on 20th Century Progressivism

RHEAA NAIR¹

ABSTRACT

The progressive era in US history began in the early 1900s, and was a period of rapid socio-economic and technological reforms. This period saw expansion of businesses as well as a hope to make America a more democratic place. During this time there emerged a group of journalists tagged as the Muckrakers. Using their first amendment right to free speech, these journalists were on a mission to uncover the corrupt practices prevalent in America at the time. They mostly wrote for McClure's magazine and included; Jacob Riis, Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Lincoln Steffens, amongst others. They gambled their reputation to write about the injustices they observed. The reason for their success at the time is partly due to the coming of Theodore Roosevelt, a progressive president who endorsed these journalists and is even credited with coming up with the term 'muckraker'. But by the 1910s, the atmosphere of America was no longer conducive to the survival of the muckrakers. The world war changed American feelings towards enterprises and the government. The traces of these journalists were reduced, but they left behind a legacy of American legislative changes.

Keywords: Progressivism, Journalists, Theodore Roosevelt, Corruption, Muckrakers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The early 1900s are often termed as the progressive era in US history. This period is marked by an expansion of businesses and progressive reforms. The coming of McKinley as President coincided with a period of tranquillity and prosperity² in America. The seeds of the capitalist behemoth that is America as we know it now, were being sown around this time. Progressivism was a reaction to the rapid industrialization that followed the Civil War. There were far-reaching socio-economic, as well as technological changes that took place at this time. This era also hoped to make America, and the world, a more democratic place.³

Amongst the forces of change were a group of journalists, who came to be tagged as the 'Muckrakers'. These were journalists who sought to expose the corruption of the system by

¹ Author is a student at NMIMS Kirit P. Mehta School of Law, India.

² Pole, J. et. al. 22. "United States: Progressive Era." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

³ Library of Congress. 2022. "Progressive Era to New Era 1900-1929."

uncovering big businessmen and governments⁴. Their work has influenced modern-day investigative journalism and was a catalyst for many legislations at the time. The First Amendment of the US constitution provides for the right of free speech, and free press. The Muckrakers were a great example of how free speech was utilized for public benefit and actualized the role of the press as the fourth pillar of democracy.

The term muckraker is said to have originated from President Theodore Roosevelt's 1906 speech where he drew on John Bunyan's character from the 1678 classic "Pilgrim's Progress". He said;

"..you may recall the description of the Man with the Muck-rake, the man who could look no way but downward with the muck-rake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck-rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor"⁵

This paper studies how these journalists employed their first amendment right to free speech, and why the progressive era was conducive to their work. I also aim to see how their writings translated into real laws, and what led to their downfall. Would the progressive era have been just as successful without these journalists? Did their writings have a real impact?

(A) Literature review

While Muckraking is said to have declined after 1910, Louis Filler's⁶(1993) account follows muckraking journalism through World War II, McCarthyism, the civil rights movement, Korea, Vietnam, Ralph Nader, and Watergate. Tracing the memory of the muckraking movement, Filler provides the context in which to place the muckrakers, and how they adjust to the debates of the 19th and 20th centuries. This gives an idea about the cultural and contemporary impact of the muckrakers.

A more nuanced study about the impact of muckrakers is found in Valuck et al (1992)⁷, where the impact of specific muckrakers is studied. Amongst this is the coverage of Edward Bok, whose reports on patent medication resulted in the food and drug act 1906. His reporting not only had an impact on the USA but these tactics were mirrored by journalists in the United Kingdom and in Europe.

⁴ Students of History. 2022. "Muckrakers of the Progressive Era." Students of History.

⁵ Roosevelt, Theodore, Andrews, Wayne (ed.). 1958. "The Autobiography, Condensed from the Original Edition, Supplemented by Letters, Speeches, and Other Writings". 1st ed. pp. 246-47.

⁶ Louis Filler. 1993. "*The muckrakers*". Stanford Univ. Press.

⁷ Robert Valuck et. Al. 1992. "Patent medicine muckraking: Influences on American pharmacy, social reform, and foreign actors". *Pharmacy in History. 183-192*.

While studying the decline of muckraking, Poitras⁸ pursues the argument that the decline of muckraking may possibly be a case study of advertiser influence. This is an argument that has been made by other scholars as well, stating that advertiser influence can prevent news media from reporting unbiasedly on business houses. However, Poitras' analysis fails to find any evidence in support of this argument. The tests entail comparing the market performance of muckraking and non-muckraking magazines, as well as assessing the factors that influence advertising in muckraking publications. In general, there was no evidence to back up the idea of an advertising boycott.

II. WHY WAS MUCKRAKING PREVALENT DURING THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT?

The progressive era is marked as a time of social revolution and change in the United States, which began from 1890 to 1920⁹. Progressivism wanted to fix the problems that were created by industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and political corruption. Economic reform and morality were promoted. The nature of reform in the era was liberal, it was a movement that wanted to further the liberalist aspirations of the capitalist nation¹⁰. It is characterized by reformist sensibilities, civic associations, and an emphasis on change. It challenged traditional liberalist doctrines, putting ideologies such as 'laissez-faire' liberalism under fire. Theodore Roosevelt was a leader of progressive ideals. His gaining presidency is a major contributor to the success of the progressive era. He was hellbent on breaking up Company trusts, and was known as a 'trust-buster'. Journalism at this time is said to be a symptom of these values and ideas, thus, muckrakers represent the interpretations of the era, and the reform in conservation ideas. Muckrakers exposed not only political corruption but also the complacency of the American citizenry.¹¹

This was also a time when print media gained a boost in popularity. It was the beginning of the age of mass media circulation. Magazines and newspapers were covering more political stories, and journalists started to expose dishonest practices. The calls for social action were amplified by the expansion of communication technology. Other than print media, powerful rhetoric was formed by film and advertisements.¹² These movements and actions had an impact on

⁸ Marc Poitras & Daniel Sutter. 2009. "Advertiser pressure and control of the news: The decline of muckraking revisited". *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*. 944-958.

⁹ David M. Kennedy & Elizabeth Cohen. 2012. "The American Pageant." 17th Ed.

¹⁰ Kristin Elizabeth Davis. (2000) "Muckraking exposés and the shaping of Progressive Era political culture." *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*.

¹¹ Kristin Elizabeth Davis. (2000) "Muckraking exposés and the shaping of Progressive Era political culture." *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*.

¹² Kristin Elizabeth Davis. (2000) "Muckraking exposés and the shaping of Progressive Era political culture." *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*.

liberalism. As John Dewey argues; liberalism cannot be understood historically; “it is a doctrine that easily can and has, accommodated change”¹³. Roosevelt had emphasized the social benefits of investigative muckraking;

“There are, in the body politic, economic and social, many and grave evils, and there is urgent necessity for the sternest war upon them. There should be relentless exposure of and attack upon every evil man whether politician or businessman, every evil practice, whether in politics, in business, or in social life. I hail as a benefactor every writer or speaker, every man who, on the platform, or in book, magazine, or newspaper, with merciless severity makes such attack, provided always that he in his turn remembers that the attack is of use only if it is absolutely truthful.”¹⁴

His election was greatly helpful to the muckrakers as he was an openly liberal president, who was not only serving the corporations.

III. IMPACT OF MUCKRAKERS

The story of Muckraking begins with Jacob Riis, who set the stage for the upcoming years of muckraking journalism that America was about to witness. Jacob Riis was a Danish immigrant who worked odd jobs in the darker parts of New York and even had a stint as a police reporter. He was a social reformer not only in his writings, but he also utilized photographs to show the harrowing realities he wrote about. His book “How the Other Half lives” (1890) is a photojournalistic account of the slums of the lower East Side of Manhattan. He documented the tenement apartments and the criminal elements on the dark streets. These accounts shocked the conscience of his readers¹⁵, and lead to the tenements being torn down, and improvements in the implementation of garbage collection. Riis received support from Teddy Roosevelt, who has been reported as stating “I have read your book, and I have come to help.”¹⁶ Roosevelt had also referred to him and Lincoln Steffens as “civic crusaders”¹⁷, his work, along with Roosevelt’s endorsement set in motion the next few decades of progressive change. Around the same time, Lincoln Steffens also caught Roosevelt’s eye. After working as a reporter for The New York Evening Post, he eventually went on to become the managing editor of the infamous *McClure’s Magazine*. He did not buy into journalistic sensationalism, and rather his

¹³ Kristin Elizabeth Davis. (2000) “Muckraking exposés and the shaping of Progressive Era political culture.” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁴ Roosevelt, Theodore, Andrews, Wayne (ed.). (1958) “The Autobiography, Condensed, from the Original Edition, Supplemented by Letters, Speeches, and Other Writings” 1st ed. pp. 246–47.

¹⁵ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jacob Riis." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 22, 2021.

¹⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Jacob Riis." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 22, 2021.

¹⁷ Kristin Elizabeth Davis. (2000). “Muckraking exposés and the shaping of Progressive Era political culture.” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

writings were sociological case studies¹⁸. His work is linked to the creation of the Federal Reserve System. Being the Editor of *McClure*, he has connections with the likes of Ida Tarbell. When tracing Muckraking, *McClure's Magazine* is important to bring. *McClure's* was an illustrated monthly periodical, that amplified and gave space to many of the muckraking journalists. To an extent, the periodical was a reflection of American society at the time. From Ida Tarbell to Riis, muckrakers found home in the magazine.

An account of muckraking is incomplete without mentioning a persistent woman, Ida Tarbell. Her exposé about business tycoon John D. Rockefeller, and his Standard Oil Company, helped usher in new political, economic, and industrial reforms. Having personally been affected by Rockefeller in the past, her 19 -part series revealed his unethical business tactics, abuse of power, and anticompetitive monopolization of the petroleum industry. Her book "The History of the Standard Oil Company" (1904), as well as her articles in *McClure's* exposed the questionable business practices of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Trust, which had been formed when Rockefeller combined all his corporations in an attempt to reduce competition and control prices in the oil industry¹⁹. Her work resulted in the Sherman Antitrust Act, and the 1911 Supreme Court decision²⁰ that led to the dissolution of the Standard Oil Company, altering the future of business in America²¹.

By the mid-1900s muckraking was flourishing. In 1906, Upton Sinclair published his book; "The Jungle" which gave a look into the abysmal working conditions of the meatpacking plants of the Chicago stockyards. Initially a newspaper report, the book sprung from his trip to the plants where he spent seven weeks gathering information. The novel showcases the exploitation of immigrants in the USA. His purpose in describing the industry was to advance socialism, but readers picked up on the health violations and unsanitary practices in the American meatpacking industry that he had described. The public's focus was not on the plight of the workers, but on the way, the meat was handled. Sinclair even admitted that he gained fame "not because the public cared anything about the workers, but simply because the public did not want to eat tubercular beef"²². The public outrage was utilized by progressive reformers in the Federal Government such as Harvey Washington Wiley, the chief chemist at the United States Department of Agriculture, who had long been at work advocating for legislation to protect

¹⁸ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Lincoln Steffens." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 2, 2022.

¹⁹ "The History of Standard Oil." *Development of the Industrial U.S. Reference Library. Encyclopedia.com*. (March 28, 2022).

²⁰ *Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey v. United States*, 221 U.S. 1 (1911)

²¹ "The History of Standard Oil." *Development of the Industrial U.S. Reference Library. Encyclopedia.com*. (March 28, 2022).

²² Mark Sullivan. (1996) "Our times: America at the birth of the twentieth century."

consumers.²³ Together with Roosevelt, they brought the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act, to protect consumers. Sinclair's reason for writing the book was to spread his agenda of socialism. The book depicted working-class poverty, and the lack of social support for workers, and also showed the corruption of the people in power. His writing did not do much for the plight of workers. And while it did lead to legislative action, it was on another agenda.

Muckrakers were writing about issues that bothered them, for Ida it was Rockefeller abusing the system, and for Sinclair, it was poverty and corruption, but the readers are the ones that pushed the change. Their writings often resulted in litigation or legislative action that had a lasting impact on American politics and voting patterns. These journalists risked their reputation to write about something that bothered them, coincidentally, or not, this aligned with the election of Theodore Roosevelt. The journalists were able to create a demand for change, and the president was able to utilize this and push change. Roosevelt's image as an energetic crusader for civic virtue and action attracted several journalists, who in turn benefited from their association.²⁴

IV. THE DECLINE OF MUCKRAKERS

Although Roosevelt was said to be one of the biggest allies of the Muckrakers, his speech which coined the term could have been behind their decline. Roosevelt's comparison of journalists of the time, to Bunyan's character, tagged muckraking journalists as journalists shining their light only on the dirtiest corners of society. Roosevelt felt that constant stories of corruption were not helping the country.²⁵

But the speech was not the only nail in the coffin. The start of World War I was an event that shifted American sentiments about industries, and industrialists. When industries are so crucial to war efforts, anyone going after them is not going to be praised, but ostracised. War brought out nationalist sentiments, that made people overlook the deceitful practices. Further, the breakup of McClure's made things harder for muckrakers. McClure had provided a home for many journalists to voice their views openly. But in 1906, when the publisher himself seemed to have skeletons in his closet, the magazine's spotless reputation came under fire. Many of the leading muckrakers left McClure's, and other magazines were less willing to give that muck leeway to expose pieces.

²³ Edsitement. "The Jungle, Muckrakers, and Teddy Roosevelt." *NEH.GOV*. 6 April, 2022.

²⁴ Kristin Elizabeth Davis. (2000) "Muckraking exposés and the shaping of Progressive Era political culture." University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

²⁵ Jacqueline Conciatore Senter. (2018) "The Muckrakers and Progressive Reformers." Cavendish Square Publishing.

Finally, the coming of Taft, a relatively conservative figure, meant that the muckrakers were running short on allies to continue doing what they did. As a result, from the 1910s onwards, muckrakers seem to disappear.

V. CONCLUSION

The progressive era in the United States marks a period of reform, in the socio-economic status of Americans. Americans were increasingly becoming aware of the cynical aspects of industrialism. Pushing reforms was one group of American journalists known as the Muckrakers. These people sought it upon themselves to expose the government and businesses' corrupt practices. They were mainly housed and supported by McClure's magazine. The Muckraking journalists were not confined to white men, they included women, and immigrants, who shone a light on the horrifying conditions of the working class. They wrote from personal experiences, but their writings resonated with many. While the works of the journalists were not directly responsible for legislative action, muckrakers played an important role in uncovering the corruption at the time. The public and the progressive reformers used their writings as an opportunity to push for change. They were also supported by a progressive President and his progressive cabinet members. In their heyday, the muckrakers brought down enterprises such as the Standard Oil Co. and drove legislative reforms in the food industry. Their decline was due to many reasons, but a major one was the starting of the World War. Criticizing the government at a time when patriotism was needed, became blasé. With no one funding their journalistic exploits, the muckrakers faded. While muckraking waned, these journalists became the picture of journalistic virtue, even inspiring some core tenets of investigative journalism today.

The muckrakers may be compared to the writers of the French revolution such as Montesquieu and Rousseau who began the conversations and ideas that lead the people to revolt. These journalists show the importance of the press as the fourth pillar of democracy.

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