**[How I Became a Rebel: Lincoln Steffens](http://bughouseblog.blogspot.com/2008/02/how-i-became-rebel-lincoln-steffens.html)**

"How I Became a Rebel. A Symposium. Part 1," **The Labor Herald,** June 1922, p. 24-25.

By [Lincoln Steffens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Steffens)


MY approach to the social problem was political. I was a reporter, a muckraker; and I had been a college man; American, German, French universities. My working theory, therefore, was unscientific. The social problem was to me a political problem; and the political problem was moral. Bad men made our good government bad and good men would make it good. Honestly I believed that.

Honestly I "exposed" seventeen cities. They were all corrupt. They were all corrupted in the same way, to the same end. Regardless of men. The sources of corruption in all seventeen cities were the same. This suggested that general, not merely personal forces were at work, and that the problems of all our cities were all one problem and that the solution must be one.

At that time many city people thought that, while the cities were "bad," the state governments were "good" or "better." I took the trail to the states, and I "did" eleven of them. They were all corrupt. They were all corrupted in exactly the same way. They were all corrupted just as the cities were corrupted. And, as in the cities, the sources of the corruption in all my eleven states were the same.

But the national government: that at least was "good." I wrote a series of articles in Washington, giving particulars which in general showed that the Federal Government was not only corrupt like the cities and the states; it was corrupted in the same way, by the same interests.

In the long course of this investigation I met all sorts of men in politics: good and bad, crooks and reformers. It made no essential difference. The best and ablest reformers I watched at work were either beaten or corrupted. The process of corruption went on over or under or through them. Evidently the problem was not a moral problem and the solution was not-goodness. Bad men did not cause the evil; good men could not do much good.

Still thinking in terms of good and evil, I asked what did the evil, and to find the answer I passed by men and started for the roots. That's what "radical" means: a digger for the roots of socalled evil. What are they? Not who, but what? I had to start with, the generalization that the sources of our political corruption in all branches of the American Government were the same. They were all one. What was that one Thing?

Business. I wrote it "Big Business;" railroads, public service corporations, etc. I did not see till later that back of big business was little business. All I saw was that big business corrupted politics and government. But that was a long step for me to take. My theory was that it was the other way around; that business was "good," politics was "bad." I thought what many men still think; that is was politics that held-up, blackmailed and corrupted business: To find that it was business that held down, bribed and corrupted politics, was progress.

I dropped politics for awhile and studied business. I reported the exposure of the Life Insurance companies. There were three of them. We began with one. That proved to be corrupt: as corrupt as a city; worse; and the sources of the corruption were the same as in a city, a state, the national government. And then, when the investigation extended to the other life insurance companies, the second and third big companies were found to be all corrupted in the same way as the first. Some of us then howled for a look into the lesser companies and they were just like the big ones. Some natural law was at work.

How about other businesses? Abiding my time, I got a chance to look deep into three railroads: The Pennsylvania, the New Haven and the Southern Pacific. All corrupt; all corrupted alike and--all like the insurance companies and the government.

One thing at work everywhere!

Yes, everywhere. Wherever I looked I saw it. It was business. It was successful business men who contributed to our political parties, gave money to our universities, supported our churches, bought up newspapers. It was business that corrupted all these things and, worst of all, "got" Labor and Business too. The controllers and grafters in business control and graft upon all life. Here and abroad. For I went to foreign countries and, though I never wrote much about them, I did study and so can say that in the four greatest countries in Europe, the corruption is just like that of the United States, in politics, business, journalism, colleges, churches, organized Labor. What did it mean? It meant a lot of things to me, but suffice it for the moment to say that, to me, it meant that the social problem is not political and not moral; it is a business problem. Therefore it is an economic problem, one and the same all over the world; and that the solution is likewise economic.

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