

Primary Sources on Urban Political Machines

*The “muckrakers” wrote on many subjects, such as child labor, prisons, religion, corporations, and insurance companies, but urban political corruption remained a particularly popular target. Lincoln Steffens was famous for his investigations of urban politics. In 1904 he collected his writings on St. Louis, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York into *The Shame of the Cities*. New York political boss George Washington Plunkitt offered his own skeptical and humorous view of Steffens’ book as one chapter in a series of “Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics,” published in 1905.*

From Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*.

On corruption in Pittsburgh, 1904

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/modules.html>

Boss Magee’s idea was not to corrupt the city government, but to be it; not to hire votes in councils, but to own councilmen; and so, having seized control of his organization, he nominated cheap or dependent men for the select and common councils. Relatives and friends were his first recourse, then came bartenders, saloon-keepers, liquor dealers....

Businessmen came almost as cheap as politicians, and they came also at the city’s expense....The manufacturers and the merchants were kept well in hand by little municipal grants and privileges....

Plunkitt’s Plain Talk: Satirizing Steffens

On *The Shame of the Cities*

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5731.html>

I’ve been readin’ a book by Lincoln Steffens on *The Shame of the Cities*. Steffens means well but, like all reformers, he don’t know how to make distinctions. He can’t see no difference between honest graft and dishonest graft and, consequent, he gets things all mixed up. There’s the biggest kind of a difference between political looters and politicians who make a fortune out of politics by keepin’ their eyes wide open. The looter goes in for himself alone without considerin’ his organization or his city. The politician looks after his own interests, the organization’s interests, and the city’s interests all at the same time. See the distinction? For instance, I ain’t no looter. The looter hogs it. I never hogged. I made my pile in politics, but, at the same time, I served the organization and got more big improvements for New York City than any other livin’ man. And I never monkeyed with the penal code.

Cartoon: “Let Us Prey” Thomas Nast

<http://www.csubak.edu/~gsantos/cat15.html>

