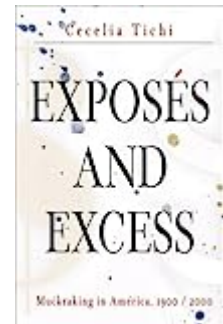


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Cecelia Tichi.** *Exposes and Excess: Muckraking in America, 1900-2000*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 234 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1926-5; \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3763-4.



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Most journalism scholars categorize muckraking and investigative reporting as a tradition separate from literary journalism. They situate bare-knuckled journalistic exposure of corruption, injustice, and maltreatment within historical models of progressive social reform. The literature of fact, then, remains a parallel, alternative tradition grounded in journalism-as-story-telling. In contrast, Cecelia Tichi, in *Exposes and Excess: Muckraking in America, 1900-2000*, examines muckraking as narrative art, challenging the conventional wisdom.

Classic works on muckraking place the genre within the early-twentieth-century Progressive movement and later reform movements. Historian Richard Hofstadter packaged the journalism of Ida Tarbell, Upton Sinclair, and Ray Stannard Baker with writings by Progressive reformers like Theodore Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and Samuel Gompers, elevating message above style, in *The Progressive Movement, 1900 to 1915* (1963). Literature on the muckrakers has focused on their political and social ideas. That is the approach taken by Louis Filler in *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (1939), Harvey Swados in *Years of Conscience: The Muckrakers* (1962), David Chalmers in *The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers* (1964) and *The Muckrake Years* (1974), Leonard Downie Jr. in *The New Muckrakers* (1976), Walter M. Brasch in *Forerunners of Revolution: Muckrakers and the*

*American Social Conscience* (1990), Ellen F. Fitzpatrick in *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles* (1994), Carl Jensen in *Stories that Changed America: Muckrakers of the Twentieth Century* (2000), and Judith Serrin and William Serrin in *Muckraking! The Journalism That Changed America* (2004). Only Michael L. Johnson saw muckraking in league with literary journalism, including both under the umbrella of *The New Journalism: The Underground Press, the Artists of Nonfiction, and Changes in the Establishment Media* (1971); but even he saw literary journalism and muckraking as separate, parallel responses to shortcomings in the mainstream media.

Tichi, a noted American studies scholar who has studied, among other subjects, the American culture of country music, does not deny muckraking's reformist character. Indeed, *Exposes and Excess* embraces muckraking within a larger theme of social criticism, studying the use of narrative to inspire reform. The "excess" in the book's title refers to American culture, not muckraking. Tichi criticizes the excesses of America's corporate "bulked up and hollowed out" culture (p. 18), from McMansions to Davos Man, to position the popularity of muckraking within America's twin Gilded Ages in the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her contribution to muckraking studies, though, comes from her focus on the literary qualities of investigative journalism.

The distinctions between muckraking and literary journalism are fewer than previous scholars have acknowledged. They share a commitment to immersion or comprehensive reporting and, to a considerable extent, literary devices such as voice, plot, character development, and symbolic language. Granted, muckraking appears to champion fact over style. "Whichever muckraker one may choose to read, one salient criterion is palpable on the narrative surface: a commitment to verifiable fact," Tichi asserts (p. 69). Literary nonfiction, on the other hand, appears to place a greater importance on style, especially in early examples of the genre when composite characters and manipulated chronology were acceptable. Yet this distinction fails to hold completely. Work by scholar Edmund Lambeth, *Committed Journalism: An Ethic for the Profession* (1992), and my study, *The Evolution of American Investigative Journalism* (2005) stress vividness and literary quality as important criteria for investigative journalism. Nonetheless, muckrakers do indeed revere facts as "one crucial basis" for their legitimacy (p. 70), but Tichi ignores the factual lapses of early muckrakers, exemplified in David Graham Phillips's 1906 article in *Cosmopolitan*, "The Treason of the Senate: Aldrich, the Head of It All," which *Collier's* criticized as being a distortion and suppression of facts to make it sensationalistic. Moreover, modern literary journalists, like modern muckrakers, embrace "a mandate for accuracy," as revealed in Norman Sims's explication of literary journalism's standards in *The Literary Journalists* (1984).

The merging of the two traditions stands out in Tichi's interviews with Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001), and Joseph Hallinan, author of *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* (2001). Schlosser was influenced as much by literary journalist John McPhee, his former teacher, as by early muckrakers Upton Sinclair and Ray Stannard Baker. Likewise, Hallinan's muckraking was influenced by the writings of literary journalists Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Robert Vare.

Tichi uses chapters 1 and 2 to show the similarities in the social and political milieus of the early twentieth century and early twenty-first century that provided the impetus for muckraking, then turns her study to the narrative style of the early muckrakers in chapter 3. Using historian Hayden White's examination of narrative, Tichi establishes the criteria of personification (character-building), figuration of language, scene setting, plotting, and coherence. She points out Lincoln Steffens's extensive characterization of Mayor Al-

bert Ames in his "The Shame of Minneapolis." She underscores C. P. Connolly's figurative description of Montana's Anaconda copper mine as that which had "since become a name to conjure with in the copper world" (p. 85). She explains that scene-setting provides "a vivid sense of place and a forum for action" (p. 85), exemplified by Connolly's description of Butte, Montana, in his (1906) *McClure's Magazine* article. Tichi also uses Connolly's article to establish the importance of plot, which she identifies in the statement: "The story of copper is largely woven around the passions, hatred and ambitions of two men who were by nature antagonists" (p. 85). Tichi shows coherence as a quality of narrative with a short discussion of Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Had Tichi used a greater variety of examples, her explication of these qualities would have been enhanced, though she partially redeems herself with a lengthy assessment of the narrative qualities in Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), perhaps wisely choosing a muckraking book to examine narrative criteria in more detail. Tichi discusses Tarbell's characterization of John D. Rockefeller, her use of the trope of war, her double-plotting throughout the book, her use of machine and shadow metaphors, and how the book's narrative coheres.

Shifting to discussion of the modern muckrakers, Tichi adequately disassembles the myth of muckrakers being solitary fanatics, showing that they are more reasonably seen as writers who build on a body of public interest in a subject. "Muckraking narrative, in fact, mostly works â€¦ [by] tapping social crises already roiling the public in deep currents," she asserts (p. 106). She points out, for example, that Tarbell's study of the Standard Oil Company came after two decades of public concern over trusts, including specific criticism of the oil company, as exemplified by publication of Henry Demarest Lloyd's *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (1894) a decade before Tarbell's first article about the company appeared in *McClure*. She also details the years of public discussion about the purity of food and drugs that preceded Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Tichi also shows that modern muckraker books often reflect years of interest in a topic in newspapers, magazines, Hollywood movies, television shows, documentary films, and comic strips.

Unfortunately, Tichi's excellent study of the early twentieth-century muckrakers does not extend to her work on the modern muckrakers. Instead of careful analysis of the books of modern muckrakers, she instead offers question-and-answer-format interviews with Barbara Ehrenreich, Schlosser, Naomi Klein, Laurie Garrett,

and Hallinan. Though Tichi precedes each interview with a discussion of each writer's work, she does not provide a systematic examination of the texts. The interviews are insightful, but Tichi offers little scholarly evaluation or explication. Additionally, Tichi's study would have been strengthened had she consulted the wealth of research on literary journalism, including Ronald Weber's excellent study *The Literature of Fact* (1980), and the articles collected by Weber in *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at the New Journalism* (1974), as well as to other studies of muckraking and investigative journalism, including Robert Miraldi, *Muckraking and Objectivity: Journalism's Colliding Traditions* (1990), and James S. Ettema and Theodore L. Glasser, *Custodians of Conscience: Investiga-*

*tive Journalism and Public Virtue* (1998).

Tichi's personalization of her subject further detracts from the scholarly material. Granted, her book is one of an occasional series issued by the University of Pennsylvania Press that encourages the personal touch, but it is disconcerting when Tichi breaks the momentum of her study with personal revelations, history, and observations. Indeed, *Exposes and Excess* is only nominally a study of muckraking, which makes the book less attractive to journalism historians. Tichi's primary thesis is social criticism, using muckraker texts to expound on the problems of modern America. While the criticisms appear legitimate, they seem out of place within her insightful, scholarly analysis of the early muckrakers.

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