An examination of five muckraking magazines—"Collier's," "Cosmopolitan," "McClure's," "Everybody's," and the "Arena"—reveals that while addressing many other social ills, muckraking journalists failed to take a strong stand against one of the most glaring evils of their day—the lynching of blacks. Both before and during the muckraking period, columns in "Collier's" argued both sides of the issue, sometimes opposing and sometimes favoring the lynching of blacks. "Cosmopolitan" and "Everybody's" paid almost no attention to lynching. Ray Stannard Baker wrote two articles on lynching for "McClure's" and continued to explore racial issues at "The American Magazine." After Baker's departure, "McClure's" lost interest in lynching. The more radical "Arena" opposed lynching during the premuckraking period, but made little of the issue during the period itself. The progressive movement's blind spot to lynching and race issues was caused by its feeling that immigrants and blacks did not fit in with their ideas of participatory democracy. Even Baker shared the racist perspective of his time. The muckraker's faith that "facts" themselves would lead to reform was justified only when the prevailing consensus allowed the "facts" to emerge, not in the case of the lynching of blacks. (JL)
The Muckrakers and Lynching:  
A Case Study in Racial Thinking

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Abstract

This paper examines why the muckrakers, who attained fame as turn-of-the-century investigative reporters, failed to take a strong stand against one of the most glaring evils of their day—the lynching of Blacks. It concludes they were blind to the true reasons for lynching, efforts to enforce white supremacy by mob tactics, because they themselves could not transcend the thinking of white society.

One muckraker, Ray S. Baker, is credited with helping alert Americans to the issues of race as a national concern. But the paper notes that because there was little social consensus on improving conditions for Blacks, Baker's efforts did not lead to an end of lynching. In this study of the failures of the muckrakers may lie a warning of the limitations of investigative reporting today.
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Investigative journalists, who attained fame as muckrakers just after the turn of the century, attacked scores of social ills - corruption, economic malfeasance, adulterated food and drugs, mistreatment of labor, slum conditions. Yet one area of injustice in American life received little attention. That was the plight of the Black, then being systematically stripped of his voting rights in the South and subjected to increasing segregation. As one historian writing in the 1930s expressed it, "On the whole, people failed to become excited about the problem of the Negro...."¹

The muckraking title was bestowed by President Theodore Roosevelt, who accused the journalists of looking for social wrongs - like the man with the muckrake in Pilgrim's Progress - and failing to see social virtues. Their limited interest in the Black seems perplexing in view of a glaring evil besetting the nation in the muckrakers' heyday: Lynching, mob action to torture and murder individuals suspected of wrongdoing. During the height of muckraking, from roughly 1902 until 1912, the United States experienced 883 lynchings, with 87 victims being white persons and 796 Black.² Two
years alone saw 100 or more persons fall prey to mob action. In 1903 a total of 103 individuals, 17 white and 86 Black, and five years later, 100 persons, 7 white, 93 Black. Thus lynching was a crime directed mainly at Blacks.

The muckrakers belonged to the broad political movement of Progressivism, which condemned special privileges and exploitation that thwarted the ideals of democracy for the masses. Central to Progressivism lay reform achieved through public exposure of wrongful acts and conditions. Consequently muckrakers could have been expected to take a strong stand against each incident of lynching. This did not prove to be the case as will be shown by this examination of the coverage of lynching in five muckraking magazines, Collier's, Cosmopolitan, McClure's, Everybody's and the Arena. This group was cited by journalism historian Frank Luther Mott as the most influential of the muckraking publications.

Edited in New York, these periodicals aimed at mass readership, except for the Arena, which moved from Boston to New York and then to Trenton, New Jersey, and reached a somewhat smaller and more select group of readers. Unlike nineteenth-century literary magazines, Collier's, Cosmopolitan, McClure's and Everybody's cost relatively little, circulated
over the entire nation, profited from national advertising drawn by their mass circulations and featured content addressed to the average middle-class reader's interests. More a journal of opinion than a popular magazine, the Arena joined the other four in crusading for socioeconomic and political reform but never attracted substantial advertising. Aside from the weekly Collier's, all five magazines were published monthly.

Collier's, begun in 1888 under the name Once a Week before becoming Collier's Weekly in 1895, had a history of speaking out on lynching prior to the muckraking era, in keeping with its vigorous liberal editorial policy. Lynching reached its zenith before the turn of the century with the average number reported per year from 1889 to 1899 as 187.5 while in the following decade the number dropped to 92.5 or less than half. During the muckraking period, the proportion directed against Negroes, particularly in the South, grew larger, making lynching an increasingly Southern and racial phenomenon. Statistics showed the proportion of lynchings taking place in the South increased from 82 to 92 per cent from 1889-99 to 1900-09, while the proportion of white victims decreased from 32.2 per cent to 11.4 per cent in the same period.
The pre-muckraking Collier's found lynching a controversial topic. In 1897 the "Current Comment" column noted that numerous citizens of Kentucky "probably" were outraged that a hundred militiamen were being kept from their families "merely" to make sure that "a colored man accused of murder shall not be lynched." It concluded, however, that a state which fails to "protect the life of its humblest citizen cannot be depended upon to protect any one else." Strong protests against lynching appeared in the "Current Eddies" column edited by Julian Hawthorne. While accepting the Southern argument that lynchings took place to punish Negroes who tried to rape white women, the column contended no matter how "lustful" the culprit, white society bore the blame: "Have we treated him (the Negro) like a dog, and then torn him in pieces for not conducting himself like an ascetic?"

This apparently was strong language for Southern readers, one of whom wrote in to insist that lynching was preferable to subjecting women to testifying in court about "unmentionable" crimes, a contention rejected in the "Current Eddies" column. But the subject provoked enough difference of opinion to set one columnist against another. The "Our Note Book" column, edited by Edgar Saltus, attacked the stand taken in "Current Eddies." "Our Note Book" supported
lynchings enthusiastically in cases of Negroes suspected of raping white women, exclaiming, "If a few of them were treated to the hot side of the fagot and left to toast for hours instead of mercifully being killed in a jiffy, their enterprise would cease."13

As the magazine turned its attention to Spanish-American war news in 1898, the editorial disagreement over lynching was forgotten. Lynching was not mentioned in 1898 and only once in 1899 when an anonymous columnist lavished concern on Southern white women and declared, "the evil which causes the lynching continues to be a frightful menace to public safety."14 After avoiding the subject for two more years, Collier's opposed it again in 1901, calling it "one of the worse blots of our civilization."15 Even then it held, "The Negro is a being apart from the whites -- a creature of incomprehensible morals and practices."16

In 1902, as the muckraking period opened, an unsigned comment called attention to a lynching in southeastern Louisiana which had turned into a race riot resulting in the loss of 30 lives.17 Instead of condemning the violence, the magazine noted merely "the increasing frequency and brutality of these outbreaks are alarming even the hopeful people who looked for a rapid settlement of the 'race problem'"
by means of education and the removal of political power from the hands of the Negroes." The following year it printed an article by Thomas Nelson Page, a leading white novelist and apologist for the South, who accused the "new Negro" of seeking social equality presumably by raping white women. He described lynching as a "manifestation of the determination...that this aspiration shall never be realized."

During the summer of 1903 Collier's carried five weekly comments branding lynching as evil. They painted its horrors: "As long as a little child can say, 'I have seen a man hanged, now I wish I could see one burned' a curse will be on the land"; "Murder, pure and simple...is on the head of anyone who contributes to a lynching"; "Let us have a statute...that whenever the community becomes excited over a crime it shall be the duty of all citizens to seize some Negro, the guilty one, if convenient, collect together the little children and women as audience and there burn his flesh until it disappears"; "Thousands long to go to legal hangings -- how much keener is the opportunity to play executioner and torturer themselves."  

Yet by September of that same year the magazine swung around and attacked the lynched rather than the lynchers.
It encouraged Negroes to follow Booker T. Washington and "cure themselves of uselessness and the one...crime (that) stands between them and mercy, between the whites and peace."22 One column suggested that Negro assailants of white women should be made "brother to the ox."23

In 1904, Collier's opposed the lynching of two Negroes near Statesboro, Georgia, after they had received a death sentence.24 A week later details of their burning at the stake appeared along with excerpts from six Southern newspapers condemning the crime and one from the Atlanta Journal praising the lynching mob.25 Caught up in its crusade against patent medicines, the magazine did not refer to lynching again until 1906 when it criticized the Atlanta Evening News for offering a $1,000 reward for the lynching of Negroes who assaulted white women.26 It added, however, that lynching still finds "occasional excuse in the laxity of law-enforcement in certain sections."27

While the impression was conveyed that lynchings occurred in reaction to rapes, in actuality this was not the case. According to records, of the 97 lynchings in 1902 only 30 were for rape or attempted rape; of the 103 in 1903 only 23 were for these causes; of the 87 in 1904 only 20; of the 66 in 1905 only 19; of the 73 in 1906 only 30; of the
63 in 1907, only 24; of the 100 in 1908 only 20; of the 87 in 1909 only 21; of the 74 in 1901 only 24; of the 71 in 1911 only 15; of the 65 in 1912 only 12. A rare instance of Collier's referring to lynching for causes other than the "usual crime" came in 1908 when it quoted Booker T. Washington as saying, following race riots at Springfield, Ohio, that "of the 25 Negroes lynched in various parts of the United States in 60 days, only four were even charged with assault." 29

As the muckraking era waned, Collier's proclaimed, "...the happiest period of the Southern Negro's existence is the present...the North (has) determined to stop meddling and concluded that the Negro is the South's problem, to be solved in the South's own way." 30 Although a prime goal of the muckrakers was to fight lawlessness, and lynching represented lawlessness at its zenith, the magazine's editors did not equate regional violence against an oppressed minority with the kind of injustice that subverted the democratic processes. In its waxing and waning on lynching, Collier's displayed a schizophrenic reaction. Sometimes it adamantly condemned the crime; other times it attempted to blame victims, not perpetrators. It appears the magazine switched positions from time to time to placate its white Southern readers.
Collier's stand on lynching reflected considerably more interest in racial issues than were displayed by Cosmopolitan and Everybody's. Cosmopolitan started in 1886 as a family magazine, moved quickly into the general literary field. Considered liberal, it did not seriously contend for muckraking honors until it was sold to William Randolph Hearst in 1905. Under Hearst management Cosmopolitan achieved the lead in advertising in the general magazine field by 1909, with readers drawn by sensational exposes such as "The Treason of the Senate" in 1906.

Cosmopolitan mentioned lynching only indirectly during the muckraking period in connection with its campaign against peonage in some Southern states. This was a system of court-ordered leasing of convicts to compel them to work out debts or fines, many of which were trumped up by petty officials who profited from the arrangement. In 1907 Richard Barry wrote that "whites and blacks are today being indiscriminately held as chattel slaves and the manacle, lash, bloodhound and bullet are teaching them submission without partiality to color." It distressed Barry to find peonage inflicted on whites: "Like a galvanic shock it undermines our self-importance to find that this new form of slavery places whites and blacks on a plane of
perfect equality..."33

*Everybody's Magazine*, founded in 1896 by the New York branch of Wanamaker's department store, entered its muckraking career in 1903 after being purchased by Erman J. Ridgway. Its greatest coup was publishing an insider's revelations of Wall Street titled "Frenzied Finance" in 1904.34 Ignoring the issue of lynching, *Everybody's* paid almost no attention to racial subjects. It ran a series of articles in 1903 by Booker T. Washington in which he told Negroes their future hinged on the extent to which they worked hard and helped themselves.35 In 1910 it carried a nostalgic piece praising the "Qld-time Negro" of slavery.36

The high point of the muckrakers's interest in lynching came in 1905 when Ray Stannard Baker, a leading journalist who had exposed wrongdoing by both railroad magnats and labor union leaders, turned his attention to the crime. Baker published two articles on lynching in *McClure's*, the leading muckraking magazine, produced by the profitable partnership of S. S. McClure, an Irish immigrant, and John S. Phillips, a Middle Westerner educated at Harvard. Started in 1893, *McClure's* launched the muckraking phenomenon in 1902 with publication of Ida M. Tarbell's "History of the Standard Oil Company," which depicted the evils of monopoly.
It also serialized Lincoln Steffens's expose of municipal corruption, "The Shame of the Cities," beginning in 1903.

A former Chicago newspaperman whose home was in East Lansing, Michigan, Baker outlined his purpose in the introduction to the first article on lynching. He wrote:

I have just been visiting a number of 'lynching towns' in this country, both in the South and in the North. I went primarily to formulate, if I could, a clear idea of what 150 lynchings a year — the average in the U. S. for the last 22 years — might really signify, to discover in what way a lynching town is different from my town or your town, what classes of citizens constitute the mobs and what is the underlying cause of such murderous outbreaks.

The first article described two lynchings in the South:

The one at Statesboro, Georgia, and one at Huntsville, Alabama. In the Statesboro incident, two illiterate turpentine workers, Paul Reed and Will Cato, were burned alive after being found guilty of murdering a well-to-do farm family. Baker told how a mob gathered round the courthouse where the prisoners were confined, broke through a squad of militia allegedly called to guard the prisoners but ordered not to load their rifles, dragged the Negroes from the building, bound them to a stump, placed fagots around them, drenched them in oil, and rejoiced in watching them die. He included sensational details as in this passage describing how the mob
fought for souvenirs: "Pieces of the stump were hacked off, and finally one young man...gathered up a few charred remnants of bone, carried them uptown, and actually tried to give them to the judge who presided at the trial..."38

Baker was appalled both by the murder of the farm family and by the lynching. He called Reed and Cato examples of "the floating, worthless Negro" and pronounced Negro criminals generally more savage than white criminals: "...under stress of passion, he (the Negro) seems to revert wholly to savagery."39 He condemned mob violence, contending it "releases that which is ugly, violent, revengeful in the community as in the individual human heart."40 Still he rationalized lynching on the grounds justice often miscarried and murderers escaped punishment through the technicalities of the law. As he put it, "...I was astounded by the extraordinary prevalence in all these lynching counties, North as well as South, of crimes of violence, especially homicide, accompanied in every case by a poor enforcement of the law."41

The journalist attributed the lynching at Huntsville, where a mob hung a Negro murder suspect and shot him full of holes, to "poor white trash," who hated Negroes in part because they provided competition for employment.42 He praised officials for indicting ten members of the mob even
though jurors acquitted them because "a large majority felt that a white man should not be punished for lynching a Negro." Exposing the contention that lynching was "absolutely necessary" to prevent Negroes from wholesale rape of white women, Baker concluded, "The mob spirit...once invoked... spreads and spreads, until today lynching for rape forms only a very small proportion of the total number of mob hangings. It spreads until a Negro is lynched for chicken stealing, or for mere 'obnoxiousness.' " He quoted statistics that reported out of 104 lynchings in 1903 only 11 were for rape and 10 for attempted rape, while 47 were for murder, 15 for complicity in murderous assaults, 4 for arson, 5 for undefined 'race prejudice,' 2 for insults to whites, 1 for making threats, 5 for unknown offenses, 1 for refusing to give information, and 3 due to mistaken identity. 

In his article on the North, Baker examined a lynching in Springfield, Ohio, that occurred when a mob broke into a jail and hung a Negro who had killed a police officer trying to prevent the murderer from shooting his girlfriend. Baker blamed this episode on "underlying conditions in Springfield: Corrupt politics, vile saloons, the law paralyzed by non-enforcement against vice, a large venal Negro vote (sold to the highest bidder), lax courts of justice."
Contrasting the Springfield incident with an attempted lynching at Danville, Illinois, that failed to materialize because of vigilant law enforcement, Baker wrote, "Lynching is not so much a disease in itself as it is the symptom of a disease. It is a symptom of lawlessness, of the failure of justice, of political corruption."

Following publication of these articles in McClure's, Baker along with a group of other leading staff members became disenchanted with the magazine's management. Together they purchased The American Magazine to convert into a muckraking organ. Searching for fresh material that would make the venture an "assured success," Baker continued to explore racial issues. In 1907 and 1908 he published in The American an exhaustive series of articles on racial questions that also appeared as a book, Following the Color Line, in 1908. Apart from the two articles for McClure's which were reprinted in the book, Baker did not deal with lynching, turning instead to subjects such as the "tragic mulatto." Disturbed by social unrest, Baker endorsed Jim Crow laws on grounds it was necessary to separate the lower classes of both races, at least for the time being. In later years he achieved his greatest fame as a biography of Woodrow Wilson.
After Baker's departure, McClure's lost interest in its crusade against lynching. In 1907 it carried an article by Thomas Nelson Page who complained that Northern objections to lynching "unhappily" were copied into Negro newspapers and "circulated among hundreds of thousands of Negro families in the South with the result of stirring up race hatred and extending race strife." Thus, he argued, Northerners were responsible indirectly for much of the attacking of white women in the South and as a corollary for many lynchings.

McClure's did not mention lynching again until 1909 when it ran an article by a Southerner, William Archer, who contended much of the cruelty against Negroes stemmed from the "order of lower instincts in the white." He attributed low instincts to the Negro which in turn acted like a magnet to the low classes of whites, bringing out the worst in both. In 1910 another writer exclaimed in view of the "protection" given to criminals it was not surprising that the number of lynchings from 1884 to 1904 actually outnumbered the legal executions, running as high as 241 in a single year.

More radical than the popular muckraking publications, the Arena lasted from 1889 to 1909. Its editor, Benjamin O. Flower, fought for women's rights, prohibition, prison
reform, free silver and a host of other economic programs, and against boss rule. Prior to the muckraking period, Flower indicted lynching strongly: "...this lawlessness has tended to further brutalize the Negro, while its baneful effects upon those who live on a plane of thought which approves this injustice has been manifest," he wrote in 1893. An article in 1896 stressed, "...expressions of lawlessness of exhibitions of savage inhumanity have never yet proved an effective breastwork for protecting the sanctity of the home."  

The next year the magazine pleaded, "...when we remember that the crime and its worse penalty at the hands of an enraged mob only blunt the conscience of the community and entail a legacy of crimes and criminals upon posterity -- we lift our souls to God for light..." In 1901 a writer pointed out that Negroes were being lynched for numerous alleged infractions apart from rape and that in Georgia "a strenuous attempt" was made to lynch an editor who had printed scathing comments on election frauds.  

In spite of its background of protest against lynching, the Arena paid almost no attention to the issue during the muckraking period, perhaps because it was floundering financially. Its muckraking crusades centered on reform of government.
through direct action such as the initiative and referendum. From 1902 until 1909, when it ceased publication, the magazine printed only two articles on lynching. In 1903 a Southern writer contended lynching revealed the "inbred antagonism" between the races "which no moral lectures can eradicate." The following year a sensationalized account of a lynching mob in Delaware depicted "the burning and dismembering of a brute, the taking of his thumbs, fingers, bones, toes for ghastly souvenirs." Obviously the leading muckraking publications failed to fight lynching with anything near the zeal they employed against economic and political wrongdoing. Two, Cosmopolitan and Everybody's, avoided the subject. The other three, Collier's, the Arena and McClure's shifted positions, condemning lynching but still printing material that served to excuse it. Part of the muckrakers' refusal to expose lynching for what it was -- intimidation of a minority by mob action -- stemmed from the philosophy of Progressivism, which revealed a blind spot regarding the Negro.

Progressivism constituted a broad movement aimed at solving the problems of modernization and urbanization by political action from an educated, enlightened citizenry. Its underlying concepts, based on the Anglo-Saxon ideas
of participatory democracy, contrasted sharply with the experience of government common to masses of immigrants accustomed to semi-feudal political structures dominated by political bosses. The Progressives saw immigrant voters tied to boss rule as threats to their vision of democracy. Even more did they view the Black population of the South as unsuited for participation in the democratic process, although they split on this issue along regional lines.

Southern Progressives rode to power in the South partly by disfranchising Blacks on grounds this would eliminate voting fraud, thus linking together white supremacy and honest elections. The leading Progressive philosopher, Herbert Croly, agreed with white Southerners that Negroes were morally and intellectually inferior. Theodore Roosevelt, the spokesman of the Northern Progressives, proposed eventual re-enfranchisement of Southern Negroes after suitable guidance from the "wisest" white men. While certainly not condoning lynching, Roosevelt believed it a local crime which should not come under federal jurisdiction, writing Ray Stannard Baker that he opposed "interference in every state where a Negro is lynched....at this moment...most of the Southern states."
Of muckraking journalists Baker alone undertook a comprehensive report on lynchings and other problems besetting Blacks. While he did not defend lynching, neither did he picture it for what it was—a racist way of keeping Negroes in "their place." Instead he depicted it as the reflection of an evil political system arisen in response to failure of "good citizens" to ensure that courts moved swiftly against criminal offenders. As Baker's biographer, Robert C. Bannister, expressed it: "There was...'negative bigotry' in his insistence that the entire problem was but another 'symptom of lawlessness, of the failure of justice, of political corruption.' Offending phrases now seem to leap from every page: 'The animal-like ferocity' of the Negro criminal, the 'black and stolid' victim of the lynching...." 67

It seems hard to understand why Baker subscribed to the judicial leniency theory since judges and juries did not hesitate to mete out capital punishment, both in the North and South, and Negroes, along with poor white, were sold into peonage on the slightest pretense in the deep South. Baker obviously accepted the rationale offered by "good people" as an excuse for lynching, writing his father from Statesboro, Georgia, "...I must say that such crimes
as these negroes commit against white women are almost worthy of lynching. In his "negative bigotry" can be seen traces of the strictly racial argument that legal capital punishment was "too good" for Negroes.

In addition, Baker, like the other muckrakers, addressed a general audience composed of both Northerners and Southerners. Even if he had wished to, he would have been unable to move far ahead of his readers in terms of general attitudes. As has been pointed out, the muckrakers continually tested the winds of public opinion. Baker paid close heed to letters from readers, writing in his autobiography: "...they were welcomed by both publishers and authors as veritable signs in the skies." Public opinion was important to the muckrakers on ideological grounds because they wanted to prompt action by a concerned citizenry to realize the Progressive ideal of democracy. It was important on practical grounds because they made their living writing for commercial publications.

It would be unfair to judge Baker a bigot for failing to transcend the assumptions of his era. Even in his endorsement of segregation, as a temporary measure to quiet racial strife, Baker continued to advocate first-class citizenship for the Negro as a long-range goal.
by the standards of its day, Baker's reporting helped alert Americans to the issues of race as a national concern. It formed part of the documentation of the Negro's condition used as a basis for the formation of the first major national groups for social defense - the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League. While preparing Following the Color Line, Baker consulted the leading Negro spokesmen, W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, both of whom applauded his efforts. Praising his work, DuBois wrote to Baker, "...I am afraid, however, that you may not find as cordial a welcome from the white brothers the next time you come South."74

In one sense, Baker's reports on lynching demonstrated the defects of muckraking in general. Baker maintained by telling the "truth" about a social problem it could be solved. One scholar contends this "abstract faith in the ability of truth to solve problems was about all the muckrakers had to offer."75 In the case of Baker's articles on lynching it proved insufficient. The articles did not lead to an end to lynching or to a decline. Because of the prevailing racism Baker was unable to structure "facts" into truth leading to effective action, although he believed he took great pains to gather all available evidence. When
there was little popular consensus on "facts" or an inclination to ignore them, the muckraker failed to accomplish the mission of stimulating reform, as this case study shows. In it may lie a warning of limitations for the investigative reporters of today, who operate in the old muckraking tradition.
Notes


21 Collier's Weekly, May 2, 1903, p. 2; June 15, 1903, p. 3; Aug. 8, 1903, p. 3; Aug. 15, 1903, p. 3 and Sept. 19, 1903, p. 3.

22 Collier's Weekly, Sept. 19, 1903, p. 3.


28 Raper, Tragedy of Lynching, Appendix C.

29 Collier's Weekly, Sept. 29, 1908, p. 12.


33Barry, "Slavery in the South oday," p. 5.


41Baker, "Lynching in the South," p. 305.


49Baker, Following the Color Line, 151-174.


62 Hofstadter, The Age of Reform, 181.


76 Bannister, "Race Relations and the Muckrakers," 60.