Tom L. Johnson and Cleveland Traction Wars, 1901–1909

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ABSTRACT. Tom L. Johnson made his mark on politics far from Capitol Hill, in the gritty world of turn-of-the-century Cleveland, Ohio. Barely 30 years old and at the height of a successful career as an inventor, steel manufacturer, and street railway monopolist, Tom Lofting Johnson experienced a change of heart. After discovering the ideas of Henry George, Johnson became a lifelong advocate of the single tax, which he used to guide his new career in politics. In 1901, Cleveland voters elected Johnson to the first of his four terms as mayor of the industrial city of 400,000 people. During his eight-year reign as chief executive, Cleveland took over essential services such as garbage collection, street cleaning, and lighting from private enterprise. Johnson helped humanize the city’s correctional system by replacing the old workhouse with a network of farm colonies designed to rehabilitate wayward youths and adults convicted of petty crimes. Largely as a result of Johnson’s efforts, Cleveland won constitutional home rule, a lower streetcar fare, the referendum, and higher taxes on the corporations that amassed giant fortunes through perpetual public franchise grants. For a short time, while he was still mayor, Cleveland owned and operated its own streetcar company, a rarity in early 20th-century America. All of these accomplishments made Johnson something of a hero to progressive reformers. The muckraker Lincoln Steffens famously called Johnson “the best Mayor of the best-governed city in the United States.”

Introduction

In the early 20th century, Cleveland was the eighth largest city in the United States, the largest city in one of the leading industrial states in the nation. To become mayor of this city and a leader in Ohio politics made one a national figure. Moreover, during the first three decades of the 20th century, Cleveland grew much faster than any city in the United States, with the exception of Detroit. By 1930, Detroit was the fourth largest city in the United States, followed by Cleveland in fifth place (Gaffney 2006: 31–32). Both of those cities were doing something right. To attract hundreds of thousands of new residents meant that their local economies were creating huge numbers of new jobs. What was the secret of their success? Much of Cleveland’s success a century ago was due to Tom Lofting Johnson, its dynamic mayor from 1901 to 1909. As a former businessman, he knew how to make a city attractive to business. As a social reformer, he knew how to make a city attractive to the ordinary citizen and worker. How did Johnson come to be the mayor of a leading American city, and how did he make it even more prominent during his time in office?

The Transformation of a Monopolist

At the age of 30, Tom Johnson had already climbed the ladder of business success. He was an inventor, steel manufacturer, a street railway monopolist, and a millionaire. He could have piled millions more into his personal treasury if he had chosen to, perhaps becoming a titan of industry. But in 1883, Tom Johnson experienced a change of heart. On a train between Indianapolis and Cleveland—two cities in which he owned majority shares of the streetcar industry—a porter offered the heavy-set southerner a copy of Henry George’s Social Problems (1883). Johnson (1911: 48–49) later remembered: “The title led me to think it dealt with [prostitution], and I said as much, adding that the subject didn’t appeal to me
at all.” Overhearing the remark, a conductor promised Johnson a refund if he did not find the book of value. No refund was necessary. Johnson recalled that he read it “almost without stopping” and became a firm believer in Henry George’s ideas. Johnson wanted either to confirm or repudiate George’s theories by discussing them with his closest friends and colleagues. After reading George’s 1879 masterwork, Progress and Poverty, Johnson (1911: 49) said to his lawyer, L. A. Russell: “You made a free trader of me; now I want you to read this book and point out its errors to me and save me from becoming an advocate of the system of taxation it describes.” Russell could not find any errors. Nor could Arthur J. Moxham, with whom Johnson owned and operated a steel mill that manufactured the girder groove rail Johnson had invented. Having confirmed the validity of George’s ideas to his own satisfaction, Johnson (1911: 51) met with Henry George during a business trip to New York in 1885 and asked him: “I can’t write and I can’t speak, but I can make money. Can a man help who can just make money?” George assured Johnson that he could help and convinced the monopolist not to abandon his business, but to continue to make money and promote his “single tax.” Some historians have tried to cast doubt on Henry George’s influence on Johnson’s life and political career. Holli (1970: li–liii) claims that “there is little external evidence” to prove George converted Johnson to a life of reform or that his ideas informed Johnson’s policies as mayor. Instead, Holli argues that George merely provided “spiritual succor” to Johnson, especially during the final weeks of his life when he dictated his autobiography. “In some respects,” Holli writes, “the teachings of the ‘saint’ of the single tax were a surrogate religion that Johnson never had, and they provided the former Mayor with a kind of Christian symbol that linked him to the past and possibly to the future.” While there is little doubt the two shared a spiritual bond—Johnson purchased burial plots next to George’s in Brooklyn’s Greenwood Cemetery long before his final illness—there also is little reason to question Johnson’s claim that George transformed his outlook on life and business and that George’s ideas played a prominent role in his political program for Cleveland (Johnson 1911: 55). Upon his election to mayor of Cleveland in 1901, Johnson promised to bring fairness and scientific precision to the valuation of private property, lower the cost of vital public services, such as streetcar fares and water, and allow the people a greater role in governing the affairs of their city. All of these undertakings relied on and incorporated the core principles of the single tax.

**Henry George’s Philosophy**

Henry George’s single-tax idea arose from his personal observations. While living and working as a newspaper journalist in California throughout the 1860s and 1870s, George (1839–1897) grew perplexed by the juxtaposition of two changes taking place before his eyes. On the one hand, new sources of power, including steam and electricity, as well as improved methods of transportation such as canals, turnpikes, and railroads, enabled mankind to produce and distribute more goods than ever before. On the other hand, many families continued to struggle with poverty, including his own during one desperate year. Despite the fact that America’s economy had become larger and more diversified than ever before, the nation continued to face periodic financial panics and industrial depressions. In the aftermath of the particularly severe financial disaster of 1873, George set out to solve what he described as the “the greatest enigma” facing modern industrial society:

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