

Editor's Introduction: The Politics of Urban Reform in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1870–1920

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Not only is the city involved most deeply in the great political experiment of the present and the future, but it is the dominating element in that experiment. The United States, along with the other nations of the western world, is rapidly coming to be a nation of cities, and even while the majority of the American people remain rural, so far as residence is concerned, the influence of the cities upon national life is quite out of proportion to their population. For the city is the distributing center of intelligence as well as of goods. The city stands for organization. It is the center of the complex web of national life. (Wilcox 1904: 14)

At the turn of the 20th century, interest in urban reform reached new and impressive levels. Decades of unprecedented growth and expansion, fueled in large measure by industrialization, created a perfect storm of problems municipal governments were ill-equipped to address. A growing cadre of middle- and upper- class reformers directed their attention to the complex challenges facing North American and European cities. These reformers hoped to solve emerging urban problems because they recognized the essential role of the city in modern life as well as its potential to promote social progress and the highest ideals of human civilization.

The articles in this issue examine the ways urban reformers—mayors and city planners, in particular—confronted the serious trials of modern urban life and, in doing so, contributed to a transatlantic dialogue about the nature of progress in the modern industrial world. Although they utilized different approaches, the leaders drew from a common

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American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Vol. 75, No. 1 (January, 2016).

DOI: 10.1111/ajes.12139

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pool of ideas that challenged traditional laissez-faire attitudes about government and recognized an expanded role for the state as a positive agent in social and economic development. Towards that end, many supported public ownership of natural monopolies such as power, gas, and water. They also pursued policies that promoted greater civic awareness and interest in the city as a collective experiment in self-government. Such policies included the construction of public farms, parks, libraries, sewage facilities, and bathhouses.

In this introduction, I will first provide a brief overview of the evolution of attitudes toward the city—from a necessary evil to the prime catalyst of national social and economic development. Following that, I will summarize each of the articles in this issue.

The Evolution of the City in the 19th Century

In the highly urbanized world of the 21st century, it is easy to forget that the city and its role as a fixture of national economic and social life is a relatively recent development. In the colonial era, cities and towns were established on a very limited scale to provide a means for regulating colonial life:

While the building of towns was a crucial feature of American colonization, the towns were to be thought of as instruments of control—not as laboratories of democracy or experiments in individual freedom. (Glaab and Brown 1967: 4–5)

Social and economic life in colonial cities was highly regulated, and unapproved exploration beyond the town's borders was strictly prohibited.

Despite the restrictions against, and dangers associated with, expansion, the diffusion of settlers into the North American back country outpaced the growth of American towns and cities throughout the 18th and most of the 19th centuries. In 1800, only 6 percent of the American population lived in urban places of 2,500 or more. By 1820, that number had only grown to 7 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1949: 24). Cities in the early decades of the 19th century were relatively small and focused on commercial activity. Most of the workforce was still directly involved in the production of goods,

with as many as one-third of workers involved in skilled or semi-skilled labor (Klein and Kantor 1976: 71).

Within a relatively short time-frame—from roughly 1820 to 1870—the nature and size of the city changed rapidly. Powered by new and improved sources of energy, the machine replaced manual labor as the dominant source of productivity. The shop system was supplanted by large and impersonal factories. New cities formed, and old cities re-formed around those factories, which processed raw materials and manufactured finished products on an incredible scale. Demanding a steady stream of workers, urban populations ballooned. In 1840, nearly 2 million or 12 percent of the U.S. population lived in urban areas. In 1860, that number had jumped to 24 percent of the total population, and by 1890, more than one-third of the American people lived in urban places (U.S. Census Bureau 1949: 24).

In addition to adding more people, urban economies specialized in one or two major industries, which provided the bulk of city jobs and wealth. For Chicago, that industry was wholesale slaughtering and meatpacking, for Philadelphia it was carpet and rugs. Specialization was even more pronounced in smaller urban areas. In 1900, for example, Troy, New York produced 85 percent of the total value of cuffs and collars sold in the United States. Similarly, Baltimore, Maryland contributed 64 percent of the total national value of canned oysters (U.S. Census Bureau 1902: ccix).

Industrial specialization increased interdependence. The degree to which the welfare of some cities depended upon the performance of its primary industry was astounding. The closing of a single plant could send shock waves throughout the entire city. Klein and Kantor (1976: 99) described the “domino like interdependencies” of industrial cities:

If a plant declined or failed, stockholders lost money, managers were fired, and workers were laid off. Railroads, warehouses, and other service industries soon felt the pinch. Everyone from the grocer to the barber lost business. As unemployment spread and incomes declined, people confined their spending to the bare necessities, setting off a wave of contraction among merchants . . . Unless the cycle was reversed by a renewal of industrial activity or an infusion of new business, the town was likely to stagnate. (Klein and Kantor 1976: 99)

The success of a city's primary industry, however, had the opposite effect.

In addition to becoming densely populated, highly specialized, and full of interdependencies, by the turn of the 20th century, American cities also were shamefully mismanaged. "There is no denying that the government of cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States," according to Viscount James Bryce ([1888] 1906: 643), Britain's ambassador to the United States. One of the primary reasons for the failure of cities to meet the growing needs of their residents resulted from the structure of government they inherited from the state. "Instead of organizing our municipalities with due reference to the problems with which they have to deal, we have consciously and unconsciously applied analogies taken from our state and national governments," explained Leo S. Rowe (1897: 318), a lecturer and expert in municipal government. A strong system of separation of powers and checks and balances prevented municipal governments from quick or effective action.

The typical structure of city government in the 19th century included a mayor, a legislative body usually known as a council, and several administrative boards and departments. The legislature often consisted of two houses: a popularly elected Common Council and a Board of Alderman, elected or appointed by wards (Bryce [1888] 1906: 631). In the early decades of the 19th century, before universal white male suffrage, state governors appointed city mayors. By the 1820s, however, mayors were elected by the voters of each city. This change was not accompanied, however, by an increase in local authority. If anything, as Glaab and Brown (1967: 170) have pointed out, "cities appeared to be losing powers as the 19th century wore on." The power to raise taxes, borrow money, or finance public improvements remained with the state, as did the authority to create administrative boards or appoint department heads. To do almost anything substantial, city governments had to appeal to state legislatures for the necessary authorization. By the 1870s, the state's involvement in urban affairs reached stupefying levels. "The New York legislature passed more laws in New York City alone in the three years from 1867 to 1870 than Parliament passed for all cities in the United Kingdom; in the

year 1870, thirty-nine state laws were passed for the city of Brooklyn alone” (Glaab and Brown 1967: 173).

Increased intervention in urban affairs served a political purpose. According to Klein and Kantor (1976: 332):

Municipalities offered several enticements to state political chieftains. They possessed large numbers of voters in a compact area, which meant they could be organized with relative ease... By extending the state’s role in municipal government, the parties could seize a lucrative share of the action for their own purposes.

Lacking either the authority or revenue to provide much-needed services to their growing populations, city leaders appealed to party officials or “bosses.” Well-connected and financed, political bosses could gain the necessary authorizations from the state to finance improvements or contract debt much faster than city bureaucrats. In exchange for their help, however, party bosses demanded valuable contracts, city jobs for their followers, and public franchises for the corporations they controlled. By the close of the 19th century, the granting of public franchises had become the chief source of corruption in urban politics.

Progressive Urban Reform and the Single Tax

The complexities and challenges facing local governments at the turn of the 20th century attracted the attention of a burgeoning class of social activists and political reformers. Historians generally refer to them as “progressives.” Although they lacked a political party or common background, progressives promoted what Rodgers (1998: 30) has called a common “agenda of social politics.” At the heart of this agenda was the belief that not everything belonged in the private market. “Against the onrush of commodification, the advocates of social politics tried to hold certain elements out of the market’s processes, indeed to roll back those parts of the market whose social costs had proved to high” (Rodgers 1998: 30). At the city level, those elements included water, power, housing, and transportation. The effort to transfer the provision of these services from private to public control was called municipal ownership.

Although progressives drew from a wide variety of sources, they relied most heavily on Henry George's anti-monopoly philosophy to justify municipal ownership. Following the Long Depression of the 1870s, George, a California journalist, endeavored to understand what he saw as a fundamental dilemma of modern industrial capitalism: the fact that progress seemed perversely to deepen social inequality and economic instability. George came to believe that private property in land was the source of the paradox. In particular, he drew connections between the speculation of land values and periodic financial panics that had rocked the 19th-century economies and increased poverty and inequality in their wake. As George ([1879] 1981: 264) explained:

Given a progressive community, in which population is increasing and one improvement succeeds another, land must constantly increase in value. This steady increase naturally leads to speculation in which future increase is anticipated, and land values are carried beyond the point at which, under the existing conditions of production, their accustomed returns would be left to labor and capital. Production, therefore, begins to stop.

To check monopolization of land and real estate speculation, George called for the replacement of all taxes with one tax on the full value of land. His proposal became known as the "single tax."

Because George's proposal involved sharing the economic value of land, his ideas were considered by many contemporaries to be uncomfortably close to socialism. As a result, the single tax was never fully implemented anywhere in the world. Still, George's concept animated many of the most notable reform movements of the era, including the effort to municipalize natural monopolies.

Advocates of municipal ownership drew heavily from George's description of the social nature of land values to justify public control of city streets and rights-of-way. As Rodgers (1998: 140) has pointed out: "Recapturing the socially created value of the city's streets and franchises meant confiscating the franchisers' unearned profit; practically, it meant municipalization. Through this logical chain, the municipal ownership movement was to be heavily stocked with single-taxers." Supporters of municipal ownership

attacked the injustice of allowing private corporations to amass huge profits for providing services required by *all* residents and using public property, such as streets or gas lines, to do so.

Urban reformers also utilized the single tax in their efforts to increase taxation on the property of railroad, streetcar, and other public service corporations. Like land values, the value that attaches to the property of these companies was social in origin, increasing as the population rose and as the community developed. As Ohio State Senator and single taxer Frederic C. Howe (1907: 313) argued:

The thing which distinguishes the public-utility corporation, whether it be a railway, transmission or franchise corporation, from all other industries is its identity with the land. It is this that makes it a monopoly. It is this that excludes competition. It is this that lies at the root of the great problems of transit and service which are concerning the nation, state and city. And no solution of these problems can be secured, and no just system of taxation devised which does not recognize the similarity of their values with those of the land itself. (Howe 1907: 313)

Urban reformers advocated increasing the taxes on the property of franchise corporations in order to reduce taxes on construction or other forms of output that tend to depress production.

In addition to the single tax, progressive urban reformers also expressed the shared belief in the potential of the city to promote the highest ideals of democracy and civilization. By the turn of the 20th century, cities had begun to replace the state and nation as the prime source of civic identity. "In cities, men are brought more closely together and have a greater number of vital interests in common than in the country," Boston's mayor, Josiah Quincy (1897: 537), explained. "The sentiment of municipal solidarity is constantly growing, and the conception of the true functions of the city government is constantly widening." In addition to becoming more important in the everyday lives of their residents, cities had become a vital component of national identity.

Summarizing the Articles in This Issue

The articles in this issue examine the efforts of local leaders in Birmingham, England and a variety of North American cities to

revitalize municipal government at the turn of the 20th century. In particular, these articles chart the structural and ideological obstacles to progressive reform as well as the various strategies local leaders employed to overcome them. Although the mayors profiled in this issue utilized different methods and pursued different policies, they faced similar problems and largely drew from the same ideas to justify fundamental changes to municipal governance. The relative success of these leaders in solving complex problems of urban life provides important insights for better understanding the nature and scope of local politics today.

Birmingham, UK

Joseph Chamberlain's short tenure as mayor of Birmingham from 1873 to 1876 not only jump-started what would become a very long and successful political career but also served as a model for urban reform at the end of the 19th century. His success in establishing public gas and water works in Birmingham formed the basis, author Jules Gehrke writes, for the municipal ownership movement and provided important lessons for other urban leaders, including several of those profiled in this issue.

In "A Radical Endeavor: Joseph Chamberlain and the Emergence of Municipal Socialism in Birmingham," Gehrke also shows how Chamberlain's commitment to the public ownership of natural monopolies was an extension of his Unitarian philosophy and colored by his business experience. Chamberlain was an active member of Birmingham's Unitarian community and even taught Sunday School at the Church of the Messiah. In contrast to the older Anglican tradition, which emphasized scripture and individual salvation, Unitarianism, Gehrke explains, "emphasized social progress and the moral duties of the individual to the community." Chamberlain justified his municipal waterworks plan in part on the belief that the city had a "moral obligation" to provide clean and safe water to its residents. His background as the co-owner of an international screw-making company provided the skills needed to broker a favorable deal whereby Birmingham acquired its own gasworks.

Detroit, Michigan

Hazen S. Pingree, four-term mayor of Detroit, also served as a pioneer of sorts. At the time of his first election in 1889, urban reform in the United States centered on efforts to reduce corruption and increase the structural efficiency of municipal government. In pursuing social improvements, including a reduction in transit fares and the establishment of a system of outdoor relief, Pingree contributed to a new model of municipal reform that “prioritized social justice over political change.” Pingree’s social justice program for Detroit, Lough argues in “Hazen Pingree and the Detroit Model of Urban Reform,” drew heavily from Henry George’s single tax. “In particular, she writes, “Pingree’s efforts to secure a municipally owned and operated street railway system and increase taxation on railroad property illustrate the ways in which turn-of-the-century civic leaders drew from the rhetoric and substance of George’s ideas to implement progressive urban reforms.”

By stressing the social nature of the traction industry, Pingree refused to sign franchise renewals or grant new contracts to Detroit’s streetcar companies without significant concessions in the way of lower fares and improved service. As a result of the mayor’s position, Detroit became the first major city in America to offer a three-cent fare during working hours (the going rate was five cents). Lough also shows how Pingree, as governor of Michigan from 1897 to 1901, derived from the single tax his justification to centralize assessment procedures and increase the rate of taxation on the property of railroads and other corporations in the state. As a result of his efforts, the state added \$75 million to its tax rolls by 1907.

Toledo, Ohio

Like many other reform mayors of this era, Toledo’s Samuel “Golden Rule” Jones enjoyed considerable success in business before a religious awakening convinced him to dedicate his life to the service of others. In “‘Ministering to the Social Needs of the People’: Samuel Jones, Strong Mayor Government, and Municipal Ownership, 1897–1904,” Ariane Liazos examines the short, but impactful, tenure of Jones, which, she argues, especially highlights the challenges

reformers faced to “institutionalize” the “noble-sounding ideas” that contributed to their election. In particular, Liazos describes how Jones’s lack of political support in the council, coupled with Toledo’s weak charter, stymied his efforts to municipalize public utilities. As a result, Jones spent much of his time and political capital attempting to secure a new charter that would pave the way for municipal ownership, while also greatly enhancing his own power as mayor. Although voters supported Jones’s social vision for the city, they rejected his method of achieving it; Jones was unable to win a new charter.

Despite his failure to win the necessary authorization to pursue municipal ownership, Jones achieved significant results in other areas of reform. According to Liazos, Jones “was instrumental in a vast expansion of parks and playgrounds and the establishment of public kindergartens.” Additionally, his “indictment of the ‘special privileges’ at the heart of the franchise system” and outspoken personal commitment to living his life by the Golden Rule greatly influenced the work and inspired the efforts of prominent reformers, including Lincoln Steffens, Frederic Howe, and Brand Whitlock, the last of whom, while serving as mayor of Toledo from 1906 to 1914, helped Ohio cities win the constitutional authority to own and operate public utilities.

Chicago, Illinois

In “Building the Planning Consensus: The Plan of Chicago, Civic Boosterism, and Urban Reform in Chicago, 1893 to 1915,” Matthew McCabe offers a new interpretation of Daniel Burnham’s 1909 “Plan of Chicago.” Criticized for its failure to specifically address pressing social concerns, such as housing for the poor, McCabe shows how the plan offered a unique “social vision” through its various attempts to promote a shared “civic identity” among the people of Chicago. In this way, McCabe argues, the Plan of Chicago represented an expression of the city’s tradition of “civic boosterism” as well as a foundational document in the nascent field of city planning.

The plan’s “social vision,” McCabe argues, is found in its belief that a “unified and rational spatial framework” would help foster an increased interest in civic affairs and a sense of belonging. McCabe tackles such questions as: “Does immorality reflect inherent racial

deficiencies, or is degradation a function of environmental influences? In short, do people shape their spaces, or do spaces shape people?" The Plan of Chicago specifically addressed the relationship between a city's physical spaces and the condition of the people who inhabit them.

Cleveland, Ohio

In "Tom L. Johnson and the Cleveland Traction Wars, 1901–1909," Lough surveys the tenure of Tom L. Johnson as Cleveland's reform mayor from 1901 to 1909. A successful street car monopolist, Johnson became interested in urban reform after reading Henry George's *Social Problems* ([1883] 1981). Lough focuses on his efforts to municipalize transportation and instill much needed scientific efficiency into the local tax code. Although thwarted in his efforts to municipalize transit in the city, Johnson successfully implemented a three-cent fare and helped increase support in Cleveland for a state constitutional amendment granting cities the right to own and operate public utilities and services.

Johnson's mixed record is typical of municipal reformers in this period. Faced with a legal system that treated public franchises as private property, municipal ownership advocates often bumped up against the accepted boundaries of state activity. Lough points out that Johnson's opponents utilized the legal system to their advantage, issuing more than 50 injunctions during his tenure as mayor to prevent him from encroaching on their private business activities. Against these obstacles, Johnson achieved considerable success. In addition to a three-cent streetcar fare and significant tax reform, Johnson managed to municipalize garbage collection, street cleaning, street lighting, and bathhouses.

Berkeley, California

In "Berkeley Mayor J. Stitt Wilson: Christian Socialist, Georgist, Feminist," Stephen Barton explores the unique blend of Christianity, feminism, and socialism that Berkeley Mayor J. Stitt Wilson used to govern the city from 1911 to 1913. A devout follower of Henry George, Barton shows how Wilson's political ideology helped bridge the gap between the single tax and the feminist and socialist

movements in California. According to Barton, "Stitt Wilson's story illustrates the creativity that can result when people learn from and are active in multiple social movements as well as the difficulties that result from the tensions between these movements. It illustrates, as well, some of the varied but now-forgotten strands of the urban reform movement that helped create modern city government in America."

Wilson's record of achievement reflected the diversity of his social vision. As mayor, Wilson implemented new safety measures in the commuter railway system, established municipal health inspections for meat and milk, created a city employment bureau, expanded the city's parks, built a municipal incinerator to improve garbage disposal, and convinced the city council to lease a house in the center of the city to serve as a homeless shelter. He also campaigned for amendments to the California Constitution that would give women the right to vote and grant local governments the authority to implement land value taxation. While woman's suffrage passed, land value taxation did not. In 1912, Wilson decided not to run again for mayor, but he continued to promote the single tax, socialism, and feminism until his death in 1942.

Vancouver, British Columbia

Louis Denison Taylor (1857–1946) was a strong mayor with an impressive record. Taylor served as mayor of Vancouver for 11 years between 1910 and 1934, during which time he promoted women's rights, removed taxes on buildings, enacted an eight-hour work day, and established a Juvenile Court. Despite this, his legacy remains muddled. Historians tend either to ignore him or focus on the unfounded rumors that he engaged in criminal activity. In "L. D. Taylor: The Man Who Made Vancouver," long-time Vancouver resident Mary Rawson attempts to sort through the historical record to present a more realistic portrait of the Vancouver mayor. With the help of oral interviews with people who knew the former mayor conducted in the 1980s, Rawson concludes that Taylor's on-the-ground accomplishments have had a lasting positive effect and warrant more serious attention from urban scholars.

Rawson attributes the fogginess surrounding Taylor's character to an official police inquiry conducted by Commissioner R. S. Lennie in 1928. Although the purpose of the inquiry was to investigate accusations of bribery on behalf of two police officers, it devolved into a partisan slug-fest in which the mayor's morality was called into question. "A study of the daily transcripts of the inquiry," Rawson writes, "exposes the rancor of partisan politics at the time. Here an aura of shadow boxing seems to develop." Ultimately, the commission cleared the two police officers of wrongdoing but hinted that Mayor Taylor's "open policy" towards gambling and other "disorderly houses" was to blame for the demoralization of the police force.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

In "Daniel Hoan and the Golden Age of Socialist Government in Milwaukee," Todd Fulda evaluates the effectiveness of Milwaukee's second longest serving mayor, Daniel Hoan (1916–1940). Although a socialist, Fulda concludes that Hoan's success as a reformer resulted largely from his ability to balance the expectations of his party and the challenges of governing in conjunction with a hostile city council. While this balance proved difficult and led to sharp criticism from within his own party, Hoan's policies earned national recognition and directly contributed to his long tenure.

Fulda also attributes Hoan's effectiveness as a leader to his recognition that although they voted for him, most of the city's voters did not consider themselves socialists. Instead, they voted for Hoan because they trusted his ability to rise above political differences and promote policies that would improve the quality of life for all residents. Hoan didn't disappoint. In his 24 years in office, Hoan significantly clamped down on corruption in municipal government, implemented the first public busing and housing projects, and led the movement toward public street lighting, sewage disposal, and water purification.

Conclusion

We can see from this brief survey of Progressive-era mayors and planners that this was a pivotal period in the development of cities. Although the "strong mayor" model of city governance lay in the

future, the strong personalities and convictions of the mayors discussed in this issue made possible a transformation of cities from weak appendages of the state to important agents in modern political life. Since cities continue to undergo crises from time to time that prevent them from responding adequately to changing demands, these stories of bold leadership can continue to offer insights and lessons.

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