Land and Liberty:
Henry George, the Single Tax Movement, and the Origins of 20th Century Liberalism

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ABSTRACT

In the 1880s, Henry George rose to fame with a series of best-selling books that proposed a social state funded by revenue from a single tax on land. Many historians have described his dramatic race for mayor of New York on a Labor Party ticket in 1886. Few, however, have written about the relationship between George, who died in 1897, and his campaign manager, Tom Johnson, who as Mayor of Cleveland became the nation’s leading proponent of public ownership of utilities during the early 20th century. Similarly absent from the literature is an appreciation of how Louis Post’s single-tax newspaper, The Public, modernized George’s policies for leading progressive reformers like Brand Whitlock, Newton Baker, William U’Ren, and Frederic C. Howe.

Rather than fading after George’s death, the movement had by the 1910s developed a firm basis of power in American cities, where it expanded the Democratic Party’s reach and accrued the political capital to obtain high positions in the Wilson Administration. Its leading members worked to establish important reforms like the Australian ballot, direct legislation, and the income tax.

I show that George’s ideas found their home in a cosmopolitan, urban, and transnational middle class. The historiography does not account for the importance of the single tax in British liberalism or the implementation of land value taxation in Australia, New Zealand, and Denmark. The single tax, I argue, was a response to exorbitant premiums charged for space in urban areas. George’s disciples hoped to redistribute the wealth levied in high urban rents. By attaching itself to this sort of universal factor of exchange, the movement garnered both global and cross-class appeal.

Furthermore, I show that Georgism was part of the transnational ideology of liberalism. Because classical economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo had composed the canon of liberal thought with a view toward undermining the moral legitimacy of the landed aristocracy, George had ample precedent to argue that the success of modern capitalism was contingent upon the nationalization of land. George offered a powerful way to incorporate elements of socialism into classical liberalism.

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This project began after I found a reference to the single tax in the preamble to the Constitution of the Knights of Labor and developed a suspicion that it amounted to more than it was remembered for. My adviser, Michael Kazin, encouraged me to pursue this hunch. He also deserves thanks for his diligent efforts to elevate the prose of this text with his extensive edits. Similarly, Joseph McCartin shepherded this work through its earliest phases. By recommending that I consult the papers of Louis Post, he set me on the trail that would define this project. Thanks goes to the final member of my committee, Jennifer Burns, for her perseverance in advising me through both my undergraduate and graduate education.

The sons’ of carpenters are not wont to write books and I am distinctly aware that I have had the opportunity in large part because of the assistance of others. To this effect, I would like to thank my undergraduate advisers, Lisa Rubens, Nigel Hatton, and Barry Pateman. Similarly, I would like to thank the institutions that supported me during my research: The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, The Roosevelt Institute, the History of Economics Society, and the Georgetown Scholarship Program.

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Introduction

**Land and Liberty**

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a subscription to the Associated Press (AP) was the only way Western periodicals could provide their readers with timely news from the East Coast. In 1869, Henry George, a self-educated San Francisco newspaper editor, traveled to New York on a mission to break the AP monopoly. He failed. Popular lore, however, was that he did something more significant. Wandering through the city’s slums, he swore to dedicate his life to alleviating poverty. His walks brought him face-to-face with the pathos of urban squalor, but they also sparked, as his son recounted it, an intellectual revelation:

> This young man, as by a kind of fascination, walked the streets of the great city, thinking how here, at the center of civilization, should be realized the dream of the pioneer – the hard conditions of life softened, and society, preserving the general relations of equality, raised as a mass from the bottom into a state of peace and plenty. How different the view that met his gaze! On every hand he beheld evidences of advancing civilization, but of a civilization that was one-sided; that piled up riches for the few and huddled the many in filth and poverty.1

Because of the rapid, uneven process of nineteenth-century industrialization, traveling from a provincial city to the metropole seemed like a trip to the future. Such a trip called into question the idea that progress was a concomitant of technological development.

As much as George differed Karl Marx, this story speaks to a shared origin story for 19th century utopianism. George’s experience in New York bore similarities to Charles Fourier’s interactions with Paris or Friedrich Engels’ with Manchester; each of these thinkers had traveled

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to the metropole only to conclude that the benefits of scientific progress promised by the Enlightenment would not be realized under existing social arrangements. However, each of these thinkers would produce their own very different diagnoses for the dilemma that George most aptly named: the paradox of progress and poverty. After a decade of intellectual inquiry inspired by his visit to New York, George concluded that, for the average citizen, all of the material benefits of progress were sacrificed to the high rents of cities like New York.

To redistribute this wealth, George argued that the state should confiscate the full value of land, exclusive of buildings and other improvements that embodied the owner’s labor. He attracted a cadre of followers who called this the “single tax,” a term adopted to make the plan appear more moderate than George’s original—and more apt—terminology: “land nationalization.” What George actually proposed was more fundamental than anything generally regard as a tax. He argued that unlike horses, buildings, or furniture the use-value of which

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2 Fourier was radicalized when he observed how expensive fruit was in Paris as opposed to the countryside and decided that progress was not, so to say, bearing fruit. Marx and Engels did not have a comparable moment of epiphany but historians have largely recognized that their ideas were rooted in the experience of English industrialization and class formation. One of their first publications was a description of conditions in England. Germany was one of the least industrially developed Western European nations, England one of the most developed so their experience was defined by the contrast between provincial and metropolitan life. Frank Edward Manuel, The Prophets of Paris (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 197. E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964). Frederic Engels, The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1884 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

3 The assumption has often been made that, because George railed against inequality in urban areas, he opposed the process of urbanization. That couldn’t be further from the truth: “The attaching of value to land in special – that is to say in particular localities with respect to population – is not merely a most striking feature in the progress of modern civilization, but it is... a consequence of civilization, lying entirely within the natural order, and furnishing perhaps the most conclusive proof that the intent of that order is the equality of men.” Henry George, The Science of Political Economy (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1898), 256.

4 For a treatment of the assessment practices of the single tax see Louis Post’s discussion of the topic in George’s paper: Standard, July 27, 1889. Because land exists in a fixed quantity, the assumption was that land values would remain more or less static as the tax was imposed. To tax the full value of land one would have to include the sum already taxed as part of the value of the assessed property. This was so different from normal assessment practice that Post thought it might be administratively easier to treat land as direct government property. But he concluded that rates could be established by weighing the selling value of properties in an area against the value of the improvements and adjusting the rate so that properties were generally sold at the value of improvements alone. In practice, that means that if one were disposing with an open piece of land, the state would impose a monthly rent
declines over a period of years, months, or even seconds, space never lost its utility and, after a millennium, would only accrue value as rising population made it scarcer. Selling price, therefore, was an arbitrary abbreviation of land’s true, perpetually reoccurring value: its rental price. To redistribute the full value of land therefore, George proposed to have the state tax land at the same rate it would charge if it were leasing the bare land of the nation at its market price.

The implications of this plan were radical. In densely packed urban areas, where the scarcity of space made land particularly costly, citizens would become virtual tenants of the state, paying in property taxes approximately 60 to 90 percent of what they would pay as renters. This would all but ban leasing in some areas. As owners came to be subject to the same economic pressure as renters, they would use less space, often abandoning or downsizing properties. As land was unloaded onto the market, taxes would also be lifted on buildings, encouraging the construction of housing. Businesses would be socialized—sometimes through taxation but often through direct public ownership—to the extent that enterprises profited from natural resources, locational advantage, or the exclusive use of valuable space.

large enough that rather than waiting for a buyer one would forfeit it to the state or give it away for a nominal sum. This was seen as identical to the rental value of the land, which represented a rational assessment of the economic opportunity associated with a site. For a good analysis showing that George meant to tax rental rather than capital values see: Robert Blake Yardley, Land Value Taxation and Rating: A Critical survey of the aims and proposals with a history of the movement (London: W. H. & L Collingridge, LTD., 1930), 135-143. The author quotes George “it is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent.” Then they quote him on the relationship between rental and selling value: “When land is purchased the payment which is made for the ownership or right to perpetual use, is rent commuted or capitalized.”

5In 1900, Boston assessors concluded that land values constituted 59% of the price of real estate in that city and 73% in the densely packed seventh ward. In 1910, the tax contractor W. A. Somers conducted an assessment of the central business district of Philadelphia. He found that 67% of real estate assets were constituted in land values and that four out of the eight assessed blocks had site values in excess of 90% of total capital value. The single tax would be equivalent to the percentage of rent that was constituted by the value of land. Walter William Pollock and Karl W. H. Sholz, The Science and Practice of Urban Land Valuation: An Exposition of the Somers Unit System (Philadelphia: The Manufacturer’s Appraisal Company, 1926), 190.
In spirit—if not substance—the single tax resembled other Progressive Era, anti-monopoly movements that sought to establish free competition and a more meritocratic society. Frederic C. Howe, one of the foremost theorists of progressivism, explained, “Freedom seemed to me the law of life, and the single tax the most nearly perfect expression of it that had been given to the world. I had no liking for Socialism; did not want to see struggle, initiative banished from the world. I liked these things and wanted rather to see them released, wanted everyone to enter the race on equal terms.”⁶ If land were like other commodities, the wine that originates from the Domaine de la Romanee Conti region in France would cost somewhere in the vicinity of any other fine wine; the market would produce more of the requisite capital—land in the region—to meet demand. That, however, is impossible, and so space accrues additional value because it is scarce, or, as George would have it, a monopoly. Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the great liberal theologians of the 20th century, observed of George that he was “not a socialist, but the strongest advocate of laissez-faire in the highest sense of the term… he insists that artificial monopolies such as the tariff should be swept away and that freedom should be given to the natural forces of society.”⁷ By forcing citizens to pay in proportion to the value of monopolistic privileges, George would create a system of perfect competition where nature seemed to make it impossible.

George defied modern categories of left and right politics, but he fit into the contours of his time. He himself recognized that he was resolving apparently contradictory sensibilities into a synthesis as precise and rigid as natural law: “Realizing as I do,” he wrote, “the correlative truth of both principles [I] can no more call myself an individualist or a socialist than one who

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⁶ Frederic Howe, *Confessions of a Reformer* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 324.
considers the forces by which the planets are held to their orbits could call himself a centrifugalist or a centripetalist.”⁸ Though he rejected the labels of socialism and individualism as too simple, George did readily identify with “liberalism” or even “radicalism,” a term that in multiparty systems around the world referred to an extreme contingent of liberals that advanced meritocracy, democracy, and individual freedom with fewer reservations for stability than moderate liberals.

That George was at home in the spirit of his times is evidenced by the tremendous reception his ideas received. In America a brand of democratic (i.e. cheap) cigars was named in his honor and advertised with giant murals of his likeness. Across the globe in Australia, his visit was hailed by The Daily Telegraph with the headline “A Man of the Century.”⁹ Beginning with Progress and Poverty in 1879, he authored several tremendously popular books that catapulted him to two mayoral campaigns in New York City. George’s son estimated that he sold five million books, which would have made him perhaps the best read American of the period. There is reason to suspect the source, but the surviving records of the only book authored by George that was distributed by a single, authorized publisher, suggests that it was a conservative estimate. Furthermore, this estimate of five million books was ventured in 1903, only four years after George’s death. But his writings persisted and, a decade later, millionaire Joseph Fels endowed a gigantic fund for their dissemination. With this organization in place, one observer “estimated that every third man in those countries covered by the postal treaties receives every morning a circular letter on the Singletax.” That statement was probably truer to tenor than fact.

⁸Henry George, Protection or Free Trade (New York: Henry George, 1887), 303.
But, it testifies to the notion that, a decade after George died, his ideas were still so widely circulated as to seem a globally ubiquitous brand of evangelism.\textsuperscript{10}

It might seem improbable that tax reform would inspire this sort of evangelical zeal, but the movement was consistently described as something like a secular religion. This apparently incongruous enthusiasm can be attributed to the skill with which George argued that his plan was essential for the actualization of traditional beliefs. There was a moral argument, rooted in a panoply of religious traditions, about the immorality of poverty. But more important was the appeal to liberalism and to republicanism, a system of assumptions inherited from the Founding Fathers about the social conditions under which democracy could sustain itself. George argued that, as inequality grew, democratic institutions would be destabilized by an embittered proletariat on the one hand, and, on the other, an elite with enough wealth to manipulate elections. But, if inequality were struck at its root, the engorgement of landed wealth, a stable democracy with a system of truly free enterprise would usher in a millennium of fraternalism and personal virtue.

William Lloyd Garrison II, son of the famed abolitionist, once wrote George that while he saw the utility in the single tax, he did not believe it was a panacea. George’s response was “Nor do I believe it a panacea, but freedom is.”\textsuperscript{11} The point struck home to Garrison, whose father had once attributed similarly transformative effects to the emancipation of slaves.\textsuperscript{12} After this exchange, Garrison joined the cause. For both of the correspondents, the single tax did not \textit{ipso facto} inspire devotion. It was seen, however, as an important precondition for preserving

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Public}, Aug. 23, 1919.
\textsuperscript{12} Emancipation would “give an Eden-like fertility to their perishing soil... make their laborers contended, grateful and happy; wake up the entombed genius of invention, and the dormant spirit of enterprise.” William Lloyd Garrison, “West India Emancipation,” \textit{Selections from the Writings of William Lloyd Garrison} (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1852), 358.
liberal democracy and realizing the fruits that Enlightenment thinkers predicted would result from it. In this way, George managed to capture loyalties to much bigger faiths, harness them, and use them to build a large and enthusiastic movement.

With emancipation, the United States eliminated—with a few exceptions like the tariff—the last of the shackles thought to stifle the free market. Yet the promise of progress remained unfulfilled. From the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, economic inequality peaked. Voter intimidation, violence, and fraud were staples of American elections; Senate seats were widely rumored to be bought and sold. Some repudiated the market altogether and turned to socialism. But liberal democracy’s crisis of credibility was also palpable in the conservative middle class. There the growing consensus that the masses were unfit for democracy received its most vivid demonstration in the disenfranchiseism of freedmen in the south. But, even in New York City, elites mobilized unsuccessfully to restrict the suffrage of non-property owning citizens, a cause that enlisted future president Theodore Roosevelt. One of George Bernard Shaw’s characters explained why liberalism’s prospects looked so bleak upon the heels of its most important accomplishments. The United States, explained Trefusis, was home of “the realized Radical Programme, where all the black chattel slaves were turned into wage-slaves....

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You and I are paupers in comparison to the great capitalists of that country, where the laborers fight for bones with the Chinamen, like dogs.”

Conversely, George was able to brush aside the shortcomings of liberal democracy by arguing that it had merely fallen short in uprooting its traditional villain, the landed aristocracy. George convinced his followers that they were part of the long, glorious history of liberal reform. When the great, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy met Henry George Jr. in 1909, he announced to the press that their shared cause was the next phase of the international fight for liberty. “The land question,” he remarked “is indeed the question of the deliverance of mankind from slavery produced by the private ownership of land, which to my mind, is now the same situation in which the questions of serfdom in Russia and slavery in America were in the days of my youth.” The pessimistic liberalism of those who would restrict the franchise could never inspire the people of Russia to adopt democratic institutions, but George reinvigorated liberals with hope that their marketplace millennium had not already failed. Not surprisingly, his cause garnered distinguished support in countries still struggling against systems that could, without exaggeration, be regarded as autocratic. The list of such supporters includes not just Tolstoy, but also Sun Yat-sen and Jose Battle Y Ordonez, founding figures in the history of China and Uruguay respectively.

“Hegemony,” claimed the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, “and dictatorship are indistinguishable, force is no different from consent.” George exploded this pessimistic interpretation of the dominant class’s cultural cache by taking bourgeois ideology and using it to undermine the moral justification of business. George’s greatest accomplishment was bringing to

16 Public, July 23, 1909.
the cause of reform many individuals who ought to have been its most avid opponents. There was the streetcar monopolist, Tom Johnson, who bested Mark Hanna for market dominance in Cleveland; A. B. du Pont, scion of one of the country’s most established business families; George Peabody, railroad executive; and Joseph Fels, manufacturer of a commercially successful detergent. Each of these figures was persuaded by George that their fortunes had been unfairly acquired and chose to allocate their ill-gotten wealth to destroying the system by which they obtained it. In this they were joined by an adept group of middle class intellectuals, professionals, and self-identified “bohemians,” artists and writers of a more genteel stripe than is now associated with that term. Because of its fixation on land, Georgism has been classified as “agrarianism” or “populism,” often because of implicitly condescending assumptions about the class in which it was imagined to have gained traction. In reality, it was an almost exclusively urban movement encompassing some of the brightest propagandists, legal minds, and technocrats of the age.

To suggest that the single tax movement was bolstered by elites is not to say that it was an exclusively bourgeois phenomenon. George was an individualist who resisted efforts to build the sort of mass organizations that would provide a window to the participation of less powerful supporters. To offer a valid conjecture about the way that individuals around the world perceived George would require a tremendous historical literature that does not exist. Historian Robert Johnston has shown that in turn of the century Portland, single-taxers were typically part

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18 There might be practical reasons for this as well. As I discuss later, rent animates a wide variety of interests. This means it potentially has a wider appeal than wage questions, but that there is less ground for collective identity rooted in shared experience. Thus, whether it was in America, Denmark, or Germany, Georgists cobbled together the support of preexisting business, labor, and agricultural organizations, sometimes in loosely organized federations, but never in a mass organization like the Social Democratic Party in Germany that was built exclusively around their idea.
of a “radical middle class” of skilled workers who often transitioned back and forth from wage labor to self-employment. Culturally, they prioritized economic autonomy and the right to keep the full proceeds of their labor. These were goals that the single tax seemed to fulfill by eliminating rent and taxes. This emphasis on economic mobility is consistent with the leading strata of the movement, where self-made men predominate. Still, we cannot assume a static basis of support for a cause that spanned half a century and had global reach. There are demonstrable cases in which farmers eager for land redistribution, tenants targeting high rents, or urbanites interested in more municipal services, were important supporters. Relative to the artisan class, these were possibly, or even probably, fair-weather supporters. Some had at best a hazy conception of what their representatives intended. Such voters, however, are always the most important constituency for any cause. When viewed from a panoramic perspective, it is clear that a diversity of interests was concerned with the issue of rent. As an inescapable factor of production it affects the cost of doing business, the price of housing, and the retail price of commodities. Rent was ubiquitously correlated to urban—and hence industrial—development and therefore was as relevant in Shanghai as San Francisco. Many descriptions of the movement’s base emphasize its cross-class appeal, which is logical when one considers how the burden of rent is distributed across society.

George’s intellectual influence can be as difficult to assess as his popular reach. T. H. Green, a largely unpublished Englishman, cuts a more significant figure in the intellectual history of the period as currently understood by academics. George and Georgists were deeply concerned with practical politics and eschewed abstract philosophy for simplified and sanitized

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20 Take the way the two are treated in one of the most influential intellectual histories of recent history: James R. Kloppenberg, Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
messages fit for mass distribution. Very few people, for example, who have read the People’s Party Platform ever knew that its land plank had Georgist roots. Nor have most who read the Mark Twain classic, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, recognized the Georgist ideology drawn into the illustrations of that book. To this day, most Americans have participated in a simulation of George’s economic theory. Elizabeth Magie, who was introduced to Henry George by her abolitionist father, designed *The Land Lord’s Game*, later appropriated by Harper Brothers and renamed *Monopoly*. A fantastic demonstration of the paradox of *Progress and Poverty*, as housing develops most players become poorer, until one takes all of the money.\(^{21}\) It would be impossible for turn of the century Americans to trace all the ways they had encountered the ideas of George and been influenced by them. Furthermore, so many of George’s ideas were derived from commonplace Americanisms, it can be had be hard to isolate a distinctive signature.

Consequently, I have refrained from focusing on the *zeitgeist* or social base of the movement and have rather studied a particular cohort of George’s followers who I contend were his legitimate standard-bearers. George tutored Tom Johnson to be his political agent so that he could stay above the fray of electoral politics. Louis Post, on the other hand, edited his periodicals and one of his books. Around these two gathered a tight-knit group that used correspondence and Post’s paper, *The Public*, to coordinate activities long after George passed away. Eventually, many active in this group coalesced into the Fels Fund Commission, an organization whose sole purpose was to advance the single tax. While the only official members of the Commission were a handful of executive officers, they used preexisting networks to organize campaigns that, in at least one instance, mobilized both members of Congress and

Cabinet officials. Because they were responding to and occasionally active in single-tax developments around the world, their story, properly told, is a global story. But, major events like the People’s Budget in England or the formation of the Chinese nation-state are discussed here primarily in regards to how they impact this core group of American activists. There might seem to be little proportionality to this approach, but it reflects my skepticism that a global story for which there is so little scholarly literature can be treated in a comprehensive and authoritative manner.

It seems counterintuitive that a political movement of global impact could have gone mostly unnoticed by historians, but there are certain good reasons why this is the case. When the grand narratives of U.S. History were written in the 1950s and 1960s, Marxism had clearly surpassed Georgism, New Deal Liberalism had overcome the variant that George espoused, and suburbanization had made rent a marginal issue. The movement was most active in municipal and global politics, frames neglected by a generation of scholars concerned with national narratives. As historians of the next generation narrowed their focus to local studies, they often encountered George, but typically discussed him in passing and without any substantive analysis.

Thomas Kuhn famously argued that science evolved by positing paradigms—broad theories—and then modifying them over time with investigations into details. On this subject there was no outline to work within, making silence the sagacious policy. Those who did deal with George more substantively were often egregiously wrong, depicting him as agrarian, interpreting the single tax as a minor fiscal reform, and failing to perceive its ideological and pragmatic connections to other reforms.

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Those historians that have written about the movement followed the discipline’s transition away from grand, sweeping narratives in a way fundamentally inappropriate for the subject. Ronald Yanosky’s dissertation, the only work since the height of the movement that attempts to describe the movement as a whole, uses as its principal evidence the two national single-tax conferences. This is a restrained approach, but if Yanosky had researched much further, he would have found George was so discontent with the ideology of these conferences that he rejected organization altogether, making them essentially insignificant aberrations. Yanosky does an admirable job of conveying how Georgism became the dominant frame by which a dedicated group of activists interpreted all social issues. However, he ultimately narrows in on a defensive moment in the movement’s history, when it had separated itself from other causes. He thereby loses sight of the wider political engagements the movement would ultimately engage with and unfairly depicts the movement as insular.\textsuperscript{23}

Similarly, Charles Albro Barker’s masterful biography of George, deficient only in that it covered the man, but not the movement, was supplemented with another biography by John Thomas. Thomas’ book was shorter than his predecessor’s and attached George’s biography to that of several contemporaries who never claimed to have any intellectual affinity with one another. With this less substantive approach, Thomas argued that George, who never lived for any real period of time outside of a major metropolitan area, was an anti-intellectual agrarian eager to resurrect a pre-industrial world. As a matter of course, George’s backward-looking mentality meant, for Thomas, that George became progressively more insular over time until he ultimately watched his movement become obsolete. Conversely, I show that he became increasingly integrated into the democratic mainstream so that long after his death the movement

still played a role in presidential politics. Edward T O’Donnell similarly describes the single tax as rooted in an antiquated national ideology and, with a narrow focus on George’s 1886 mayoral race, argues that it dissipated shortly thereafter because it was out of tune with the practical needs of workers.

The most meritorious treatment of the single tax movement since Baker’s biography of George is Richard Johnston’s *Radical Middle Class*, which focuses on the local movement in Portland. Johnston’s book is a good depiction of the way that skilled laborers and the educated middle class of that city turned to the single tax to ensure that they received the full fruits of their labor. It does little, however, to explain why Sun Yat-sen would take up the cause in China.24

In every place it took root, the movement developed slightly different accents, but that it had salience in so many parts of the world indicates that broad, global concerns rather than these distinctly national ideologies account for the movement’s vitality. Land is an inescapable factor of exchange, essential for shelter, production, and consumption. Before transportation developments, industrialization required the huddling of hundreds of people within walking distance of a factory, radically increasing the ratio of population to economically advantageous space. While anti-rent movements do not have obvious places for organization like the workplace, it is every bit as natural for industrialization to foster demands for land reform as it is to provoke worker unrest. If anything the breadth of rent’s impact, which affects shopkeepers as well as workers, is conducive to a more inclusive, if less organized, coalition. At the same time, liberals were discontent with laissez faire capitalism’s capacity to provide its citizenry with the economic and educational resources required for a democracy. Liberals responded with a variety

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of reform proposals, but the single tax reconciled economic reform with traditional liberal commitments better than any other program. Even the deeply hostile *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1911 characterized single-taxers as “nothing if not logical.”25 Opponents could not deny that single-taxers worked on strict intellectual principles. If not the most practical, George’s idea was the most philosophically elegant way to reconcile property rights with an expansive social state and so proved attractive to those whose human instincts might otherwise have been muted by the values of the bourgeois cannon.

But liberalism does not just help us understand the single tax, the single tax helps us understand liberalism. That is because it adhered so closely to the strictures of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill even as it pushed liberalism toward the New Deal. Classical liberalism and New Deal liberalism entail nearly antithetical views about the power of the state and the sanctity of property. As a result, scholars have typically been required to sacrifice the intellectual substance of these doctrines to establish some sort of coherent liberal tradition. Instead of a body of thought with a consistent core, liberalism became a flexible, “protean” philosophy.26 As Jeffery Lustig observed, “For some, imprecision itself is definitive of modern liberalism.”27 Even so great an advocate of liberalism’s centrality in U.S. history as Louis Hartz believed that it was never a formal school of thought, but rather “a stranger in the land of its greatest realization and fulfillment.”28

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But, if George was able to unite liberalism and socialism in a philosophically rigorous way, it was because the seeds of such a union were already there. The presentism of an earlier generation of scholars, intellectually ensnared in a bipolar world, encouraged them to understand American liberalism principally as the antithesis of Soviet Communism. Liberalism was defined as a conservative faith in property or even as a fear of socialism. Liberalism, however, was not born in the shadow of socialism, but rather of feudalism. Defined by the struggle against the inherited privileges of the nobility, it was, in fact, riddled with reservations about the institution of private property. As an alternative, it offered the principle that hardworking individuals should be able to ascend through the ranks of society, surpassing those born into a higher class. This was the animating principle of the single tax movement both as it worked toward economic reform during the Progressive Era and turned against it during the New Deal. In this way, it illuminates a thread of continuity in the wider history of liberalism. Though it could be argued that the depth of commitment to social mobility has varied with time and place, one would be hard pressed to imagine any movement—left or right—which could plausibly fit within the liberal tradition and yet did not share some faith in this principle.

This is not just a story about Henry George, but also the type of liberalism that shaped the American state. While the United States has never developed an extensive welfare system, it has exceeded much of the world in the progressivity of its taxation, its regulation of monopolies, and its preservation of public lands. George would quibble with many of the specifics of these policies, but they represent a surprisingly congruent set of priorities and assumptions.29

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29 This story is told through accounts of individual agency. In asserting the import of a mode of thought that has been neglected, I felt that it was essential to maintain a stringent connection between policies and ideas, relating how architects of specific public policies perceived them to be part of a Georgist program. My recourse to that mode of argument does not, however, mean that I am positing a great man theory of history, wherein events are shaped by the agency of special individuals. To the extent that people were working in an intellectual structure
Much of the recent history of American economic reform is negative and counterfactual. It asks why the United States did not develop according to a stereotyped standard of Western European Social Democracies. It finds answers in the power of the judiciary, the stringent regulations of the Constitution, and the poor performance of American bureaucracy.

But the single tax encountered at least as many obstacles; there were no constitutional restrictions on the power of state or federal governments to distribute money but there were on their power to tax. Few bureaucratic instruments were as flawed as tax assessment. While sometimes these factors obstructed the single tax movement, often it reinvigorated it, providing it with immediate, realizable victories. Nowhere was the single tax movement more effective than in changing the procedural norms of American politics, because there it could establish broader coalitions around the concept of democracy or the statutory power of the state. Institutions matter, but the rise and decline of the single tax provides a counter narrative wherein the prerogatives of society proved more potent than the established institutions of the state. While it might seem congratulatory to focus on victories, it is even more self-serving to plead impotence; to admit to having held power is to acknowledge complicity in the present state of affairs.30

The victories of single-taxers, as with most of America’s left, only scrapped the surface of their true aspirations. The important caveat is that what they achieved tangentially would, by most modern estimates, be counted as more significant than what they had hoped to accomplish.

To a degree that has never really been appreciated, single-taxers did manage to institute moderate forms of “land value taxation” in municipalities across the country and even in foreign nations. Nowhere did the severity of these taxes ever approach what George had imagined. Still the reform seems to have fostered the development of municipal government and anecdotal evidence suggests that it spurred population growth in cities. More importantly though, George and his followers played important, even essential, roles in fostering direct legislation, public ownership of utilities, autonomy for municipal government, judicial reform, and progressive taxation. These were understood as part of the broader liberal ideology held together by the single tax, or, perhaps more often, as practical tools to facilitate the realization of the single tax. While there is an important untold story about the ascent of land value taxation during the turn of the century, the real revelation is how many now sacrosanct American institutions were once just stepping stones to land nationalization.

While many of the underlying norms of the single tax movement were congruent with the trajectory of American reform, it was also idiosyncratic even when compared to other variants of progressivism. It grew up alongside the progressivism of a professional, Victorian middle class, which aimed to remedy encroachments on its authority by both the nouveau riche and lower class. To do this it would impose a rational order on society with strict regulatory regimes staffed by educated professionals. Single-taxers scoffed at this class’s moralism and what they saw as a primitive reiteration of the notion that good men make good kings; for them a ruling class was only as virtuous as the economic incentives that society created for it. So long as privilege existed, professional, state-level regulatory commissions were as likely to be corrupted as urban political machines. With this perspective, they differed in details even from the anti-monopolists who shared their faith in competition and the independent producer. Anti-trust commissions, they
believed, could not effectively deal with monopoly nor did they need to because monopoly was only an issue where free enterprise intersected with limited natural resources or exclusive rights of way, both of which would be socialized with the single tax.  

Even to the extent that their liberalism was in some sense typical, it was also unusually consistent. Not only did single-taxers adhere strictly to the precepts of writers like David Ricardo and Adam Smith, but they also applied their faith in universal rights and liberties to people regardless of color. This was a rarity for the time period; genetic thinking was at its historic zenith, and progressives often advanced both eugenics and segregation.”

Despite differences, George encouraged his followers to collaborate with other agents of change who looked toward a more democratic society and by a process akin to natural selection any adherents who obtained political significance did precisely that. But differences persisted and only grew more acute as the project of economic reform diverged from the conditions that had birthed the single tax. By the late 1930s the few single-taxers who had not become conservatives held onto increasingly desperate hopes that their aspirations would be acknowledged by liberals. George’s followers played an important role in ensuring that state capacity in the United States had a lopsided focus on public ownership of utilities and expanded control over land, not just because they actively campaigned for these issues, but also because to

31 “We have no right to say that competition, or combination and aggregation are in themselves evil or that they necessarily produce evils, so long as we have no experience of a social organization where it is possible to have competition and combination and aggregation free and unrestricted... It is the special privilege given by law which confers the advantage on one of denying the competition of other, and which produces the evil of excessive or discriminating rates. The evil would exist in quite as great a degree if the privilege were conferred upon a partnership or upon a single man, and it must be plan to everybody that the right of incorporation or the right of combination and aggregation has nothing to do with the evil.” Tom L Johnson at National Anti-Trust Conference, Chicago, Feb. 13, 1900. Republished The Public, April 31, 1911.

various degrees they resisted alternative paths which would have expanded the regulatory and coercive powers of government.

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Chapter One explains where George’s thought fits into the traditions of liberalism and republicanism. It begins with an exposition of land’s function in the economic formulas of the classical economists and political theories of republicans. It argues that Georgism evolved out of the intellectual bankruptcy of the free land tradition after the public domain was exhausted. Chapter Two reinforces the argument about liberalism’s and republicanism’s impact on George, within the context of his life story. It follows his biography until the publication of Progress and Poverty, at which point it focuses on his ideology and how he adapted the traditions that preceded him. Chapter Three covers George’s political career from Progress and Poverty to his first mayoral campaign. It describes the parallel intellectual development of the Knights of Labor, the largest labor organization in the country, to demonstrate that George’s ideas developed organically out of earlier traditions of producerist reform. It also touches on an array of other constituencies that joined the movement and why they choose to do so. Studying these causes illustrates the success of George’s complex, layered, ethical appeals as well as the broad practical implications of land reform.

Chapter Four covers George’s life from his first mayoral race to his death. It emphasizes his struggle to integrate the movement into the Democratic Party. While the single tax has often been treated as politically inflexible, I argue that George made an effort to compel his followers into a strategy of political gradualism and cooperation with the Democratic Party. William Jennings Bryan worked to bring single-taxers, many of whom had been Republicans because of their faith in civil rights, into the Democratic Party. There single-taxers broadened the
traditionally agrarian democratic base. Chapter Five deals with the structure of the movement absent its leader. I argue that after his death, George’s faithful were guided by his ideology, as reaffirmed and refined by publications and his close associates. It places that faith within the context of modernism’s destabilizing forces and argues that this zeal played an important role in inspiring progressive reform.

Chapter Six is devoted to Tom Johnson’s mayoral career in Cleveland and argues that municipal reform was the natural site for single-tax activism because, as the principle enforcers of the property tax, cities controlled the institution most readily adaptable to George’s objectives. Johnson saw streetcar profits as a species of land value and initiated a campaign for fare limitation reflecting a calculated Georgist logic. I posit that Johnson was the nationally recognized leader in popularizing government ownership, rather than regulation, of utilities. I contend that his administration’s successes resulted from Johnson’s ability to mobilize resources—professional skills, propagandistic ability, and financial assets. I attribute its failures to the behavioral logic of rent-seeking.

Chapter Seven deals with the international Georgist movement. It shows there was a high level of international coordination and awareness. The principal reason for its spread, I argue, was the international nature of the components—urban rents and liberalism—that inspired it. Chapter Eight covers the local implementation of land value taxation and The Fels Fund Commission, which supplied resources to single-tax campaigns around the world. The Commission is often credited with a renaissance in the movement, but I argue that the international spread of land value taxation and the local reforms of Johnson, specifically the Somers System, were principally responsible. Whereas many of the previous chapters have suggested the importance of ideology, I argue that when it came to direct elections, it was often
an impediment. When voters were confronted directly with the single tax they tended to think primarily about their own economic interests. The progress of land value taxation was closely correlated to objective economic conditions.

Chapter Nine argues that by building a base of support in urban areas, single-taxers became useful to Woodrow Wilson as he expanded the typically agrarian base of the Democratic Party. George’s followers obtained some of the most important positions in the administration, from which they shaped war contracts, taxation, and utility policy to reduce monopoly rents. The single tax obtained enough momentum for a national land tax to be seriously discussed in the administration, but not enough to persist as a force once it became evident that the Constitution forbid it. George’s followers increasingly looked to state ownership of land as the most practical plan of action.

Chapter Ten covers the multitude of reasons why the single tax movement declined rapidly after World War I and its ambivalent interactions with a new generation of reformers, particularly Regional Planners, who were loosely inheritors of the Georgist tradition but also a distinct and independent movement. This lays the foundation for Chapter Eleven, which covers single-taxers’ engagement with the New Deal. Though both parties shared enough interest in land reform to inspire initial cooperation, single-taxers ultimately found New Deal principles of regulation and taxation unpalatable. By the 1940s the movement, so often on the forefront of radicalism, tried to make an uncomfortable alliance with conservatism. While apparently incongruous, it was a decision that made sense in the context of a complex ideology, which cut sharply to both the right and left. This conclusion demonstrates the fallacy of treating single-taxers as part of a vague, general reform program
Chapter I

The Truths of Smith and Proudhon
Liberalism and Republicanism in the Modern Metropolis

What I have done in this book, if I have correctly solved the great problem I have sought to investigate, is to unite the truth perceived by the schools of Smith and Ricardo to the truth perceived by the schools of Proudhon and Lassalle; to show that laissez faire (in its full true meaning) opens the way to a realization of the noble dreams of socialism.…

Henry George, (1886). ¹

Perhaps nothing speaks so forcefully to how ill-understood George is than the assertion, posited by one of the preeminent historians of the American mind, that he was an “idiosyncratic and non-systematic thinker.”² This contrasts starkly with popular opinion in his own time, during which he was subject to the criticism that his work was entirely unoriginal, possibly plagiarized. His contemporaries had the more persuasive claim; even Herbert Spencer, who is generally regarded as the patriarch of Gilded Age conservatism, was, in the years before George radicalized the proposition, espousing the notion that “equity…does not permit property in land.”³

The truth to the question of George’s originality rests somewhere between the extremes of idiosyncrasy and plagiarism. George’s ideas grew directly out of the traditions of liberalism and republicanism, both of which he had substantial personal engagement with. From liberalism he took the idea that property rights were conferred by labor and that no one could claim to have created land. From republicanism, he took the idea that the distribution of landed property was a

key factor in the success of democratic governance. These would be the foundation of his thought, though, as we will see, he made several essential changes. Preeminent among these was the concept of social value, which introduced into liberalism the idea that society had a sacred claim to some types of property and brought the radical republican tradition closer to modern socialism than it had been.⁴

This chapter, however, does not just exhibit precedents for George’s thought, it also argues that its appearance in America during his time was part of a natural evolution. The doctrine of land value taxation was a well-established principle of liberalism, but had few supporters in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. Americans were as preoccupied with land, if not more so, than those on the opposite side of the Atlantic but the vast public domain, offering opportunities for wide-spread proprietorship, tended to mute opposition to land ownership. At the time of George’s writing though, the policy of free settlement was becoming progressively less tenable. As American economic conditions converged with those of Britain and France it was natural that theories of rent that were a staple of European political economy would find similar expression on the western edge of the Atlantic.

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The doctrine of land value taxation dates back to the roots of liberalism in the early 18th century. Liberalism, with its faith in private property and inviolable individual rights, represented the ideology of an insurgent entrepreneurial class, struggling to secure its station relative to that

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⁴ In juxtaposing “The truths of Smith and Proudhon” (liberalism and socialism), with George’s roots in liberalism and republicanism, one could conclude that I am equating republicanism with socialism. They are by no means identical, but because republicanism called for the transcendence of individual interests for the collective good and indicated that economic inequality could be corrosive, it tended to inspire efforts for economic reform. James Morone has argued that it stood behind nearly all successful efforts at economic reform in America. This narrative does not suggest anything quite so grand, but does substantiate the idea that even relatively modern variants of socialism had roots in classical republicanism. James A. Morone, The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the limits of American Government (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
of a privileged aristocracy, whose wealth and status was rooted in the idle exploitation of land. Even before the Enlightenment doctrine of economic and political liberty reached its bloody realization in the French Revolution, the argument for land value taxation had already been well established. The French Physiocrats of the eighteenth century—Francois Quesnay, A. R. J. Turgot, Marquis de Condorcet, and Pierre Samuel du Pont—were the first great advocates of both free enterprise and a tax that would bear exclusively on land.

Physiocrats believed that agriculture garnered an economic surplus not enjoyed by urban commerce and was thus best fit for an impot unique, a single tax on rent. Thus, when A. B. du Pont, a descendent of the Physiocrat Pierre du Pont, offered to join George’s movement, George welcomed him with the caveat “I shall refuse to instruct this young man in the Singletax. His ancestor had the philosophy before I was born.” George was overly generous, but he recognized—and wanted others to recognize—that his idea transcended himself.

In fact, George was not as indebted to the Physiocrats as he pretended. Their philosophy was based on the idea that farming was special; George exploded the divide between agricultural and commercial land uses. The Physiocrats were however, responsible for one idea essential to the Georgist cannon: the “incidence” of taxation. According to this notion, taxes were not always ultimately paid by those upon whom they were immediately levied. Producers would pass the expense of taxation on to their consumers. Only landowners bore the burden of their taxes directly, because land existed in fixed sums, so that its supply would not be reduced nor its price increased by taxation. For George this would mean that only a land tax could effectively redistribute wealth.  

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5 Public, June 28, 1919.
When liberalism crossed the English Channel, land value taxation’s association with the economic interests of the entrepreneurial middle class became more obvious. In the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith chided the British tax system because it was designed for the enrichment of the nobility and not even intelligently crafted for that purpose. Of capitation taxes he said that “the proportion which falls upon the nobility… is the least considerable” Instead they were “direct taxes upon the wages of labour.”\(^7\) Merchant taxes were not only ineffective, they existed because the nobility saw that class as mere “emancipated bondsmen” and “were not unwilling that he should tallage likewise those of an order of men whom it was much less their interests to protect” than the serfs they owned.\(^8\) In response to the nobility’s efforts to shift taxes onto the lower orders, Smith advocated a tax that would target them specifically: “Ground-rents, and the ordinary rent of land, are … perhaps the species of revenue which can best bear to have a peculiar tax imposed on them.”

Smith argued that property rights accrued with labor. Land existed without human labor and so rent, not land taxes, was the real levy on property:

The produce of labor constitutes the natural recompense or wages of labour. In the original state of things, which precedes both the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock, the whole produce of labour belongs to the labourer… As soon as the land becomes private property, the landlord demands a share of almost all the produce which the labourer can either raise or collect from it.\(^9\)

The aristocracy had often prided itself on being idle, because its freedom from necessity implied the luxury to cultivate the culture of a ruling caste. The identification of ownership with labor was therefore a threat to both the economic and political authority of the ruling class.

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The liberal British economist who did the most to pave the way for George intellectually was David Ricardo. In the *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817) he argued that the proceeds of population growth were accruing to landlords. As population increased the demand for food brought marginal land into use, raising the price of agricultural goods and increasing the margins for more advantaged land. 

Because no one could produce land, the landowner was able to demand all of the superior earning power of land in excess of that of the most marginal land in cultivation. Rent was determined by the productive advantage of any plot of land relative to the most marginal land in cultivation. As agriculture was forced onto less productive land and land further away from consumers, prime real estate became more expensive. As George came to better understand the forces that increased the value of land, he would use this concept to argue that the advantages not just of greater population, but all progress, went into the pockets of landlords.

Ricardo made land value taxation into a staple of British pleas, both from the middle and the working class, for economic and political liberty. He disputed Thomas Malthus’ notion that poverty was inevitable, arguing instead that if was a result of rents and that distributing rents through land value taxation would alleviate the plight of the poor. This inspired working class advocates for land value taxation among whom the most prominent was the radical publisher, Thomas Spence. There was also, however, a multitude of forgotten advocates, including the Scottish chartist radical Thomas Morrison, who like George advocated the complete nationalization of land through taxation. Morrison is only remembered today because of his famous grandson, Andrew Carnegie. 

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At a time in British history when wage earners and shopkeepers found common cause against aristocratic lords, land value taxation retained the sanction of middle class intellectuals, especially the utilitarians. James Mill, working as a colonial administrator, designed a system of land value taxation that England imposed on India. His son, John Stuart Mill, raised from birth to be a liberal philosopher, coined the term “unearned increment”—eventually a favorite among George’s followers—to describe the growth of land values that occurred without any labor on the part of the owner. Mill’s attributed land values vaguely to “the general circumstances of society,” a step away from an exclusively agricultural understanding of land values that Ricardo had devised, but far short of George’s realization that the process of urbanization created a natural tendency toward higher rents.

America did not have—at least officially—a landed nobility, but land was still a salient feature in American political discourse because of its perceived importance for stabilizing the relatively new system of republican government. For most students of the subject, Rome was the obvious historic precedent. The internal collapse of that polity spoke to the tenuousness of experiments with democratic governance. A long discourse about the causes of Rome’s decline had begun in Renaissance Italy, been inherited by the English, and then studied closely by early Americans. Republicans were inclined to agree that blame for Rome’s decline rested with the aggregation of large landed estates that drove the small yeoman farmer off the land. Caesar had been able to seize power, and his successors maintain it, because Roman citizens had few independent source of income and were willing to sell their freedom to those who could provide

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for them. The consequence was that landed property was immensely important to the maintenance of popular government, too important, in fact, for the government not to play a role in a socially desirable dispensation of it.

The premise that broad based property ownership was essential for republican government inspired the founders to engage with the prospect of sweeping reforms to the fee simple system. Thomas Jefferson fought to end the right of primogeniture.\textsuperscript{15} Jefferson wanted to limit the growth of government as much as possible. But he conceded that as the class of people dependent on others for wages or other financial support grew, it might be necessary for the state to play a more active role in the dispensation of land:

> Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as common stock for men to labour and live on…. It is too soon yet in our country to say that every man who cannot find employment, but who can find uncultivated land, shall be at liberty to cultivate it, paying a moderate rent. But it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of the state.

It was no accident that Jefferson’s notion of paying rent to the state coincided with the ideas of the French Physiocrats. Both Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were intimately associated with the Physiocrats and spoke highly of their principles.\textsuperscript{16} Franklin wrote to his French associations that he had “not lost any of the principles of public economy you once knew me possessed of.” He was unable, however, to realize their ideas because of the prevalence of land ownership in America: “Our legislators are all landowners, and they are not yet persuaded that all taxes are paid by the land.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Geiger, \textit{The Philosophy of Henry George}, 191.
\textsuperscript{17} Benjamin Franklin, \textit{The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin} (New York: 1887), ix, 414.
Providing citizens free or cheap land proved to be the easiest way to navigate the conflicting interests of land owners, the mantras of minimalist government, and the public necessity for mass proprietorship. Appropriately it was Jefferson, with the Physiocrat Quesnay acting as a broker, who negotiated the constitutionally questionable purchase of the French territory of Louisiana in 1803. By adding 433 acres to the public domain and opening the way to American expansion throughout the west, the deal was believed by many to save the yeoman republic. One newspaper reported that the deal extended “the empire of republicanism, by giving corresponding influence to the agricultural class, who in all ages have been peculiarly devoted to liberty.”

Abraham Bishop observed that “The history of the world teaches that nations, like men, must decay… Wealth, luxury, vice, aristocracies will attack us in our decline…” Jefferson, however, managed to forestall the nefarious decline of agricultural independence: “We see in Louisiana an insurance of long life to our cause. The Atlantic states, as they advance to that condition of society, where wealth and luxury tend to aristocracy, will yield to that country ascensions of enterprising men.”

Though the east might develop into a modern commercial society, there was now a vast, seemingly inexhaustible territory that would house self-supporting farmers, immune to economic coercion.

Without the outlet provided by the Western land, however, republican ideology tended toward something approximating the ideas of George. Thomas Paine, the founder most associated with the artisan class, had little to say of landed property while he lived in the United States. But, he later traveled to France and participated in the Revolution, where he was elected to the National Convention. There Paine witnessed the growth of “The Society of Equals,”

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19 Abraham Bishop, Oration, in honor of the Election of President Jefferson, and the Peaceable Acquisition of Louisiana… (Hartfield, Conn.: 1804), 4. McCoy, The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America, 203.
which, led by Francois-Noel Babeuf, advocated a primitive form of socialism. Paine concluded that economic conditions in France were not conducive to a free society and attributed the disruption to the vastly unequal distribution of landed property.

Paine’s response, the pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*, anticipated many of the most important of George’s ideas. Paine declared land “the common property of the human race” and proposed that “ground-rent” be confiscated and returned to the citizenry as “compensation, in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property.” He proposed that the revenue from this tax go to one-time, lump sum payments to individuals, rather than to a modern social state with its sophisticated array of programs. Otherwise Paine anticipated the essentials of George’s thought a century before George: land was not private property and the best means of alleviating poverty was to confiscate and redistribute land rents.

In one of the canonical texts on the development of the American state, Frederic Hegel is quoted to the effect that nineteenth-century American was a nation without a “real state.” There is some truth to this contention, but it obscures the unique resources of the American state. Constitutionalism severely restricted the functions of federal government and the prevalence of awarding government posts as patronage to political supporters probably compromised the efficiency of national bureaucracy with public servants of low caliber.

The federal government had, however, one unique asset: a public domain which, by 1850, approached 1,400,000,000 acres. There was no class of skilled bureaucrats like that with which Hegel was acquainted, but, with a publically owned landmass almost twice the size of modern Germany, it could have been purchased *en masse* had such a proposition appealed to

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anyone. Instead the public domain became the foundation of other, perhaps more benevolent public policies. By 1880, nearly eight million acres had been distributed to states to fund internal improvements like roads, bridges, canals, and the draining of swamps.23 The rising clamor for railroads to connect the nation spurred the government to subsidize construction with a grant of over 131 million acres.24 The federal government provided bounties of land in return for military service in every conflict from the Revolutionary War to the Mexican American War.25 The sale of public land was also one of the largest sources of federal revenue in antebellum America.

Most pertinently, the public domain served as the foundation for early social policy. Beginning in 1803, the federal government began to reserve every 16th section of a township as a source of revenue for schools and at approximately the same time the reservation of some state land for funding universities also became standard practice.26 The Morrill Act of 1862 granted 30,000 acres to every state in order to fund universities, a policy that provided the foundation for public higher education in the United States.27 Land was granted to the handicapped, victims of natural disasters, and farmers experimenting with new crops.28

But the signal piece of public domain law was the Homestead Act of 1862, under which over a million farmers claimed 160 acres each, nearly free of charge. Though it sped the dispossession of the American Indians, for white citizens of the United States it was a truly radical social program, nearly unique in that it constituted an actual redistribution of capital, rather than the bare provisions for survival customary in modern welfare states. America, for

26 Ibid., 309-310.
period of time, bucked Marx’s predictions about the inevitable decline of independent producers and the ascent of wage labor: between 1870 and 1890 the frequency of wage labor in American agriculture fell from 35 to 27 percent.  

The Homestead Act was inspired, at least in part, by the activities of working class radicals who saw free land as a way to escape wage labor and become economically independent. In the 1830s America birthed the first explicitly working class political parties in the world, the New York and Philadelphia Workingmen’s Parties of the 1830s. After their passing, the movement to lobby the federal government for free land was resuscitated under the National Reform Association (NRA) in 1843. It leader, George Henry Evans, perpetuated Jefferson’s republican notion that those who worked for wages were not sufficiently independent to be reliable citizens and claimed that the free distribution of land would allow the worker to “redeem himself from the slavery of wages.” Horace Greeley, editor of The New York Tribune and future presidential candidate, publicized the free land movement and seared the cause into American memory with his famous exhortation to “Go West young man, go west and grow up with the country.”

Because the yeoman farmer would only ever prosper if he was not in direct competition with slave owners, proponents of free land inevitably joined the movement against expansion of slavery into the West. In 1848, the restriction of slavery and opening of the public demand came together in the Free Soil Party. When that party faltered, land reformers took the lead in other

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political efforts to restrict slavery. Alvan Earl Bovay, former Secretary of the National Reform Association, presided at the meeting wherein it was proposed to found a new anti-slavery party named The Republican Party.\textsuperscript{32}

Together the limitation of slavery, free land, and free education constituted an ideologically consistent vision of reform according to which the principal function of the state was to encourage free competition and democratic government. But any conclusion about the motive force of ideas in this process needs to be weighed against the structural incentives that encouraged this species of reform. Land was nearly the only available resource that could easily be demanded of the federal government; it was equally subject to dispute between state governments, eager to reap the profits from its sale.\textsuperscript{33}

Advocates of free land sometimes believed themselves to be, in essence, adapting the current of international socialist movements to an American context. George Henry Evans, the leading voice of the NRA, happily positioned his cause in this global context:

> The Chartists of Great Britain, the Repealers of Ireland, the Republican Associationists of France, and the Communists of Germany – Noble Pioneers of the good time coming! When National Reform for a Free Soil shall be triumphant throughout the world…\textsuperscript{34}

Karl Marx, on the other hand, was a frequent contributor to Horace Greeley’s \textit{New York Tribune} and in the \textit{Communist Manifesto} ranked the “Agrarian Reformers” of the United States as the nation’s indigenous proletarian movement. Greeley himself had been a Fourierist, until that branch of socialism receded from history and a rent strike in New York brought land reform to the forefront of practical politics.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} Hibbard, 171-197.
\textsuperscript{34} Lause, \textit{Young America}, 1.
The ultimate cause of ante-bellum land reform, whether it be in the civic ideology of republicanism or the practical opportunity to better the plight of working class whites, is ultimately immaterial to the history of Henry George. What is significant is that he stepped into a tradition of reform—reinforced by both ideological traditions and institution structures—that perceived land reform as the central axis for securing free competition and a democratic society. So powerful was the impulse that by the 1860s, it had helped to propel the nation into a war over slavery’s expansion in the west and inspired the redistribution of landed wealth through the Homestead Act. In contrast, little had been accomplished to develop labor law beyond the precedents of English common law, designed to regulate the relation of serfs to their masters.\textsuperscript{36} George’s success would hinge on his ability to capture the momentum of these movements.

Though Georgism evolved out of the tradition of free land, taxation was never considered a desirable option to this school of opinion so long as there was still land available for settlement. Land value taxation promised to open up land for the landless, but only by taxing it so much that those who were not making productive use of it would opt to abandon it. After some early interest in the Physiocrats around the time of the founding, America became a stronghold for opposition to the Ricardian theory of rent. John Stuart Mill signaled out the popular American economist Henry C. Carey as the most vocal opponent to the Ricardian School.\textsuperscript{37} Pragmatic and empirical in his style, Carey could see little evidence around him that rent was growing or that it had harmed Americans. Carey posited, in an argument that was perhaps more philosophic and semantic than economic, that land was merely another type of capital. Rent, he believed, had no special characteristics of growth different from or antithetical to those of capital and labor.


But, the crux of Carey’s argument against land value taxation was an idealized picture of American society. When summarizing his points in his *Principles of Political Economy*, Carey concluded that the ideal was a society much like his own: “a nation whose population is widely scattered to increase rapidly in numbers and wealth, bringing into activity the lands which from quality or situation are inferior… as has been the case in the United States.”\(^{38}\) Carey argued that government revenue was best obtained by tariff, and that contrary to classical liberalism, eliminating taxes on land would provide the laborer with “vastly increased power of obtaining the necessaries of life.”\(^ {39}\) Carey’s ideas found an important place in antebellum free land ideology. Carey was a frequent contributor to Greeley’s *New York Tribune*. One of Greeley’s apprentices, John Skinner, left that paper to publish his own devoted to Carey’s ideas.\(^ {40}\)

But even the American West was not large enough to provide for an endless stream of homesteaders. As settlers made recourse to progressively less suitable land, the Homestead Act was in 1877 revised to allow claims of as much as 640 acres of desert land. Prospective farmers came into conflict with railroads, granted between 7 to 10 percent of the nation’s landmass to subsidize construction. According to some estimates, railroads kept nearly 30% of that land off the market to sell when it would be more valuable, creating speculative deserts shut off from settlement.\(^ {41}\) Nor was the growth of an urban proletariat forestalled; immigrant workers were imported at a rate greater than could be absorbed by western lands. Between 1862 and 1890 approximately 2 million Americans migrated to the West, only a small percentage of the total

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\(^ {39}\) Ibid., 1:262


\(^ {41}\) Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of my Own:*” *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 147.
population growth of 32 million. A market of small proprietors was progressively eclipsed by large, national businesses. The development of industry meant that multitudes of workers needed to huddle within short distances, even walking distances, from work.

These processes of industrialization and urbanization inflated the value of land in proximity to commerce. From 1860 to 1890 the value of real property tripled. Statistics on land value are sparse but illustrative; from 1885 to 1900 the value of land in Boston grew by nearly 85%. In many instances, corporations purchased all of the land surrounding the workplace to control their workers’ access to housing, retail, and churches. For contemporaries, this sort of company town was understood as a particularly autocratic encroachment on American freedoms, as evidenced by the titles of works on the subject, including Jane Addams’ “A Modern Lear” or Upton Sinclair’s *King Coal*.

Rising wealth disparity fostered concerns about the stability of republican government. Henry George and the other major reformers of the late nineteenth century, Edward Bellamy and Henry Demarest Lloyd, were inclined to draw comparisons between their America and the Roman Republic during its final years. The fear that a disappearing public domain endangered democracy became a popular truism after Frederick Jackson Turner presented ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History” in 1893, but Turner was drawing upon a current of thought already established by Walter Bagehot, Francis A. Walker, Achille Loria, and Henry George.

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42 White, “It’s your Misfortune and None of my Own, 143.
46 Ray Allen Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1971), 130. Some iteration of the idea appears in almost all of George’s books, but the only one we can say for sure that Turner read was “This public domain… the enormous common to which the faces of the energetic were always turned… has been the great fact that… has formed our national character and colored
Turner’s expropriation of George was particularly egregious in that he later claimed to be unaware with his work, though surviving evidence proves that he had studied *Progress and Poverty* in graduate school, marked up his personal copy, participated in two debates about the book, seen George speak, and even scribbled notes about which pages to consult when writing his essay on the frontier. But, Turner pulled as easily from the work of Francis Walker, a devoted opponent of George. In 1889, Theodore Roosevelt, in his massive *The Winning of the West*, also attributed stereotypical American traits like independence, equality and appreciation for liberty to the frontier lifestyle, even then on the decline. While Turner provided the definitive analysis of the socio-economic impact of the transition from easy proprietorship to widespread urban wage labor, he did not so much invent an important new understanding of his country as much as he elaborated on anxieties that had already obtained salience in popular discourse.

When the distribution of open land first ceased to be a practical means of ensuring peasant proprietorship, republicans increasingly resorted to land taxes as the next, best solution. After the emancipation of slaves, Radicals Republicans took the position that freed men and women needed access to land in order to be truly independent of their former masters; George

our national thought…. The general intelligence, the general comfort, the active invention, the power of adaption and assimilation, the free, independent spirit, the energy and hopefulness that has marked our people, are not causes, but results – they have sprung from unfenced land.” *George, Progress and Poverty*, 389-390.

47 Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis*, 129-130. When confronted with the similarities between his and George’s ideas Turner wrote ‘I never saw his earlier essays and think that I never read his *Progress and Poverty* before writing the ‘Frontier.’ Since reading your chapter, I have read the *Progress and Poverty* discussion of the public domain and its influence upon the question of labor and capital. It is clear that, so far as the land question and legislation on its taxation goes, he had the idea before my ‘Frontier;’ but the single-tax conception never met with my assent. And, in general, I think it is true, as you indicate, that my use of the presence of the frontier touched more aspects of American society and culture than the one to which he gave almost exclusive attention.” Frederick J. Turner to Merle E. Curti, Jan 5 1931, box 45, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.


W. Julian, Indiana Congressman, argued that, if “land monopoly” remained in place, ex-slaves would be forced into a “system of wages slavery… more galling than slavery itself.”

President Andrew Johnson’s liberal policy of pardons, however, ended hopes that land redistribution could be effected by confiscating the property of former confederates. Black voters and legislators in the south turned to property taxation as a means of simultaneously funding an expanded government and forcing the forfeiture of plantation land. Abraham Galloway, a notable black leader and state senator in North Carolina, declared that he wanted “to see the man who owns one or two thousand acres of land, taxed a dollar on the acre, and if they can’t pay the taxes, sell their property to the highest bidder… and then the negroes shall become land holders.” Frank Moss, a black delegate at Virginia’s constitutional convention, suggested that “If we do not tax the land, we might as well not have come here to make a Constitution.”

The Reconstruction governments used revenue from property taxes to lay the rudiments of the region’s first real system of public education. Legislators in South Carolina used tax receipts to purchase land and resell it with low interest, long-term loans, providing one seventh of the state’s black population with homesteads. In Mississippi alone, over six million acres of land were forfeited by plantation owners unable to pay their property tax bill. In most places though, black proprietorship was forestalled when southern whites “redeemed” state governments from black suffrage and returned forfeited land to its original owners.

Surprisingly, there is little evidence as to how George perceived the precedent of Reconstruction property taxes. Like the single tax, they were designed both to redistribute landed

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51 Ibid., 376.
52 Ibid., 328.
53 Ibid., 375.
54 Ibid., 376.
property and to fund an expanded social state. But they were also, in essence, routine property
taxes, more severe sometimes than the norm, but still taxes assessed on the combined value of
land and improvements. In this sense they differed from a pure tax on land alone. George wrote
in favor of the Radical Republican position in the early days of Reconstruction, but shifted
toward the Democratic Party because of high tariffs and corruption under President Grant. Still,
he maintained a strong affection for the Radical Republican land reformers, particularly George
Julian, whom George became acquainted with when the Indiana Congressman visited
California.  After George completed Progress and Poverty, he sent a copy to Julian. The San
Franciscan’s adoration was reciprocated by the one-time Free Soil Vice-Presidential nominee,
who assigned to George “an exalted place among the heroes of humanity.”

It is probable that later in his career George refrained from alluding to the precedent of
Reconstruction property taxes, because the period was unfairly depicted as a low point of
American governance. Still, the precedent was realized, if not highlighted with any frequency.
Louis Post, the foremost representative of George’s ideas after his death, wrote that
Reconstruction land taxes were responsible for widespread black proprietorship in the South
Carolinian island of St. Helena, that they had a beneficent effect on freedmen, and, of course,
that the experiment should be replicated.

Similarly, Mark Twain’s Gilded Age, the 1873 text that gave the era its name,
independently articulated many of the George’s concerns about the effect of speculation on
public morality and even hinted at his remedy. The novel tells the story of the Hawkins family,
whose patriarch, Silas Hawkins, discovered a large deposit of natural resources and bought

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55 Barker, Henry George, 312.
56 Barker, Henry George, 621.
57 Public, Aug. 25 1900.
seventy-five thousand acres of the property. Because “all that is necessary to hold the land and keep in the family” was “to pay the trifling taxes on it yearly,” Silas decided to keep it off the market until steamboats and railroads reached the area and increased the value of the deposits. Taught that work was demeaning, Silas’ children were forced to enter the game of politics to ensure their land would receive the public improvements necessary to inflate its value. In Washington D.C. they became inured in a life of political and moral corruption that ultimately cost Silas’ daughter, Laura, her life. At the moment of his sister’s death, Washington Hawkins mourned that the land was a “curse” and that he had “depended on it all through my boyhood and never tried to do an honest stroke of work for my living.”

However, Twain, doubtful that even the most forceful moral suasion worked meaningful results, provided Washington with a Georgist _deus ex machina_ to liberate him from the burden of land. As Washington struggled with how to dispose of his inheritance, he suddenly received an unusually high property tax assessment; at that moment Washington tore up the bill and abandoned the land, announcing that “The spell is broken.” The story of the Gilded Age, with its corruption, speculation, and political decadence, hinged entirely on whether or not the state permitted the idle exploitation of landed property. That _The Gilded Age_ anticipated _Progress and Poverty_ by eight years suggests the fallacy of construing their shared presumptions as the fruits of one man’s imagination.

The relationship between the single tax and the passing of the frontier was best treated by Hamlin Garland. Hailed as one of the pioneers of Western literature by Walt Whitman, his Pulitzer Prize winning Middle Border series was a detailed autobiographical treatment of life on

59 Ibid., 441.
60 Ibid., 443.
the frontier.\textsuperscript{61} The novel begins when Hamlin’s father, for whom Greeley’s \textit{New York Tribune} was a “political adviser,” returned from the Civil War.\textsuperscript{62}

The family philosophy dictated that the promise of the young nation and the glory of western migration were deeply intertwined; household songs intoned that “Fair Freedom’s star points to the sunset regions, boys.”\textsuperscript{63} Garland, however, describes in great detail the difficulties of Western life: the arduous and tedious labor; the dearth of culture and society; the oppression of women; and the barbaric treatment endured by American Indians. The Garland family’s fortune reached its nadir when its members made their final move to the Dakotas, where they burned the bones of buffalo—an incomparable metaphor for the decline of the frontier—as the final recourse to warm themselves during the harsh winter.\textsuperscript{64}

As an amazing testament to George’s reach, it was in this desolate territory that Garland first read \textit{Progress and Poverty} and—apparently by light of buffalo bones—became a devotee.\textsuperscript{65} Shortly thereafter, Hamlin traveled back to Boston to join the ranks of the literati and begin a career as a political activist. Under George’s influence:

This wasteful method of pioneering, this desolate business of lonely settlement took on a new and tragic significance... Instructed by my new philosophy I now perceived that these plowmen, these wives and daughters had been pushed out into these lonely ugly shacks by the force of landlordism behind. These plodding Swedes and Danes, these thrifty Germans, these hairy Russians had all fled the feudalism of their native lands and were here because they had no share in the soil from which they sprung, and because in the settled communities of the eastern states, the speculative demand for land had hindered them from acquiring even a leasing right to the surface of the earth. I clearly perceived that our Song of Emigration had been, in effect, the hymn of fugitives!\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{61} Hamlin Garland, \textit{A Son of the Middle Border} (New York: Macmillan Company, 1920), 419.
\textsuperscript{62} ibid., 120.
\textsuperscript{63} ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{64} ibid., 309.
\textsuperscript{65} ibid., 313-314.
\textsuperscript{66} ibid., 367-8.
When the frontier’s potential for economic opportunity was exhausted, Garland looked to George for a way to perpetuate his father’s dreams. But, Garland’s newfound political economy of land did not dictate that he be a freeholding farmer on the periphery of civilization, bereft of community and culture. Now, Garland was free to settle in New York, where he could finally cultivate his artistic and social impulses.

Contemporary labor historian John R. Commons similarly believed that the single tax evolved out of the agrarianism of the homesteading tradition and adapted it to fit modern conditions. Commons wrote “Henry George was the spiritual heir of George Henry Evans,” leader of the NRA. But the single tax was also markedly different, bearing the marks of a society in which the open frontier was no longer plentiful and urbanization had undermined the significance of agricultural land:

“Vote yourself a farm” was a practical kind of agrarianism when the existence of an apparently inexhaustible public domain logically suggested an “extensive” solution to the labor problem, a mere opening of the land to the energetic wage earner… At a time, however, when the railway had nearly abolished the available supply of free land, and when industry had concentrated huge populations in the cities, the “agrarian” solution of the labour question had to be of the “intensive” order, namely, the opening up of opportunities to the labourer by means of an indirect pressure upon the owner of the natural resources through the power of taxation.67

The single tax would, in fact, make unimproved land free, but it would do so by taxing it so dearly that the owner would find it to be a liability and abandon it to the state. As with homesteading, it promised equal access to opportunity; unlike homesteading, it undermined the tenure of landowners that agrarians had prized.

There was enough momentum toward land taxation in the years immediately preceding the publication of Progress and Poverty that George’s followers tended to interpret him not as

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the author of a new plan, but as the intellectual that solidified emergent interest in their idea. In later years Georgists, for example, would republish a letter from an obscure “Mr. Ensley” to the Governor of Tennessee contending that the most suitable articles for taxation were species of “immovable property”—particularly land—that could not flee to lower tax environs. 68 A more famous example of the rising interest in land value taxation was, Edwin Burgess, who published a series of articles in favor the plan in *The Racine Advocate* from 1859-1860. These were republished in 1912 in response to interest from Henry George’s followers.

There were even instances in which those who joined George’s movement had articulated his ideas before *Progress and Poverty* was published. In England, Alfred Russell Wallace, was wrapping up the final chapters of his own book *Land Nationalization and Its Aim* when he happened upon *Progress and Poverty* and joined George’s cause. 69 This was less surprising in Britain, where the idea had long had salience. But Charles Frederic Adams, a distinguished lawyer at the historic New York Firm, Coudert Brothers, also published an article on the subject the year prior to the publication of *Progress and Poverty*. In the 1878 article, “Land and the People” he argued that land was “the natural gift of God” and that the “rent of it” should be “applied for the benefit of the entire people.” Adams subsequently became one of the principle presenters for the Henry George Lecture Association and served as part of the committee of seven that, under Tom L. Johnson’s direction, organized George’s New York mayoral campaign in 1897. 70

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70 *Public*, June 10th 1910.
Biographically, George was both part of these traditions and part of a new age. He grew up in a Philadelphia incensed by working-class activism and the issue of slavery; he began his career as a writer working under one of Greeley’s apprentices; and he even corresponded directly with John Stuart Mill. While Jefferson was in the too distant past for George to have any direct interaction with him, George and his followers did their best to appropriate his mantle. But George had also experienced something fundamentally new. A resident of San Francisco in the 1850s, he had watched the city be born. He had seen the effect of the railroad on its development. He had, most importantly, realized the outsized function of urban land in modern society. The rapidly ascending rents of his city proved that the value of land was constituted by society in general. This, in turn, would have implications that pushed George further in the direction of socialism than his predecessors.

John Dewey’s mentee, George Geiger, described the difficulty of teasing out Henry George’s influence:

Henry George must be considered as part of a great liberal tradition, a tradition that extends far in the past and includes in its ranks many great names. That tradition is more important than the work of any one man. Whether consciously or not, George borrowed from and contributed to that stream of thought; he has become an integral part of it.

Because George so clearly fit within established traditions, it is hard to isolate his own agency. However, in the tapestry of American history, he exemplifies a new juncture. Americans, fixated on land, had with a dulling regularity insisted upon homesteading as the best means to ensure a distribution of land conducive to democratic governance. The taxation of land had occurred as an alternative, but its appearance in, for example, the years before westward expansion, in the

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71 For an extended argument by a single-taxes that Jefferson anticipated the ideas of Henry George see Public, June 2, 1906.

72 Geiger, The Philosophy of Henry George, 384.
relocation of republicans to aristocratic France, or in the reconstruction of the equally aristocratic south, was strongly correlated to a scarcity of open land for homesteading.

This ingrained preoccupation with land made recourse to something like land value taxation probable when opportunities for homesteading dwindled. There were, however, other expositors of the idea who met with no success. George rose to prominence because he adeptly dealt with the concerns of the day. He framed his arguments in terms of classical liberalism, republican, and evangelism. He reconciled them with one another and, more importantly, with changing social conditions. Despite a handful of unique insights, George was not principally an original thinker. He was a transitional figure, a synthesizer, and—despite impressions to the contrary—a modernizer, revising the tradition of land reform for an urban setting.
Chapter II

The Prophet of San Francisco
Henry George and the Evolution of the Free Land Tradition

The fact that Henry George has an ardent group of disciples who have a practical program for reform of taxation has tended to obscure from the recognition of students of social theory that he is one of the great names among the world’s social philosophers. It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who from Plato down rank with him. Were he a native of some European country, it is safe to assert that he would long ago have taken his place on the roll of the world’s thinkers which belongs to him...

John Dewey, (1928). ¹

Here you have a man who is one of the first half-dozen of the world’s creative geniuses in social philosophy…. Yet in this capacity he is today pre-eminently the Forgotten Man of Anglo-American civilization…. I think it is without precedent.

Albert Jay Nock, (1939). ²

Henry George was born into the current of working class reform that he would eventually come to personify. But, he was not subservient to it. From an early age he demonstrated an independent streak on issues like religion and slavery. He reconciled the individualistic impulses of American liberalism with republicanism’s concern for the wider public interest in a way that somehow managed to be amenable to the most extreme advocates of both. But, in his desire to construct a truly global ideology, he broke outside of these discourses altogether, appealing, for example, to Hinduism and Judaism. To the principle edifice of liberal republicanism he added important new ideas about the social value of land and the processes that caused it to rise in value.

Just as the free land of the earlier generation came to embody a larger vision of a competitive capitalism dominated by small proprietors, land value taxation became the

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centerpiece of its own economic vision. This was a system of true, unbridled free competition. To reach it monopoly would have to be eliminated—not just by regulation, but by socialization. Nor was monopoly defined so as to refer, as it does now, to a condition in which one seller dominates the entire market. George’s much broader definition included any instance in which scarcity or the necessity of government intervention created market advantage for one party; the market place millennium would only be possible after the socialization of large swathes of the economy.

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Henry George was born on September 2, 1839, in a respectable row house less than half a mile from Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. Born in the shadow of the Declaration of Independence, he was reared in the tradition of working-class reform. Within a few years of Henry’s birth the growth of his family—he was the sixth of fourteen children—pushed his father to resettle in the Southwark District, a more affordable, working-class neighborhood. Two years before George’s birth the neighborhood had been the location of labor riots. A decade before that it had served as a birthing grounds for Philadelphia’s Workingmen’s Party. It and its New York cousin constituted, according to Marx, “the first story of an organized political party of labor in the world’s history.” Echoes of its platform, including opposition to state chartered monopolies, calls for free public education, and its central plea for land reform, would later be discernable in George’s own philosophy. Perhaps nowhere else would the tension between American ideals and social practice have impressed themselves more on Henry. He later recalled that as a young boy he had “seen the shackled slave under the shadow of Independence Hall carried by federal

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arms back to his master.” For George, America was a work in progress; at the pinnacle of his career he declared that “I love the American Republic not for what it is, but what it was intended to be, and for what in fullest measure it yet may be.”

Descriptions of the social status of Richard George, Henry’s father, generally place him somewhere between the “genteel” middle class and the more well-to-do working class. Both have an element of truth to them; Richard, like his son, and many of those who would eventually support him, belonged to what has been called the “radical middle class.” While most were wage laborers at some point, they often resented the loss of autonomy that it entailed, and traded it in, whenever possible, for even the most precarious ventures at self-employment. Richard’s campaign work for the Democratic Party earned him a fairly cushy patronage job at the Philadelphia Customs House. But once he had raised enough money, Richard, a strict Episcopalian, put his savings into a religious bookstore. The business did not prove self-sustaining and Richard was ultimately forced to return to the customs house. Despite the promise of higher income and greater stability, Richard resented the return to the customs house, complaining that he was given too “much to do” and “consequentially [had] too little time to study.”

The better part of Henry’s education occurred outside of the classroom. He ended his formal academic career at less than fourteen years old, but, as the son of a Democratic Party activist and Christian bookseller, his home life served a sort of education in popular American intellectual life. What he learned at home was augmented by extensive use of Philadelphia’s

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8 Richard George to Henry George, March 6, 1858, Reel 1, Henry George Papers, New York Public Library, New York.
libraries, and its institutions of popular learning, including the Franklin Institute. From his father he inherited many of the pieties of Jacksonian Democracy: he would advocate hard money into the first few years of his career as a journalist and would, until his death, cite Jackson’s bank war as a successful example of executive war on monopoly. However, Henry was inquisitive and on his own time read Emerson and other writers who helped him develop a broader intellectual life than his own four walls could offer.

On a couple of particularly divisive questions he broke with his parents. Henry decided that slavery was wrong in principle, even if, as his father claimed, owners treated their chattel benevolently.9 Like many an over-churched child before and after him, he grew distant from the traditional faith of his parents. He largely ceased to be religious for many years and, when he did venture into spiritualism, experimented with unorthodox doctrines, like Swedenborgeism: a faith, often associated with transcendentalism, that promised a direct connection to god through commune with nature. In his teens, George was already showing a tendency to appropriate traditional American faiths like producerism and labor republicanism without sacrificing the fiercely independent streak that would define his life.

Henry very quickly found himself in the ranks of blue-collar labor. After dropping out of school in 1855, he began a short career as a sailor on the Hindoo.10 The ship was bound to Australia, but George seems to have been more impressed by his stop in India, where he first

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10 The decision to leave school is occasionally taken as evidence of the George family’s anti-intellectualism, though the motivations for the decision are not so clear. Henry George Jr. claims that his father merely had a strong desire to sail. Ignatius Horstman, a classmate who later in life became Bishop of Cleveland, claimed that a doctor told the family to send Henry on a trip because his physical condition was so terrible that he was liable to die. It seems more plausible that an overprotective Christian book-seller would shelter his son to the point of being dangerously anemic than it is that a father who paid for private tutoring would suddenly decide that his son was better served mopping the deck of a ship. Ultimately though, it is impossible to discern which story is true. “Henry George, The Man” from Rev Ignatius Horstman to Henry George Jr., Sep 30 1898, Reel 13, Henry George Papers, New York Public Library. Henry George Jr. *The Life of Henry George* (London: William Reeves, 1900), 17-18.
encountered extreme poverty. In Australia, George had his first direct contact with labor struggle, after several of his crew members were sentenced to a month of forced hard labor for striking. Upon his return home, he wandered through a series of low-skill jobs – mostly typesetting, an occupation that likely helped to refine his literary abilities. The “hard-fisted mechanic,” as he described himself, found the discipline required of a wage laborer unbecoming and on at least one occasion had an altercation with a foreman, whose “impositions and domineering insolence” he found unbearable.¹¹ Like many Americans before him, George was lured west by stories of economic success on the frontier. He was drawn by the promise of Oregon, but his ship terminated in San Francisco, where he arrived in May of 1858. Although, he would head north briefly, George spent the better part of his career on the West Coast in the city by the bay.

On the West Coast, George’s career was as refractory and unsettled as it had been in Philadelphia, but in some ways the young frontier metropolis was congenial to him. He saw San Francisco as just the sort of classless, economically mobile paradise that Jacksonian democracy idealized—the very same type that his own social philosophy would try to replicate:

In a country where all had started from the same level—where the banker had been a year or two before a journeyman carpenter; the merchant a foremast hand; the restaurant waiter had perhaps been educated for the bar or the church, and the labourer once counted his ‘pile,’ and where the wheel of fortune had been constantly revolving in other places unknown, social lines could not be sharply drawn, nor a reverse dispirit.¹²

George adopted the persona of the archetypical western male. He had something of a penchant, which faded later in life, for whiskey and gambling; his vice of choice, cigars, would never wane. Whereas Rousseau practiced his critique of landed property in the salons of Paris, George

¹² Ibid., 51.
sharpened his in San Francisco’s saloons. Later, when he began his career as newspaperman, it was not unheard of for him to brawl with offended parties in his office; when investigating charges of brutality at the local prison he pushed aside an armed warden to enter the premises.\textsuperscript{13}

In 1862, George married Annie Fox, an Irish Catholic, and in November of that year had the first of four children. The pressure of a family made George’s periodic lapses of employment more painful. He would later admit – in a story that would impress upon many of his followers the connection between crime and poverty—that during this period he had once went out on the street to ask for money, prepared to commit murder to support his family. The random benevolence of a stranger saved the beggar with such a propitious future from the fate of a common criminal.

In his better days, George was cobbling together a meager living printing, soliciting newspaper subscriptions door-to-door across the bay in Alameda, and selling his wife’s sewing. He decided to try a career on the other side of the typesetting machine and submitted a short contribution to the \textit{Journal of the Trades and Working Man}, the first labor paper on the West Coast. In his letter to the editor, he wrote that “At a time when most of our public prints pander to wealth and power and would crush the poor man beneath the wheel of the capitalist’s carriage; when one begins to talk of the ‘work people’ and ‘farm servants’ of this coast, and another to deplore the high rate of wages…. I, for one, feel that your enterprise is one which we should all feel the necessity of, and to which we should lend our cordial support.”\textsuperscript{14} It was a crude start to a meteoric writing career; his second publication, a week later, was for the literary journal \textit{Californian}, home to the local luminaries Mark Twain and Bret Harte.

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George’s early work was characterized by a brand of labor republicanism in which land played a prominent, though not dominant role. In articles, some under the penname “proletarian,” he wrote an ode to Lincoln and arguments supporting the Radical Republicans in Congress, who were then engaged in the fight for racial equality in the South. His devotion to republican ideals took an ill-conceived international tone when he embarked on an aborted filibuster to overthrow Emperor Maximilian in Mexico and establish a democratic government south of the border. During his later political career rumors of the effort, which never made any real progress, were used to label George a pirate. More realistically, it could be said to represent a level of evangelical zeal that, after being inherited by his followers, would inspire similarly ill-fated dreams of using military force to spread liberalism abroad.

Though his first piece was crude, George rose up the ladder of the newspaper business, in which he was mentored by old-time advocates of free homesteading. He was introduced to editorial writing by James McClatchy of the *Times*. McClatchy had been born in Belfast and upon moving to the United States joined the Land Reform Association, where he met and befriended Horace Greeley.¹⁵ McClatchy worked for Greeley before setting off on his own editorially; though as editor he always advanced the same ideas of land reform and abolition that his mentor had. McClatchy recognized George’s talent and quickly promoted him, making him co-editor in 1867. As a consequence, if one construes intellectual mentorships as analogous to family relations, George was the linear descendant, once removed, of the patron saint of the free land movement.

If assuming the editorship of a land reform paper was not enough to determine his course, the peculiar politics of American public domain served to bring land to the forefront of George’s

mind. The acquisition of his new job coincided with court decisions confirming Spanish pueblo titles and establishing, for a brief moment in time, the better part of San Francisco as the public property of the city. Under George’s direction the *Times* advocated that the land be distributed into small homesteads, with large portions of land reserved for public use to support colleges, charitable organizations, and two large parks. The city choose to distribute the vast majority of the land privately; though Mayor Frank McCoppin fought successfully to preserve a large tract of land that was converted into Golden Gate Park. In addition to forcing George to consider what benefits the communal ownership of land could offer to a burgeoning city, the instance served as George’s first successful attempt to insert himself into the political discourse. He was likely McCoppin’s most important supporter in the press. The mayor wrote twice during the controversy to thank George for his editorial support.  

With something of a public profile, George’s ambitions began to shift towards the sort of entrepreneurial ventures that his father had once attempted. After leaving the *Times*, George served a stint as managing editor of the new San Francisco *Chronicle*, which he converted from a small theatrical publication to a full-sized newspaper. His first real entrepreneurial work, however, was with the *Herald*. In connection with that journal, George moved east and devised a scheme to circumvent the Associated Press’s monopoly on transcontinental news by wiring reports through Western Union. The AP endeavored to stifle their competition by colluding with Western Union, which agreed to double the price of George’s telegrams. When George became irate about the combination, the President of Western Union, who readily admitted to the agreement, told him to build his own telegraph.  

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16 Frank McCoppin to Henry George, April 10 1868, Frank McCoppin to Henry George, July 23 1868, Reel 1, Henry George Papers.  
The business left George penniless; upon returning to California, he worked odd jobs for two years before he was able to make his first attempt at publishing with the *Daily Evening Post* in 1871. For four years George was a successful independent editor and publisher, but to expand circulation he took a large investment from Republican State Senator John Jones, who had made a fortune off ventures in silver. The politician had promised not to dictate George’s editorial policy but ultimately proved untrue to that promise. George was removed from his own paper after refusing to act as Jones’ personal mouthpiece. Thus, both of George’ experiments in entrepreneurship demonstrated the power of concentrated wealth to crush the small businessman.

Despite his ignominious split with the paper, the *Post* served as a fruitful location for George’s intellectual growth during the early 1870’s. Shortly before beginning the *Post*, George had a revelation that brought him closer to the idea that would define his life. While working in the East with the *Herald*, George discovered land value taxation in the works of John Stuart Mill. Not long afterward, George went on a hike in the foothills of Oakland. Along the way he asked a passerby, out of curiosity, the price of land in the area. He was astounded to find the estimate set at one thousand dollars an acre. “Like a flash it came upon me that there was the reason for advancing poverty with advancing wealth. With the growth of population, land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay for the privilege,” George remembered. The epiphany did not strike *ex nihilo* it merely “crystallized” his “brooding thoughts into coherency.” George was not new to the politics of land reform; what he discovered in the hills of the East Bay was the relationship between private property in land and economic inequality. It would be the first step toward his thesis that property in land explained the persistence of poverty despite progress. George’s subsequent decision to cite this as the moment his ideas crystalized suggests that he perceived his distinctive contribution to lie more in the function of land in redistributing wealth,
than with any particular scheme to remedy the problem.\textsuperscript{18} While land value taxation became a staple in his writing at the \textit{Post}, George continued to advocate the application of other taxes for several years after his hike in the hills.

George gave his most forceful expression to his theory of distribution in a famous 1868 article, “What the Railroad Will Bring Us,” wherein he cast doubt on boosterism prevailing in San Francisco as the transcontinental neared completion. George, confident that city’s position on the Pacific foreboded greatness, perhaps exceeded the optimism of much of his audience when he asked “Is it not too much to say that this city of ours must become the first city of the continent; and is it not too much to say that the first city of the continent must ultimately be the first city of the world?” He took pleasure in many of the opportunities the new metropolis would offer “We shall have our noble charities, great museums libraries and universities; a class of men who have leisure for thought and culture; magnificent theaters and opera houses, parks and pleasure gardens. We shall develop a literature of our own, issue books which will be read wherever the English language is spoken.” But to perhaps the most salient concern of his audience, material progress, he pessimistically concluded that the railroad, “will not benefit all of us, but only a portion.” As the city grew, it became denser, the price of rent dearer. To this he added that the concentrated wealth in the railroads would exacerbate corruption, turning the apparatus of the state against the interests of its people.\textsuperscript{19}

During the 1870s, George also became increasingly involved in a less savory cause; anti-Chinese nativism. In 1869 he published an article in the New York \textit{Tribune} calling the Chinese migrating to San Francisco “long-tailed barbarians…making princes of our capitalists… and

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 136.
crushing workers into the dust.”\textsuperscript{20} The principle argument of the article was economic: immigrants would increase the number of workers, lower wages, and reduce American standards to those of the immigrant laborer. The subtext was a conflicted vision of race wherein ethno-nationalism went hand in hand with opposition to genetic thinking. The Chinese were naturally capable, but culturally backwards and too geographically segregated to obtain conformity with American norms. He forwarded the article to John Stuart Mill, who replied with a level of skepticism to George’s racist undertones, but generally assented to the economic principles he advanced. The letter was positive enough that George chose to publish it, causing considerable local excitement that the world’s leading economist would dabble in the provincial affairs of San Francisco. George would later part way with Mill on the premise that population growth limited standards of living. But that George had bothered to write Mill, and Mill to respond to George, suggests a level of continuity between George and the tradition of British liberalism.\textsuperscript{21}

George’s mixture of nativism and labor politics was far from idiosyncratic in Gilded Age San Francisco, but the company he kept did little to encourage prejudices that were increasingly incompatible with his philosophy. In 1878 Dennis Kearney came to prominence as the leader of California’s nativist Workingmen’s Party. Kearney interspersed his tirades against the Chinese with attacks on the “land pirates.” Despite his racial preoccupations, Kearney still believed that “the land question is the future great question of this country.”\textsuperscript{22} In 1878 his party had won enough power to convene a Constitutional Convention for the state of California. George, however, turned against the movement as it obtained power, arguing that the Chinese question had distracted the movement and complained that the new constitution “entrenched vested

\textsuperscript{20}Gwendolyn Mink, \textit{Old Labor and New Immigrants} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 78.
\textsuperscript{22} Denis Kearney, \textit{Speeches of Dennis Kearney} (New York: Jesse Haney, 1878), 29.
rights—especially in land—more thoroughly than before, and interposed barriers to future radicalism by provisions in regard to amendments which it will require almost a revolution to break through.” The party did not even stay true to its name: “It was anything but a workingmen’s constitution: it levied a poll tax without exemption, disenfranchised a considerable part of the floating labor vote, and introduced a property qualification.”

He implied that Kearney was a political opportunist who had allowed railroad companies to take over the party. George decided that the Chinese were being used as a “scapegoat…for all political and demoralization and corruption” in much the same way that Jews had been in past epochs. The increasing emphasis he placed on land, left no room for immigration as a significant economic factor. He now pointed to nativism as an example of how, in economics “infantile explanations… still largely suffice.”

It is not clear that George ever entirely abandoned his ethno-nationalism, but during the 1870s it ceased to play an important role in his politics. The idea of innate equality of ability between races— important to the claim that societies rose and fell in accordance to socio-economic conditions – became the position with which George was most commonly associated. He even took a step back from his anti-Chinese article in the *Tribute*, which he now called “crude.” He explained that he “had not then come to clear economic views” a claim that illuminates how much of his broader philosophy emanated directly from economic premises.

23 Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants*, 85.
25 Henry George Jr, *The Life of Henry George* (London: William Reeves, 1900), 195. It seems counterintuitive that a movement founded by a man with a racist past, would eventually be so active in fighting racism. It’s a testament though to the implicit egalitarianism of George’s thought, that even he was forced to step back from his prejudices as his ideas took shape. Amazingly, William Lloyd Garrison challenged George’s views on the Chinese precisely because he claimed they were contrary to the egalitarianism of single-tax philosophy, an indication that, on this point at least, his philosophy transcended its creator. Barker, *The Life of Henry George*, 203. William Lloyd Garrison to Henry George Dec. 4, 1893, George Papers, Reel 6. When campaigning for mayor of New York, George was asked by a black voter if he would do anything about landlords who refused to rent to people of color. His
George’s first book, *Our Land and Land Policy*, published in 1871, marked an intermediate point between the politics of free land and those of the land tax. He devoted the first paragraph to an illustration of how little arable land remained in the public domain. While George discussed land value taxation, he gave equal attention to his critique of federal land grants to railroads, which he claimed were increasing the price of land and inefficiently reallocating capital investments.\(^26\) While he advanced his theory that progress would exacerbate economic inequality, he still saw free land as a way to circumvent his paradox of progress and poverty. In his effort to protect the public domain, George even stumbled on conservationism, asking at one point: “What have the buffaloes done to us that we should sacrifice the heritage of our children to see them extirpated before we die.”\(^27\)

While it only sold about 1,000 copies, *Our Land and Land Policy* marked the beginning of George’s career as a public leader. It served as the foundational text for the world’s first Georgist organization, the Land Reform League of California, founded in 1878. James McGuire, future congressman and gubernatorial candidate, was an active member; the preservationist John Muir stopped by for at least one meeting.\(^28\) As a mark of his growing prestige George, was invited to give a lecture on political economy at the University of California at Berkeley. He interpreted the speech as a job talk, though no position was offered. His son would later claim that the faculty was offended by the implication in George’s speech that the field of Political response suggested that he would have little power to deal with it, but the ideas he promoted inherently forced a level of tolerance: “I think so. If you will notice the men into whose minds these ideas have entered, you will find them rising above all prejudices of nationality, or race, or color, because the bottom principles for which we contend – the whole basis of the theory – is that we are all the equal creatures of a common God. As these ideas grow in the mind, so appears the sentiment of the brotherhood of man.” Louis F. Post, *The George Hewitt Campaign: In the New York Municipal election of 1886*, (New York: John W. Lovell Company 1886), 89.

\(^{26}\) On this latter point his analysis coincides with the most recent academic work on the subject. Richard White, *Railroaded* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2011).


Economy was unduly influenced by monetary self-interest and by his assertion that to understand the field “you do not even need text-books nor teachers, if you will but think for yourselves.”

George’s influence in California garnered him political patronage that effectively served as a Gilded Age research grant, allowing him the leisure to pursue his intellectual work in a more concerted way. On January 1876, William Irwin, newly elected Democratic Governor of California, appointed him State Inspector of Gas Meters. The job was not particularly lucrative, but it also did not require a substantial time commitment. The Governor was reportedly an admirer of George’s work, but the appointment was also meant to sway an independent, leaning increasingly toward the Democratic Party. George had been an ardent Republican, but he had established a relationship with Democratic Mayor Frank McCoppin during the fight to preserve San Francisco’s public domain; George had even become a Democratic Party delegate in the election of 1872, because the party was coalescing around land reformer Horace Greeley as a Presidential candidate. With an easy source of income, George had an opportunity to take a step back from the immediacy of the newspaper business and approach politics from a more abstract and theoretical perspective. The Land Reform League of California served as a sounding board for him to test his developing ideas.

On September 18, 1877, George wrote a short note in his diary “Commenced ‘Progress and Poverty.’” What he initially envisioned as a short article, grew under the encouragement of his friends. While George often appeared distracted, his son’s description of him during the period speaks to a father never more than half-present. He paced the floor smoking cigars; his countenance showed “tense thought in the brow and a gleam in the deep-blue eyes that looked

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straight through and beyond you, as if to rest on the world of visions of the pure in heart.”

George Jr. romanticized this moment in his father’s life, though at the time it was probably difficult to abide by the way that George suddenly disengaged from conversations or made unplanned, contemplative jaunts down to the bay. In March of 1879, George finished his book. After writing the last word he fell to his knees and wept, overcome by the feeling that his fate now rested in the “Master’s hands.” That sense of divine destiny became to him “a religion strong and deep, though vague.”

This moment does not speak to a strong sense humility, though his confidence seems to reflect more a faith in the inevitability of his cause—a cause that to great degree preceded and transcended him—than to personal vanity.

The completion of Progress and Poverty would be the defining moment of his life; his philosophy had reached maturity and he had taken his first steps onto the world stage. However, in some respects it has been overestimated. Though its circulation is hard to ascertain because George allowed it to be republished in innumerable unauthorized auditions, serialized in newspapers, and abbreviated in short pamphlets, Progress and Poverty became a global phenomenon.

But to measure him on this one book undercuts – and misinterprets— his influence. With about six hundred pages, many loaded with dense economic terminology, Progress and Poverty, became the requisite reading for the initiated, but it was hardly the tip of the spear. Shorter, less dense works like Social Problems, Free Trade and Protection, “Moses,” and the Irish Land

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31 Ibid., 301.
32 Thomas, Alternative America, 103.
33 George Jr., The Life of Henry George, 312.
34 Barker, Henry George, 312.
Question were preferred for propaganda purposes.\textsuperscript{36} During various periods, The Irish Land Question and Protection or Free Trade – possibly even Social Problems – eclipsed Progress and Poverty in sales, serving as the reading public’s principle introduction to George’s philosophy. These texts contextualized the land question in broader concerns about colonialism, taxation, unionism, and modernity. Contemporary readers, to the extent that they refer to George at all, typically turn to Progress and Poverty, a more focused and direct treatment of the economic impact of fee simple land ownership. But Progress and Poverty did not represent the totality of George’s intellectual influence. It was probably even not his “Communist Manifesto;” if anything it was his Das Kapital.

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In Progress and Poverty, Henry George tells the parable of a lone settler founding a community that grows into a great metropolis. In its origins, the settler “must be his own blacksmith, wagonmaker, carpenter, and cobbler;” he “cannot have his children schooled” and “though nature is prolific, the man is poor.”\textsuperscript{37} Once a settlement is established “There are gratifications for the social and intellectual nature—for the part of the man that rises above the animal. The power of sympathy, the sense of companionship, the emulation of comparison and

\textsuperscript{36} This is evident in the biographies of George’s supporters, who only occasionally report that Progress and Poverty was their first exposure to single-tax philosophy. In terms of propaganda, the most vigorous efforts to distribute one of George’s books were in 1892 and 1916, when congressional frank was used to distribute copies of Protection or Free Trade. On both of those occasions a million copies of the book were distributed. Sometimes George’s followers explicitly acknowledged that his other works were better for propaganda: ”I, of course, have the complete edition of Mr. George’s works and know Progress and Poverty too well to need an abstract of it for my own use. Indeed I believe the distribution of Moses is much more likely to penetrate than any part of Progress and Poverty, the economic qualities of which instantly arouse resistance in many minds.” Newton Baker to Will Atkinson, September 17, 1927, Box 32, Newton Baker Papers. When The Public addressed the question of which book would be best to give a young discontent potentially interested in George, Progress and Poverty was not even discussed. Instead Social Problems and Protection or Free Trade were the only ones considered. Public, Sept. 27, 1912.

\textsuperscript{37} Henry George, Progress and Poverty, 236.
contrast, open a wider, and fuller and more varied life.”

The city creates economies of scale inconceivable to the loner settler and opportunities for expert specialization unknown to the primitive community, so that “especially to labor expended in that final part of production, which consists in distribution, it will yield much larger returns.”

This concentration of population “brings out a superior power in labor, which is localized on land… which thus inheres in the land as much as any qualities of soil.” A New York or a San Francisco offers advantages to business that are unlike anywhere else in the world and “all these advantages attach to the land; it is on this land and no other that they can be utilized, for here is the center of population—the focus of exchanges, the market place and workshop of the highest forms of industry.”

The demand to participate in these markets translates into a demand for the underlying land and so “there are lots that are worth more than would suffice to pave them with gold coin.” Those who came first, reaped the bulk of the proceeds, regardless of their contributions: “our settler, or whoever has succeeded to his right in the land, is now a millionaire. Like another Rip Van Winkle, he may have laid down and slept; still he is rich—not from anything he has done.” The long predominance of less fictive Dutchmen in the economic elite of New York City perhaps testifies to the veracity of this narrative.

George’s observation that the proceeds of urbanization inhered in land made rent, already a concern of classical economists, an even more severe impediment to generalized economic progress. The law of rent as posited by Ricardo had stated that greater productivity of land would

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38 Ibid., 237.
39 Ibid., 239.
40 Ibid., 235.
41 Ibid., 241.
42 Ibid., 242.
43 Ibid., 241.
always be paid in rent. The owner of a prime piece of property would recognize the advantage of his property relative to the least productive piece of property and charge a premium that reflected the difference. In Mill’s words, “The superiority of the instrument is in exact proportion to the rent paid for it.” Ricardo saw the advantages of land in terms of agricultural or extractive productivity, but George observed that the “sandy waste” underneath San Francisco was more valuable than the most productive agricultural land in the world. The values of urbanization, including higher culture, economies of scale, and opportunity for specialization were all vested in the land so that all the virtues they offered became recompense for the landlord.

This was perhaps George’s most original intellectual contribution, but by his final book, The Science of Political Economy, he recognized that it had mostly fallen on deaf ears. That is because a majority of readers continued to imagine “land” as an essentially agrarian issue. In the same work, he began to use the term “space,” which in its colloquial use better approximated the concept he was describing.

George also revised Ricardo’s analysis of extractive industries in such a way as to make rent an even greater concern still. Ricardo had argued that, with the growth of population, the

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45 Henry George, Progress and Poverty, 242.
46 “That the development of our modern economy began in what was still mainly the second stage of social development, when the use of land was usually regarded from the agricultural point of view, is it seems to me, the explanation for an otherwise curious way of thinking about land that has pervaded economic literature since the time of the Physiocrats, and that still continues to pervade the scholastic political economy—a way of thinking that leads economic writers to treat land as though it were merely a place for subsistence on which vegetables and grain may be grown and cattle bred.” Henry George, The Science of Political Economy (New York: Doubleday & McClure Co., 1898), 354. The originality of this point is perhaps obscured by the fact that Mill did acknowledge that some urban conveniences increased rent, but enumerated a fairly small number of causes; sites of remarkable beauty or conveniently located domiciles, superior locations for retail and rents of wharfage. He failed to consider the way that concentrated population facilitated production and specialization and most non-agricultural causes of rent he listed were accidents of location, rather than systematic changes in social and economic geography. This is probably why, when analyzing the effects of rent on economic development he only considered agricultural rents—urban rents appeared accidental and conformed to no general pattern. John Stuart Mill, Principles of Political Economy, 289.

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demand for food would push production to progressively more marginal land, increasing the price of agricultural products and the value of more advantageously situated land. George observed, in contrast, that it was obviously fallacious to assume per person consumption was static. Technological innovation meant improved production, expanded consumption, and, subsequently, higher demand for raw materials like wood, iron, or coal. Demand for raw materials would increase the value of land, compelling the consumer to pay a premium for goods and the entrepreneur to pay more for access to raw materials—the single-taxer George Record would cite the example of the cotton gin, which, he claimed increased the value of cotton producing land by 300% in five years.47

This analysis of the demand for resources seemed to answer the paradox of progress and poverty. Technological innovation should have significantly improved standards of living, but the benefits were only accruing to the propertied elite. Even before George posited that technological development and urbanization increased the price of land, John Stuart Mill had argued that rent acted like an “elastic and extensible band” to restrain development, though not as a “wall, which stands immovable in one particular spot.”48 With George’s additions to Ricardo’s theory, it began to appear more like the wall than the band.

If any increase in consumer demand ultimately rebounded to the landowner, the implication was not only that technological advancements, but also all political reforms short of the single tax would fail to improve the lives of the average citizen. In Protection or Free Trade, George contended that there was “the tendency of monopoly of the process and machinery of production and exchange, the tendency of protective tariffs, of bad systems of currency and

47 George L. Record, How to Abolish Poverty (Jersey City: The George L. Record Memorial Association, 1936), 126-127
finance, of corrupt government, of public debts, of standing armies… They are the lesser robbers, and to drive them off is only to leave more for the great robber to take.”

This pessimistic assessment, however, hardly discouraged the movement from fighting for such reforms; *Protection or Free Trade* was itself a best-selling campaign document designed to put revenue reform into the national political discourse. Even if eliminating the “lesser robbers” would not improve the plight of the poor, George’s followers claimed that it would make the injustice of landed property more salient by eliminating other maladjustments that detracted from land’s share of national wealth. For example, free public transportation, one of George’s favorite proposals, would increase rents in areas within immediate proximity to transportation infrastructure. Similarly, free trade would increase demand for raw material, producing higher resource rents, as seems to have been the case in the past several decades.

Thus, while George has sometimes been understood to argue that the single tax was the only important reform, the truth is more complex. George believed that there were many facets of society that needed to be fixed, but that the single tax was the foundational reform that would ensure the benefits of progress were evenly distributed. Even without the single tax though, eliminating other monopoly rents had a salutary political effect, because this made the corrosive function of land in the economy clearer.

Within George’s framework, economic downturns were explained by the tendency of rising land costs to stifle economic opportunity. The reigning economic theories of the era, like the Wage Fund Theory or Say’s Law, dictated that there could no discrepancy between the

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49 Henry George, *Protection or Free Trade* (New York: Henry George, 1887), 286.
50 Rents from resource extraction have grown from less than 1% of global GDP in the early 1970s to approximately 5% by the middle of the 2000s. Thomas Piketty, *Capital: In the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Belknap University Press of Harvard, 2014), 459.
supply and demand of products. George did not entirely overturn that precedent; like modern analysts of “rent-seeking,” he defined rent as a third factor, separate from labor and capital, that worked to diminish the stock of both. 51 But, by slowing production, George believed that rent could cause as “a cessation of demand, which would again check production there, and thus the paralysis would communicate itself through all the interlacings of industry and commerce.” J. A. Hobson, perhaps the most important advocate for demand-side economics before John Maynard Keynes, would thus draw some inspiration from George, but *Progress and Poverty* fell short of fully articulating Hobson’s position.

Additionally, while George realized that there was speculation in products other than land, he doubted the now popular thesis that overconfidence in the value of these factors could provoke industrial disruptions. Prices of other commodities were mediated by factors of supply and demand. Land existed in a “fixed quantity,” so that whereas the value of other commodities would decline with increased production, reducing marginal profits, increased investment in land

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would cause its price to rise until consumers were no longer afforded access to the housing market or businesses could no longer sell goods at a price the market would bear.  

Henry George’s thesis proved difficult to rebut, at least theoretically. Perhaps the most thorough effort to refute him using classical rent theory was endeavored by Francis A. Walker, President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in his 1891 book *Land and Its Rent*. Walker’s best critique of George was that he failed to take into account, as John Stuart Mill had before him, the effect of improved transportation to raise the “lower limit” of land under cultivation. George already accepted, in the case of the western frontier, that bringing new land into cultivation reduced rents, giving Walker a definite upper hand on this point. Walker’s other major contention was that many inventions were land-saving devices which, by increasing the average productivity of land or bringing more into cultivation, reduced demand for it.

Neither of these critiques, however, did anything more than suggest some possible countervailing trends. Walker claimed to have disproved all of George’s revisions of Ricardo’s original theory of rent. In fact, he had not addressed the idea that land values were constituted, not just by extractive capacity, but also by the efficiencies inherent in urban markets. Within the framework of Ricardo’s law of rent, Walker could only ever hope to argue, as had Ricardo, that land rents were a grievous maladaptation that should be taxed, but not, as George argued, a brick wall obstructing all material progress for the masses. While Walker had affected some minor revisions to George’s logic, he had failed even to reestablish the Ricardian theory, as hospitable as it already was to George’s practical proposal.  


The ascendant neo-classical economists, emphasizing quantitative analysis, largely side-stepped George’s arguments. George believed that they had abandoned precepts of classical political economy largely to escape the implications which he had derived from the works of Ricardo and Smith.\textsuperscript{54} Alfred Marshall, the only member of this group that addressed George directly, gave some substance to the charge. In a series of three lectures targeting George Marshall began with the observation that George’s work was based on “phrases, which were used by the last generation of economists, but which the rising generation almost to a man have abandoned, not as false, but as liable to misrepresentation or misleading.”\textsuperscript{55}

Marshall acknowledged Ricardo’s law of rent, but refrained from addressing the conclusions George reached using this principle. Rather he turned to a more contemporary interpretation of diminishing returns and argued that agriculture’s share of income declined as more labor was expended on it.\textsuperscript{56} Since George himself argued that the value of agricultural land was declining relative to urban land, Marshall’s arguments were tangential to the question at hand. Marshall seems to have recognized this fact. He refused to publish the lectures and concluded of them that “I failed utterly…. I practically had to leave him [George] entirely out of the argument.”\textsuperscript{57} Despite his pretenses of scientific objectivity, Marshall understood poverty principally through the lens of crude generalizations about the character of the poor. Poverty was not more prevalent in urban areas because of rent, but rather because “those who from physical

\textsuperscript{54} Henry George, \textit{The Science of Political Economy}, 200-209.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 14
or mental infirmity are unable to do a good day’s work find it impossible to live where population is scarce.”

Marshall’s analysis had its shortcomings, but when he confronted George at a meeting in Oxford University in 1884 he bested him as a crowd of jeering students cheered him on. Marshall presented hard statistics indicating that, the San Franciscan’s objections notwithstanding, the living standards of the average British farmer and worker had increased. George’s arguments based on Ricardo’s law of rent were hard to refute analytically, but the conclusion that all progress would inhere in land proved objectively wrong. The value of land has definitively not risen exponentially relative to other factors of production. Statistics indicate that real estate has typically constituted, with some local and chronological variation, something like half of national wealth, though there is no reliable data on the percentage of this sum that has been constituted by land values.

That means Marshall’s sanguine conclusion that rents would fall with the decline of agriculture were equally invalid; the value of urban real estate has risen proportionally to compensate for the decline of agriculture. Along these lines, economist Thomas Piketty has concluded that it would be wrong to dismiss the “Ricardian apocalypse,” which as he understands it is actually more like the Georgian apocalypse. “To convince one of this,” he writes “it is enough to replace the price of farmland in Ricardo’s model by the price of urban real estate in world capitals, or, alternatively, by the price of oil.” George overstated the inevitability of this catastrophe, but he had also refined Ricardo’s model by shifting its focus to

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59 Piketty, Capital In the Twenty-First Century, 6.
the factors—urban land and resources for mass production—that would be significant in the modern era.

George, however, was not a materialist; economic questions were only of import to the degree that they impacted personal development, democratic government, and religious salvation. Like other classical republicans, George believed that the stability of democratic governance was dependent on the existence of a large class of proprietors, whose economic independence allowed them the virtue to think and act upon the wider public interest.

George saw in his own time a process of polarization similar to those that had occurred in the final years of the Roman republican. He wrote that “given a community with Republican institutions, in which one class is too rich to be shorn of its luxuries… and another so poor that a few dollars on election day will seem more than any abstract consideration… power must pass into the hands of the jobbers who will sell it as the Praetorians sold the Roman purple.” He warned that, “To give the suffrage… to men who must beg, steal, or starve, is to invoke destruction.” On the other hand, economic privilege had also fostered an aristocracy, all the more dangerous because it went unacknowledged: “Is there not growing up among us a class who have all the power without any of the virtues of an aristocracy? We have simple citizens who control thousands of miles of railroad, millions of acres of land… who choose the governors of sovereign states as they name their clerks… and whose will is as supreme with the legislatures as that of a French king sitting in bed of justice.” Ultimately George warned that inequality “threatens to compel every worker to seek a master, as the insecurity which followed the break-up of the Roman Empire compelled every freeman to seek a lord.”

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60 George, Progress and Poverty, 531.
61 Ibid., 532.
62 Ibid., 534.
63 Ibid., 535.
In claiming that citizens would need to “seek a master,” George was evoking the long-standing fear that when given no opportunity but to work for wages, citizens would become politically subservient to employers. Unlike some of his predecessors, George did not entirely reject the practice of wage labor, but he did suggest the single tax could facilitate alternative production regimes.

George attributed to land value taxation a litany of benefits for the worker. The removal of taxes from productive labor would foster higher employment and better bargaining position for workers. Heavy taxes on the non-use of land would promote the development of housing, creating more construction jobs and lowering rents. Land would be taxed to the point that it would have no selling value, so that no capital would be necessary to claim space for businesses. Under these conditions, “Instead of laborers competing with one another for employment… employers would everywhere be competing for laborers… the employers of labor would not have merely to bid against other employers… but against the ability of laborers to become their own employers upon the natural opportunities freely opened to them by the tax which prevented monopolization.”

With such generalized access to capital, cooperative enterprise would also thrive. George “was inclined to think that the result of confiscating rent… would be to cause the organization of labor… to assume the co-operative form… since the more equal distribution of wealth would unite capitalist and laborer in the same person.” The single tax would also fund state employment; George even suggested that it could subsidize a national academy for industry that would teach skills and produce goods, while setting wages above the market rate to improve

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64 Ibid., 438.
65 Ibid., 468.
labor’s bargaining power.\textsuperscript{66} Better bargaining power for workers along with rising levels of self, cooperative, and state employment, would all eliminate the dependency of wage labor.

The educational and cultural edification of the citizenry was as vital to democratic governance as its economic condition and George believed the single tax would provide equally well for these. Education was progressively more important because, “As society develops, a higher and higher degree of social intelligence is required, for the relations of individuals to each other becomes more intimate and important, and the increasing complexity of the social organization brings liability to new dangers.”\textsuperscript{67} The expropriation of rents, therefore, would fund, perhaps more so than anything else, the means to edify the citizenry: “There would be a great and increasing surplus revenue from the taxation of land values…we could establish … museums, libraries, gardens, lecture rooms, music and dancing halls, theaters, universities, technical schools, shooting galleries, play grounds, gymnasiums… discoverers and inventors rewarded, scientific investigations supported….\textsuperscript{68} This emphasis on widespread access to education was a popular trope of republican discourse, stretching from the Workingmen’s Party of the early nineteenth century, back to Thomas Jefferson, founder of the University of Virginia.

Less typical was George’s belief that the city, the development of which the single tax would foster, was more congenial to democratic knowledge than the open spaces of the independent, but isolated farmer. In this respect, Hamlin Garland’s extended criticism of the frontier as a place of cultural backwardness was very much in line with George’s analysis. The city allowed for “the collision of mind with mind.”\textsuperscript{69} George argued that the expectation of rising

\textsuperscript{67} Henry George, \textit{Social Problems} (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1900), 12.
\textsuperscript{68} George, \textit{Progress and Poverty}, 456
\textsuperscript{69} George, \textit{Progress and Poverty}, 241.
land values had spurred the farmer to “want more land than he could profitably use.”\textsuperscript{70} With unnecessarily large estates, population was unnaturally dispersed. Rural America was peopled with “half-savage cowboys, whose social life is confined to the excitement of the ‘round-up’ or a periodical ‘drunk’ in a railroad town.”\textsuperscript{71} If they paid rent to the state, these same citizens would no longer purchase more land than they could profitably use, so that, even in remote areas, population would concentrate into communities that could foster personal development.

Such a benevolent environment was important because George believed that individuals and societies had an almost infinite capacity for improvement. At the time of George’s writing, Herbert Spencer had popularized the notion that biological evolution was the motor of human progress. To this, George replied that if modern man had obtained an elevated position it was because “we stand on a pyramid, not that we are taller.”\textsuperscript{72} Under sanguine conditions, there would be no cause for crime—either the smaller variety perpetuated against individuals on the street or the larger one committed against the commonwealth in boardrooms and legislative chambers.

People, George believed, were naturally inclined to prefer self-actualization and respect to money, choosing the later out of desperation and the perversion of natural values created by the tendency to emulate a corrupt social hierarchy. This environmentalist perspective militated against the racism inherent in Spencer’s biological interpretation of the world. To prove the

\textsuperscript{70} Henry George, \textit{Social Problems}, 322.

\textsuperscript{71} George, \textit{Social Problems}, 320. George also attributes salutatory economic benefits to this fact: “If land were taxed at anything near its rental value, no one could afford to keep land he was not using, and, consequently, land not in use would be thrown open to those who would use it. Settlement would be closer, consequently, labor and capital would be enabled to produce much more with the same exertion. The dog in the manger, who, in this country especially, so wastes productive power, would be choked off.” Henry George, \textit{Progress and Poverty}, 413-44.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 503.
importance of environment, George pointed to the example of young black students, who he indicated where at least as bright as their white peers until they realized that “they can never hope to be more than cooks, waiters, or something of that sort.”

In addition to these arguments built on the republican tradition, George revised the natural law thought of his liberalism with an argument about the social value of land that established the moral sanctity of communal property rights. John Locke and Adam Smith had both claimed that the right to property accrued to labor. For Locke, individuals had a natural right to themselves, and by extension, to what they produced. Because it garnered an “unearned increment,” land had a weaker claim to proprietary rights. “When the sacredness of property is talked about,” wrote Mill “it should always be remembered that this sacredness does not belong in the same degree to landed property.”

But George’s theory suggested that the rent was not only unearned, but that it had also been produced by the community as a whole. The development of fashionable retail, expansion of transit, growth of economic opportunity and efficiency—all of the things that residents of a community collectively did to improve the standard of living in their city—were commoditized and sold in the value of the land on which they worked. Just as the labor of the individual gave him title to his products, so too the labor of the community gave it title to its products—land values. The idea of social value and social property was a distinctly Georgist contribution to liberal thought, but it would come to play a defining role in the public discourse on issues as disparate as conservation and utilities, both in America, and abroad.

Fascinatingly, George’s idea cut both ways, establishing a theoretical basis for social property and reaffirming that private property had inviolable rights to an extent not even

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73 Ibid., 490.
74 Mill, Principles of Political Economy, 142.
countenanced by Herbert Spencer, the period’s principal philosopher of laissez-faire capitalism. John Locke, who had established the philosophical basis for the right to property, acknowledged that land was an exception to the idea that property accrued to labor, because no one made land: “God,” he said “hath given the world to men in common.”\textsuperscript{75} Locke believed that all property must ultimately be produced from this common fund, but this condition was justifiable as long as natural resources were evenly distributed.

This was a virtually utopian notion in seventeenth-century England, but it was ludicrous in an industrial economy where coal deposits and expensive urban lots made a truly equally subdivision of land impossible. Herbert Spencer concluded that Locke’s argument for property rights was indefensible without an intricate system of land nationalization that was unlikely to be realized anytime in the foreseeable future. The only justification for property—because all property was ultimately derived from the use of land—therefore, was expediency, not moral right.

George entered this discourse as a defender of the original Lockean faith in property’s sanctity. His one word response to Spencer was “value.”\textsuperscript{76} One could, he argued, quantify the opportunity cost the community incurs by allowing the private expropriation of space. With the community’s levy on production calculated and confiscated, profits would represent the true value of individual exertion and thus would obtain the moral sanctity initially envisioned by Locke. George asserted unequivocally “that which a man makes or produces is his own, as against all the world—to enjoy or to destroy, to use, to exchange, or to give.”\textsuperscript{77} He reached a

\textsuperscript{75} John Locke, \textit{Two Treatises on Government} (London: R. Butler, Bruton-Street, 1821), 209.
\textsuperscript{77} George, \textit{Progress and Poverty}, 334.
conclusion that even the most extreme advocates of laissez faire capitalism had shied away from: there was no moral or pragmatic justification for a tax on property. He could practicably advance that point because he had defined much of the world’s wealth as social property, properly subject to confiscation.

George’s theory of government was just as finely delineated—or as severely dichotomous—as his theory of property. Government would shed its most basic regulatory and coercive powers, becoming little more than the administrator of the people’s estate: standing armies, a threat to democratic government, would be abolished. With the decline of crime “the administration of criminal law, with all of its paraphernalia of policemen, detectives, prisons, and penitentiaries, would, like the administration of criminal law, cease to make such a drain upon the vital force and attention of society.” Even “the great host of lawyers who are now maintained at the expense of the producers” could be reduced and the law simplified.78 Honest administration required popular scrutiny, so law and government needed to be intelligible. “To prevent government from becoming corrupt and tyrannous,” George argued, “its organization and methods should be as simple as possible” and “its functions be restricted to those necessary to the common welfare.”79

These functions, however, grew with time because “in the process of integration, the individual becomes more and more dependent upon and subordinate to the all, it becomes necessary for government, which is properly that social organ by which alone the whole body of individuals can act, to take upon itself, in the interest of all, certain functions which cannot be left to individuals.”80 Because land garnered a progressively larger percentage of national

78 Ibid., 455.
79 George, Social Problems, 234.
80 Ibid., 242.
income, the resources of the state would grow to meet these ends. He suggested that this great communal fund might be used to fund old age pensions, free public transportation, free healthcare, and free higher education. This would be a rather expansive social state even today, but at a time when even local street improvements were mostly funded by private citizens, George was a pioneer. The state would perform a progressively larger role in social welfare, but it would also shed many of the functions that made it cumbersome and repressive.

The principal way that the functions of the state would be streamlined was by all but eliminating its coercive and regulatory functions, especially as they pertained to the restraint of business or the enforcement of moral codes. The question of prohibition is a particularly useful window into George’s views on these subjects. On purely practical grounds, he repudiated prohibition because it encouraged unhealthy adulterations of alcohol and because the inevitable increase in price it would not encourage a corresponding reduction in consumption.

“Ostentation” he observed “prompts consumption, decrease of cost is apt to lessen it.”81 Both were surprisingly astute observations ventured so far in advance of the 1920s, but perhaps more significant was his protest that prohibition was not relevant to actual social problems: “there is no instance in which intemperance among a civilized people has toppled advance… but the history of the world furnishes example after example in which this has occurred from corruption of government.”82

The coup de grace, however, was George’s analysis of the political economy of regulation: “Where it is prohibited, illicit sales, it risks nothing to predict, would still go on. These illicit sellers would all the more need the favor and connivance of officials owing their

82 Ibid., 3:157.
positions to politics, and must therefore use their influence and spend their money." Most importantly, George indicted that what was true of liquor was equally valid for opium, cigars, matches, or wool. Economic restrictions created scarcity and exaggerated returns. Exorbitant profits could easily—and certainly would—be invested in corrupting government so as to manipulate the legal restrictions that were intended to control the business. Conversely, George suggested that, if the liquor trade were of such great public import, the state could establish a public monopoly on the sale of alcohol. George afforded some exceptional cases for regulation—like banking regulation or civil rights legislation—that were never particularly well integrated into his philosophy. By and large, however, he opposed regulation in a way consistent with his unmitigated faith in property. Anything that was worth regulation would be better off owned by the government. It was a system in which socialism would exist side by side with unregulated capitalism.

George advocated land nationalization as one of a series of reforms. They were all part of a coherent vision: the abolition or socialization of monopoly, defined as with land, as any unduly high returns from the exploitation of scarce resources. George targeted the patent system, though, interestingly not copyrights, as a legal device that arbitrarily limited production. He attacked the practice of government contracts with private business to build infrastructure or supply public

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83 Ibid., 3:159
84 George, Social Problems, 323.
85 George points to a few exceptions wherein regulation is useful without really articulating a systematic vision for when it might be appropriate. George Record, one of his followers, did offer a fairly simple and straightforward paradigm that seems to be consistent with majority opinion within the movement. He distinguished between “supervision of certain businesses to prevent adulteration of food products or misuse of banking facilities” as opposed to “government attempts to fix or limit prices or earnings of monopolies and privileged trusts.” Record took issue with the latter because “the profits of these monopolies are so enormous and are so illegal, that the beneficiaries are compelled to control the legislative, administrative and judicial machinery of the government charged with the task of regulation.” George Record, How to Abolish Poverty (Jersey City: The George L. Record Memorial Association, 1936). 46-47.
goods. Contracts, he argued, typically were not awarded on the basis of competition, but rather in return for corrupt deals. Instead, in an argument that intersected neatly with his concern for popular government, the state should do all of its own work because: “experience shows that in all departments of government the system of contracting for work and supplies has, on the whole, led to more corruption than the system of direct employment.” The most significant object of George’s scorn, however, was what we now regard as natural monopolies or utilities. He wrote about railroads and telegraphs that “businesses which are in their nature monopolies are properly part of the functions of the State, and should be assumed by the State.”

Collectively, these reforms were intended to foster an idealized market economy, where producers earned in proportion to what they made without diminution from monopolies or taxes. It was the sort of system an independent artisan might idealize. Once no party had undue market advantage, all labor would receive returns proportionate to “exertion” or “the feeling of effort and … irksomeness and repugnance that attends its continuance.” George discounted the role of skill levels, believing that in a state of equality natural ability would be no bar to success. “Man’s true wage varies,” he argued “but little; God makes men, on whole, fairly equal, but men’s laws give an unlimited power of appropriation.”

George’s motto, taken up with gusto by his followers, was “justice.” The term suggested reciprocity, symmetry, and balance; it spoke to the ideal of fair exchange by equal partners, of payment to the nation in proportion to the value of the portion of it fenced off for personal use. George saw in this process of exchange a species of voluntary, unconscious cooperation more powerful that the state directed cooperation of socialism. George cited the example of a boat:

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86 George, Social Problems, 253-4.
87 George, Progress and Poverty, 412.
Consider the timbers, the planks, the spars…the canvass of various textures; the blocks and winches and windlass; the pumps, the boats, the sextants, the chronometers, the spy-glass and patent logs… and all the various things, which it would be tiresome to fully specify, that go to the construction and furnishing of a first class sailing-ship of modern type… Directed cooperation never did, and I do not think in the nature of things it ever could, make and assemble such a variety of products.  

For George the market, once cleared of monopoly, would be its own sort of cooperative venture, organized by the great unconscious intelligence of society as a whole.

Georgism also inherited from the republicanism traditional a classic understanding of class. The single tax did not permit the Marxist focus on wage earners nor even the interest group pluralism of modern liberalism. The elites George challenged were “aristocrats,” because much like the lords and ladies of yore, they obtained wealth from special state granted privileges that allowed them to earn more than competition would permit. More particularly, modern and ancient elites both earned their wealth from the idle exploitation of land.

Opposite these idle elites and their unearned rents was a whole panorama of “producers,” ranging from industrial workers and white-collar professionals to small farmers and entrepreneurs. He objected to any effort to drive a wedge between these groups, including capitalists and wage earners, as it would introduce special interests into a populace that should be united behind a common good. George did believe that wage workers would be most likely to take up his cause and thus he supported groups like the Knight of Labor that organized them to affect the political will of all producers. Strikes, however, drove a wedge between citizens. They were “war; and, like all war, it lessens wealth. And the organization for it must, like the

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89 Ibid., 301-312.
organization for war, be tyrannical."

Under monopoly capitalism, George believed strikes might redistribute some of the proceeds of monopoly. Therefore, George supported stoppages, with great hesitance, as a means to protect workers under the status quo but believed they had no function in the ideal republic.

George’s milieu was not that of abstract philosophy, but of practical politics and therefore he prioritized pragmatism over intellectual coherency, imparting a deeply Machiavellian streak to his followers. Even the principal term of identification for the movement— “the single tax”— was a misnomer that obscured its real objective, land nationalization. To tax land to the point at which it had no selling value represents a degree of confiscation that bears no real resemblance to taxes as they are commonly understood.

George’s premise that land should be taxed, rather than owned by the government, was itself largely a question of political expediency. George noted that “It is an axiom of statesmanship… that great changes can best be brought about under old forms.” Property taxes, although they wrongfully included the value of improvements, already existed. By modifying and expanding them one could bring about nationalization “in a simpler, easier, and quieter way” than direct ownership.

Still, in Progress and Poverty, George did cite positively federal leasing of a fur seal fishery in Alaska.

George’s most famous speech, “Moses,” demonstrates something of this flexibility. In this speech, delivered to the Young Men’s Hebrew Association of San Francisco in 1878, George highlights the Mosaic Law of the Jubilee, which mandated the redistribution of the landed property of Israel every fifty years. George believed that in modern society efforts to create an

91 George, Progress and Poverty, 316.
92 Ibid., 310.
93 Ibid, 404-5.
94 Ibid., 400-401.
equal distribution of land would reduce “the aggregate production of wealth” by eliminating the efficiencies of concentrated population. But when designing Hebrew law, “Moses had to work, as all great constructive statesmen have to work, with the tools that came to his hand, and upon materials as he found them.” It was not the case that “forms suitable for that time and people are suitable for every time and people.”

Still the virtues of common ownership were operative in ancient Israel, creating a culture that embodied the best features of humanity:

From the free spirit of the Mosaic Law sprang that intensity of family life that amid all dispersions and persecutions has preserved the individuality of the Hebrew race; that love of independence that under the most adverse circumstances has characterized the Jew… It kindled that fire that has made the strains of Hebrew seers and poets phrase for us the highest exaltations of thought; that intellectual vigor that has over and over again made the dry staff bud and blossom.95

For George, Moses’ program of redistribution was a contextually valid approach to the land question that had only ceased to be desirable because it would not work in a modern urban setting. Furthermore, it was not, as it is sometimes depicted, a cry to old-testament Christianity. George treated Moses as a historical figure, a representation of a bygone period of political upheaval, in many ways superior to Jesus. That he slights the religious tradition that he could best be identified with suggests that he did not turn to the example out of faith. It was, in large part, an effort to flatter a religious minority that did ultimately serve as a crucial basis of support. For those outside of the Jewish faith, George was referencing a revolutionary era discourse that had proven itself to be persuasive. In the 18th century sermons like Samuel Langdon’s The Republic of Israelites an Example of the American States had demonstrated that highlighting the

democratic and egalitarian features of the “republic” of Israel, could provide an effective moral force to liberalizing agents in the contemporary world.  

Much emphasis has been laid on the Christian tenor of Progress and Poverty, but Christian rhetoric was so politically useful that even the most prominent American Marxist, Eugene Debs, tried to claim Jesus for his cause. It is of far greater historical interest that George cited the Hindu epic Ramayana multiple times in Progress and Poverty. George evidenced an ecumenism so broad as to be unintelligible to those whose knowledge of world religions fell short of the encyclopedic:

The Scriptures of the men who have been and gone – the Bibles, the Zend Avestas, the Vedas, the Dhammapadas, and the Korans; the esoteric doctrines of old philosophies, the inner meaning of grotesque religions, the dogmatic constitutions of Ecumenical Councils, the preachings of Foxes, and Wesley’s, and Savonarola, the traditions of red Indians, and beliefs of black savages, have a heart and a core in which they agree—a something which seems like the variously distorted apprehensions of a primary truth.

Reading Emerson at a young age seems to have impressed upon George the transcendentalist faith that global religions represented, in George’s words, “myths and symbols in which men have tried to display their deepest perceptions.” George believed in a transcendental truth, “natural law”— according to his lexicon—that was emotionally intuitive to such a degree that he used the term interchangeably with “natural perceptions of men.” Religious traditions were

97 George, Progress and Poverty, 356.
98 Ibid., Poverty, 563
99 Ibid., 563.
100 George, The Science of Political Economy, 54.
manifestations of these perceptions and hence were deployed as evidence of a moral truth, but
were not *ipso facto* truth.

George clearest statement of his own personal religion suggests that it was short on
theological precision. It was a “feeling” that struck him after finishing *Progress and Poverty* and
became “a religion strong and deep, though vague—a religion of which I never like to speak or
make any outward manifestations, but yet that I try to follow.”¹⁰¹ This doctrineless, emotive
connection to the divine was characteristic of both transcendentalism and to a lesser extent
evangelicalism; George attended churches associated with both at various stages in his life.¹⁰²

But there was a fine, perhaps imperceptible, line between appropriating religious
traditions for their moral gravity and doing so to broaden one’s appeal to the faithful. George
leapt over that line, writing one particularly religious follower: “… but for feelings that I never
like to talk about you would probably never have heard of me….Unless it [religion] inspires
without overcoming the cool intelligence and the clear judgment religious enthusiasm may not
merely waste itself, but become exceedingly dangerous. What would you have? A crusade of the
children….”¹⁰³ He seems to have abided by this pragmatic approach; after the initial burst of
religious fervor in *Progress and Poverty* that had attracted followers like Ms. Milne, his later
works avoided all but fleeting references to the topic.

It is unclear to what extent George knew Jesus as his personal savior, but Jesus’s
followers knew him. He helped propagate the notion that Christianity had as much a role to play
in this life as the next. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Christianity began to turn toward a
“social gospel” that prioritized economic reform. Important adherents like George Herron and

¹⁰¹ George Jr., *The Life of Henry George*, 312.
¹⁰³ Henry George to Ms. Milne, August 14, 1889, Reel 5, Henry George Papers, New York Public Library.

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Herbert Bigelow were devotees of George. From George, these individuals derived the faith that paradise was not merely something to be hoped for after death, but a goal that the faithful should try to realize on earth.\textsuperscript{104}

This idea had some precedent; more radical was George’s tendency toward the doctrine of social salvation. Christian reformers of previous eras, most notably the abolitionists, had suggested that individual moral improvement would remake society, but George’s environmentalist interpretation of vice suggested that they had reversed the process of causation. This was most evident in the conclusion of \textit{Progress and Poverty}, which builds an argument that the ultimate end of human life is religious salvation. He began with the observation that in the end “science discerns a dead earth, an exhausted sun—a time when, clashing together, the solar system shall resolve into a gaseous form.” “What then,” asked George “is the meaning of life? To me it seems intelligible only as the avenue and vestibule to another life.” George’s argument reached its crescendo with the conclusion that Manichean religious archetypes expressed an underlying need to liberate human virtue and mankind’s potential for salvation:

Here, now, in our civilized society, the old allegories yet have meaning… Ormuzd still fights with Ahriman—the Prince of Light with the Powers of Darkness. He who will hear, to him the clarions of the battle call…. Strong soul and high endeavor, the world needs them now. Beauty still lies imprisoned, the iron wheels go over the good and true and beautiful that might spring from human lives. And they who fight with Ormuzd, though they may not know each other—somewhere, sometime, will the muster roll be called.\textsuperscript{105}

A less pagan and more densely articulated doctrine of social salvation would later be put forth by Walter Rauschenbusch and serve as a defining influence on U. S. Christian reformers down to Martin Luther King. Rauschenbusch left no doubt that he was indebted to George: “I owe my


\textsuperscript{105} George, \textit{Progress and Poverty}, 564.
first awakening to the world of social problems to the agitation of Henry George in 1886 and wish here to record my lifelong debt to this single-minded apostle of a great truth.”

The libertarian philosopher Albert Jay Nock observed that some people were prone to read with their “eyes” such as to “accuse the Psalmist of atheism because he had written ‘The fool hath said in his heart, There is no god.’” Much the same could be said of those who have seen mention in Progress and Poverty of land, Christianity, or classical republicanism and concluded that George was an antiquated agrarian. Eschewing a priori reasoning, he built an argument around the authority of a densely layered complex of traditional discourses, all the time reconciling them not only with one another, but with new social conditions that threatened their relevancy. A tradition of American land reform that had demanded the apportionment of property in such a fashion as to forever forestall the development of cities or industry became a virtual process of land redistribution that would result in the creation of a modern welfare state. Urban areas were reimagined not as hindrances to, but rather as epicenters of, republican virtue. Religion became a loose evangelical passion for uplifting humanity and liberating its potential. The semi-mythical salience assigned to land in American civil religion was transmuted into a precise economic argument about the inequity of monopoly that was as applicable to concentrated forms of industrial capital as to great aggregations of land.

In the time of the American Revolution, an easy alliance had been struck between the liberal doctrine of property rights and the republican concern for the community and civic virtue. That union was no longer so self-evident in the late 19th century when the institution of property came to embrace railroads that girded the country and made the prosperity of the entire

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nation subject to the whims of a tiny cadre of its citizens. George, however, demonstrated how even according to the strictures of classical liberalism, these corporations could be construed as something less than private and that, by socializing these and other natural monopolies, principally that of land, private property rightly considered could be elevated to an even higher level of sanctity than that previously proposed by its most ardent supporters. Theoretically—that is treating practical application as an entirely separate question—it was one of the most philosophically elegant efforts proffered by the Western mind to reconcile inviolable individual rights with the pragmatic demands of society.

George appealed to disparate constituencies by promoting individual property rights and competitive capitalism in tandem with social property. As a consequence, his following was remarkably variegated and diverse. Yet he was able to instill in it common purpose by uniting it behind one, actionable piece of public policy—“the single tax.” The theoretical abstractions of Karl Marx have draped him in an aura of intellectual profundity not accorded to George. But, the interpretive void of such abstractions as “the dictatorship of the proletariat” provided sufficient space to accommodate all the internecine struggle and unscrupulous ambition that could ever be hoped for by the enemies of a mass movement. George, whose background was in popular writing, had a better sense of praxis than his German contemporary. His ability to reduce complex intersections of ideas to a simple plank provided the foundation for a movement that was accessible to diverse constituencies yet capable of fostering a sense of unity—imperfect as in all congregations of people—but potent enough to provide a basis for collective action.
Chapter III

Labor Omnia Vincit
Assembling the Movement

George himself, while decidedly an ‘intellectual’ of the highest order so far as capacity to reason on the theoretical plane went, was yet, by virtue of his personal experience and of prolonged continued contact with the life of that great American ‘producing class,’ the most representative ideologist that class has ever had.


Political parties cannot be manufactured, they must grow. No matter how much the existing political parties may have ceased to represent vital principles and real distinctions, it is not possible for any sort of men to collect together incongruous elements of discontent and by compromising differences and polling demands create a live party. The initiative must be a movement of thought. The formation of a real party follows the progress of an idea. When some fundamental issue, that involves large principles and includes smaller questions, and that will on the one hand command support and on the other compel opposition, begins to come to the front in thought and discussion, then a new party… must begin to form… though… {it} may retain old names and develop from old organizations.


It is possible that *Progress and Poverty* would never have gained any traction without George’s third book, published in 1881, *The Irish Land Question*. That book introduced George to Irish Nationalists, among whom he first developed mass support. But George soon augmented this base with ex-abolitionists, conservationists, socialists, and even monopolists. He was able to construct this coalition in part because of his skillful and intentional efforts to frame the issue of land as essential to all social questions. In fact, George was so frank about his political calculations that it is possible to construe the centrality that he placed on land as at least as much about articulating a central idea to unite the country’s disparate reform movements as it was about ideological or economic concerns.

Of these causes, the most important that he was able to rally in the first years of the single tax movement was labor. In the almost parallel evolution of the Knights of Labor toward the

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single tax, we see how organically George’s thought developed out of the labor republicanism that prevailed in the period’s largest labor union. Ultimately George’s labor following would be compromised. After that point the single tax movement was defined by the support George garnered from middle-class liberals like Tom Johnson, who were drawn to George’s natural law arguments about social and private property. But labor initially put George on the international stage.

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Upon its initial publication *Progress and Poverty* earned some muted praise, but little in the way of the tremendous circulation it would be remembered for. In its first year, it sold a thousand copies, not impressive by the standards of its future success, but more than was typical for a book on political economy. While he received a friendly letter of support from Horace White, editor of the *The Nation*, newspapers did little to promote the book. White’s response was characteristic of the early reaction to George among intellectual circles. “It is a very impressive work,” wrote White, but the measure George purposed was too much, too soon: “The taxing power of the state may eventually, I think, confiscate rent, but it will be a long time.”\(^{110}\) Very nearly the only publication to promote George’s proposal as anything more than an interesting abstraction was *The Sacramento Bee*, then under the editorial direction of George’s mentor and fellow land reformer, James McClatchy.

When George moved to New York to promote *Progress and Poverty*, he found ardent supporters in two, high profile Irish nationalists. First was Michael Davitt, a working class Irishman who had lost his arm in a mill accident. Davitt had founded the Irish Land League, which in 1880 won a majority in Ireland’s general election and lead a national rent strike. Second

\(^{110}\) Horace White to Henry George, December 17, 1881, Henry George Papers.
was Patrick Ford, an editor who began his career with William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* and had become the successful proprietor of the leading journal of the Land League in the United States, *Irish World*. Both of them were predisposed to George’s ideas because of the peculiarities of the Irish situation. Much of Ireland’s land was in the possession of England landowners, forcing the Irish into tenancy or unsustainably small land-holdings and thereby raising questions about the relation between economic and political independence. Land reform proved to be a crucial way of mobilizing the Irish peasantry for independence.

George, whose marriage to an Irish Catholic had given him an intimate connection to the issue, realized that the interdependence of land and Irish nationalism created an opportunity to promote his cause. In 1881, he published *The Irish Land Question* to weave together the cause of home rule with land nationalization: “The cry has indeed gone up that the land of Ireland belongs to the people of Ireland, but there the recognition of the principle has stopped…. if… the land of Ireland rightfully belongs to the people… it must be resumed by the whole people.” George emphasized the importance of economic reform to independence. Crucially, he suggested that by making “Land Nationalization” their central issue, the Irish could build a coalition with their “natural allies,” the “English working classes.” Land therefore was woven into the issue of independence on multiple levels: absentee ownership constituted the economic counterpart of colonial oppression; the abolition of fee simple ownership was a cause that cut across national boundaries, unifying the oppressed against national exploitation; and the symbolic identification

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112 Ibid., 45. This quote is interesting not just because it reinforces George’s belief that the land issue can build a powerful coalition led by working-class interests, but also because the terminology indicates a surprising transnational political consciousness. Gareth Stedman Jones has shown that the use of “working classes” as opposed to “working class” was a common device in England, used to incorporate small proprietors into a broader class consciousness that transcended the limited definition of the former term, which applied mostly to wage workers. By using the term, George was appealing to a producerism similar to that which he cultivated in the United States. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
of the nation with its physical landmass implied that authentic nationhood would vest the land in its people as a whole.

Patrick Ford, responding to these ideas, offered George a position traveling Ireland as a correspondent for *Irish World*. This brought George’s cause into intimate association with Irish nationalism, and, in what ultimately proved a tumultuous relationship, Catholicism. On this trip, George cemented his relationship with Davitt. The one-armed patriot generally preferred state ownership of land to confiscatory taxation, but George suggested that he was not inflexibly attached the idea of taxation; George did not “care what plan any one proposes, so that he goes on the right line.”

Moderate Irish leaders quickly came to resent the influence of a radical outsider, and Davitt was forced to defend himself against the charge that he had been “captured” by George. George was reassured that moderates had not driven too deep a wedge between the two when, Davitt, on a trip to America, spoke alongside Reverend Edward McGlynn, who openly declared himself for George. George instantly apprehended that a charismatic priest could bring him new consistencies; he described McGlynn as a one man “army with banners.” By combining a millennial, religious anti-poverty doctrine with Irish Nationalism, McGlynn would build such an enthusiastic following that he eventually rivaled George for preeminence in his own movement.

The highlight of George’s trip, however, was his arrest in small town of Loughree for being a “suspicious stranger.” Unusual circumstances and flimsy evidence turned this harassment into something of an international situation, attracting the attention of the American embassy and

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113 The idea of state ownership, actually evinced less concern in George than the fact that Davitt proposed compensation for land owners. These two ideas often went together, they idea that it would be easier to get landlords to consent to government ownership than taxation, because owners could be paid in the process of nationalization. George was willing to reconcile himself to either position if it brought him closer to his goal, which is suggestive of his political pragmatism. George Jr., *The Life of Henry George*, 382-3. Barker, *Henry George*, 367.

the press. George was lectured by the judge for the Land League propaganda in his possession, but he, undeterred, laughed at the judge and passed out copies of *The Irish Land Question* in the courtroom. When George returned to the United States, he found two welcome parties had been organized for him, one organized by elite New York notables at the fine dining establishment, Delmonico’s, the other organized by local labor unions, under the auspices of the Central Labor Union.

George’s arrest in Ireland made him a celebrity, but he had already developed some support in America, particularly among adherents to America’s most recent transformative liberal cause. Francis G. Shaw, a wealthy former abolitionist, bolstered sales of *Progress and Poverty* by paying to have a thousand copies sent to libraries around the country. He would later donate more to print a cheaper copy of the book. After the Civil War, Shaw had become “hopeless on social questions,” until he read George’s book and the “‘Light broke on him’”

For George, Shaw’s money was less important than the endorsement that tied his cause to the tradition of abolitionism. George claimed it was the “highest complement and best advertisement of the book… the knowledge of it can spread as many copies as the donation.” Shaw, a famous abolitionist in his own right, had obtained particular notoriety in the war as the father of Colonel Robert Shaw, who had perished leading the first active regiment of black troops. Shaw’s moral authority has never waned; he is still memorable to a modern audience because of his depiction in the film *Glory.*

It was the Republican Louis Post, a diminutive, bearded lawyer from a middle-class, New England farming family, who first gave *Progress and Poverty* a “big circulation among the very

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class” that George claimed to most “want most to reach.”¹¹⁶ Post was editor of the *Truth*, a cheap one-cent journal with a circulation of between 75,000 and 100,000 mostly working-class readers.¹¹⁷ The paper was essentially the *de facto* organ of New York’s Central Labor Union, publicizing its events and recording the outcomes of its meetings.¹¹⁸

Post had quickly read *Progress and Poverty* and dismissed it. The sort of economic revolution George proposed implied that he was a “crank” or a “long hair,” though Post himself already had a history of engagement in reform movements. A decade earlier he had joined the effort to “Reconstruct” the post-civil war South as an employee of the Freedmen’s Bureau. It was when Post read *The Irish Land Question*, in which George made a sustained comparison between land monopoly and slavery, that the young editor’s mind began to turn: “The appeal stirred me deeply. Revising within me my anti-slavery spirit of Civil War times, then less than twenty years behind us, it made me realize that the struggle for relative human rights had not triumphed at Appomattox, as enthusiastic patriots of the period like myself had confidently believed.”¹¹⁹ A thorough re-reading of *Progress and Poverty* convinced Post that land value taxation was the solution to the question of land monopoly.

After publically attacking George, Post reversed course and serialized the whole of *Progress and Poverty* in the *Truth*, making it the first of many papers to do so and providing George a considerable working-class audience. A couple years later Post would become President of the Free Soil Society, a Georgist organization that took its name from the abolitionist Free Soil Party. Over time, Post became George’s leading representative in the press.

¹¹⁶ Henry George to James McClatchy, Oct. 9 1881, Reel 2, George Papers.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 313.
His early interest in black civil rights never waned; in 1925 he published his experiences with the Freedmen’s Bureau to demonstrate that Reconstruction had collapsed under the force of white violence not because, as most historian then contended, blacks were incapable of governing.\textsuperscript{120}

With a class of readers like those who subscribed to \textit{Truth}, George’s writings had a circulation that greatly exceeded the sales of his books. Because much of his audience lacked the resources to purchase books, but had plenty of zeal to propagate his ideas, the reading of George became a collective phenomenon. Robert La Follette, future progressive Senator and presidential candidate, wrote in his biography that he came upon George as a boy in an “intellectual activity and awakening…” where be both “heard and felt… the movement of the Grangers swirling about.” It was in the context of this agrarian revolt that “a dog-eared copy of one of Henry George’s early books got into our neighborhood. It was owned by a blacksmith… a big powerful fellow, who was a good deal of a reader and thinker.” Though La Follette had not yet developed an interest in politics, the blacksmith compelled him to read the book.\textsuperscript{121} The details of the description, from the worn out quality of the book to the notion that it “got into our neighborhood,” all indicate that La Follette was hardly the only one to have the book forced on him by this particular tradesman.

The circulation of George’s works among working-class constituents made the reading of George almost a social movement unto itself. Chicago painter’s assembly, DA 24, of the Knights of Labor, devoted twenty minutes of every union meeting to reciting \textit{Progress and Poverty}.\textsuperscript{122}


During a period of popular religiosity, it is doubtful that no one observed the similarity to the recitation of the Bible at the beginning of a sermon. A less extreme example of a similar phenomenon was recorded by Samuel Gompers, who recalled that the workers in his cigar shop kept a library and would alternate reading aloud to the entire shop during breaks. He remembered digesting in this fashion a handful of labor newspapers, a pamphlet version of *Progress and Poverty*, and some articles written by George for the *Irish World*.123

Although somewhat less social, the spread of George’s writings by an active class of pamphleteers demonstrates some of the zeal that went into reading George. One supporter in Birmingham, England claimed to have personally distributed 2,300 copies of *Progress and Poverty*.124 The circle of periodical and pamphlet literature was probably even larger than that of full length books. Pamphlets, some reportedly obtaining a circulation in the millions, were distributed by George’s publishing department at a price of $8.50 per stack of 5,000.125 These were passed out by the faithful, like one Chicago workingman, who found he “could not make speeches, nor carry on a public debate, and he had little money to contribute” and so set up a literature table to distribute Georgist pamphlets, week after week, every week, for over twenty years.126

George’s speaking tours were also instrumental in building his movement. He cultivated a highly emotive mode of extemporaneous speech, in which he began with a handful of notes and improvised off a general theme with a slow, pronounced, and deliberate style. Even his

124 Henry George to “Dear Doctor,” April 28, 1883, Reel 3, George Papers.
125 “Voices for Reform” 1, no. 4, April 21887, box 32, Powderly Papers, Manuscript Collections, Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. George reported to one of his correspondents that over three millions copies of Johnson’s congressional speeches, presumably those dealing with the tariff and income tax, were distributed in the lead up to the Wilson Gorman Tariff debates. Henry George to August Lewis, May 24, 1894, Reel 6, George Papers.
opponents would accede to his eloquence. Famed lawyer Clarence Darrow once reported discomfort with George’s style, but only because Darrow was scheduled to follow him.\textsuperscript{127}

Although he cultivated an aura of idealism, George was also keenly political and would adapt his speeches to the local context with the assistance of a network of supporters. When he was advised by the British Land Reform Union not to attack compensation for landowners—a useful palliative in a nation where landowners held the balance of power in parliament—George explained in his speeches that he thought it was a bad idea but left it open as a possibility if it was the best that could be obtained.\textsuperscript{128} Conversely, he was advised by Sydney Webb, future leader of Fabian socialism, that because England had a better-trained bureaucracy and less anti-statist sentiment, he would be able to talk more openly there about government ownership of utilities.\textsuperscript{129} In doing so, George exploited the flexibility of a movement in its infancy. It was still easy to perceive it as part of a general movement toward socialism. One radical Portland paper considered George’s platform to be “communism in land – the most revolutionary change that can possibly be proposed.”\textsuperscript{130}

The early 80s were a period of rapid growth and dynamism for George’s nascent movement. After returning from his trip to Ireland, George began publishing a series of articles that would become \textit{Social Problems}, an accessible work that placed land value taxation in the context of a broader platform that included paper currency and government ownership of utilities. The theme of the book was the increasing complexity of modern society, which George

\textsuperscript{128} George Jr., \textit{The Life of Henry George}, 423.
\textsuperscript{129} “You may safely lay much more stress on nationalization or ‘municipilization’ of monopolies here than in America. Our Civil Service and municipal governance is much better fitted to bear the strain, and the people are quite ready.” Peter d’A Jones, “Henry George and British Socialism,” \textit{The American Journal of Economics and Sociology} 47 (October 1988), 477.
\textsuperscript{130} “Mr. Powderly’s Position.” \textit{Avant-Courier}, November 20, 1886, Box 27, Powderly Papers.
argued would require an expanded state to manage. He followed with several speaking tours in the United States and the United Kingdom. While not one of his most important books, *Social Problems* would be the introductory text for his favored disciple, Tom L. Johnson.

Even as he was reaching out to socialists and labor leaders, George won a modicum of unlikely support from the business community. Johnson was a successful Cleveland businessman who had made a fortune in the streetcar business, specially targeted by George as social property. One day a “train boy” tried to sell him *Social Problems*, which he refused. The conductor chimed in and offered to pay for the book if Johnson did not appreciate it. Johnson took him up on the offer and was troubled by what he read. He subsequently read *Progress and Poverty*. One of many reluctant converts upset by how George had turned bourgeois logic against itself, Johnson employed his company’s lawyers to find a hole in George’s argument. Even with professional assistance, Johnson could not refute that George’s logic followed naturally upon their shared premises.

What struck Johnson was how George had inverted the producerist ethic of the entrepreneur to show that the value of natural monopolies was made by and owed to the community. Johnson’s own “street railway fortune was due not so much to his enterprise as to the natural growth of the cities in which he operated. He didn’t make the town; the town made him.” Johnson first came to his revelation in 1883, though it was not until 1885 that he met George and became an active supporter. Then he donated his massive fortune to the cause for which he would also serve as a crucial organizer. In their first meeting George suggested Johnson might be useful as a candidate for elected office; Johnson briskly brushed aside the idea because his pointed and direct mode of speech was ill-equipped for long, effusive campaign
orations.\textsuperscript{131} Time would show that George had a better sense of Johnson’s’ potential than Johnson himself did.

Not surprisingly, George also attracted support from early conservationists. In October of 1890, Daniel Beard, a leader in the scouting movement, sent George a copy of one of his books discussing the benefits of nature to the development of children. Beard emphasized that the ideas were all his own, but claimed that it showed: “how a mind running on practical subjects was still unconsciously preparing itself to receive your grand ideas when you sent them to the world, because those ideas appealed not only to the sense of justice and right but also strongly to common sense.”\textsuperscript{132} George wrote back to agree as to the “mental effects” of nature on youth, and the two subsequently became close friends.\textsuperscript{133} Beard realized his ideas by founding the Sons of Daniel Boone, which, after merging with other scouting organizations, became the Boy Scouts of America.

The sense of continuity that Beard perceived between his and George’s ideas seems to have been fostered by the shared notion that private property in land was undermining republican virtue. George’s argument, however was principally economic, whereas Beard was preoccupied with an idealistic notion of nature’s ability to foster personal virtue. He articulated his concerns in a private letter years later:

\begin{quote}
The time has come when the private ownership of land is beginning to exclude trespassers, and the time will come when the exclusion of trespassers from all private lands will be so universal that unless there is some public place belonging to the people, there will be no playground for them but the public roads and the health and morals of our population absolutely depend upon their possessing the opportunity for outdoor recreation.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{132} Dan Beard to Henry George, Oct. 11, 1890, Reel 5, George Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
\textsuperscript{133} Henry George to Daniel Beard, Oct. 12, 1890, Box 53, Daniel Beard Papers.
\textsuperscript{134} Dan Beard to George Pratt, March 31, 1915, box 33, Daniel Beard Papers.
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In addition to this shared sense that private ownership of land threatened the citizenry, there was a vague feeling of common sensibility. When Hamlin Garland first met Beard at a “Henry George meeting” they bonded over a “desire to perpetuate the traditions of the border,” Garland’s preferred term for the Western frontier.\footnote{Cyril Clemens, \textit{Uncle Dan} (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1938), xi-xii.}

George received less sympathy from professional economists, many of whom resented the encroachment of an amateur upon their sphere of expertise. E. R. A. Seligman, the leading academic proponent of the income tax, was one of George’s principle opponents. Ironically, Seligman was at least mildly favorable toward land value taxation.\footnote{Alan Richmond Prest, \textit{The Taxation of Urban Land} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 19.}

Seligman certainly believed the full confiscation of rent was too extreme a platform, but the major source of his animus seems to have been that George had violated the integrity of his field. In 1890, The American Association of Social Science hosted a debate on the single tax at which both George and Seligman spoke. Seligman complained that:

\begin{quote}
In biology, in astronomy, in metaphysics, we bow down before the specialist; but every man whose knowledge of economics or of the science of finance is derived from the daily papers, or one or two books with lopsided ideas, thinks he is a full-fledged scientist.\footnote{Ed. Robert V. Andelson, \textit{The Critics of Henry George} (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 407-434.}
\end{quote}

Economics, Seligman believed, should be left to the economists.

With this sort of opposition, Georgism naturally came to be identified with populist opposition to professional authority, but George articulated a moderate, nuanced perspective that weighed the value of expertise against the imperatives of democracy. George responded to Seligman that “professors of political economy” either “belong to” or “are influenced by” the class that profits from monopoly. Furthermore, if only economists were permitted to discuss economics, democracy would be a charade:
There is a reason why the great majority of us must, in such matters as astronomy or chemistry, accept what the professors of such sciences tell us. We cannot study such sciences: we have neither the leisure, the knowledge, nor the opportunities. But, if we cannot study political economy,—the science whose phenomena lie about us in our daily lives, and enter into our most important relations, and whose laws lie at the bottom of questions we are called on to settle with our votes,—then democratic republican government is doomed to failure; and the quicker we surrender ourselves to the government of the rich and the learned, the better.¹³⁸

George did not deny the value of expertise, but he alleged that even the learned were subject to the influences of a corrupt society. Ultimately, the people were supreme and needed to come into possession of the knowledge of experts, else democracy was doomed to failure. There has perhaps been a tendency for academic observers, reviewing these debates, to view unsympathetically what they perceive as George’s anti-intellectualism. It should, however, be noted that many of George’s positions, including his support for paper money, free trade, and public ownership of utilities are remarkably modern when compared to the stalwart opposition these causes encountered from his professional contemporaries.

The hauteur of George’s assailants occasionally backfired. In 1884, the Duke of Argyll published an article in *Nineteenth Century* entitled “The Prophet of San Francisco,” ridiculing the Western editor for adopting, what the author believed were prophetic pretentions. George was disinclined to respond, but members of the Scottish Land Restoration League advised him that a successful response to perhaps the leading nobleman of Scotland would make him famous throughout the country.¹³⁹ When he responded, George refused to stoop to the lord’s brand of personal invective won the respect of many so that the “Prophet of San Francisco” was appropriated as a term of respect by George’s followers.

¹³⁹ *George Jr., The Life of Henry George*, 445.
George’s response, “The Reduction to Iniquity,” helped secure his place in the tradition of liberal reform. William Lloyd Garrison II read the exchange with a disposition toward the Duke, who he held in high regard because of his past support for abolition. George on the other hand seemed a “professional labor reformer;” part of what he considered a “fluent but work-shunning brotherhood.” Once he read the exchange however: “The native dignity of the humble printer was in marked contrast to the scarcely veiled contempt of his Grace and the true nobleman stood revealed.” Garrison waivered for several years, until George explained to him through correspondence that the single tax was not a panacea, “the panacea for poverty is freedom. What I see in the single tax is the means of securing that industrial freedom which will make possible other triumphs of freedom.”\footnote{Public, Oct. 22, 1909.} If emancipation had not appreciably improved the economic condition of Southern freedmen, it was because land monopoly had forced them into sharecropping.\footnote{“That is a good little article of yours in the Monthly Review. God Keep you. There is great work for you yet to do. I have long of course believe that the single tax was the only solution of the race question in the South, but the little glimpse I got of Southern life last spring made me realize this more clearly than ever before. It is to me a great and continuous satisfaction that the second William Lloyd Garrison should have stepped forward to finish the task the first began.” Henry George to William Lloyd Garrison, Dec. 16, 1894, Reel 6, Henry George Papers.} After Garrison received the letter in 1888, he publically came out for George and was “baptized” in the cause, lending gravity to the notion that it was, in Garrison’s words, “The New Abolition.” In one pamphlet, for which he dropped the “II” from his title so as to be indistinguishable from his famous father, he noted that abolition had set a precedent for eliminating whole classes of property: “We do not deny that the law considers land property, but thirty years ago it also recognized the ownership of human flesh.”\footnote{George Jr., The Life of Henry George, 511.} This established the single
tax firmly in a tradition of reform that defended the rights of property, even as it narrowed the
definition of what could justly be owned by a private individual.

Labor, however, appeared to be the group George was most eager to recruit. *Protection
or Free Trade*, the writing of which was his primary concern from 1884-1886, was expressly
directed to wage earners. While Irish nationalists made up a considerable portion, if not the
bulk of George’s popular following, he was not entirely confident of their support. Patrick Ford
kept the American wing of the movement firmly on his side, but in Ireland, a contingent led by
Charles Parnell succeeded in taking the “land” out of the name of the Irish Land League. This
reflected the Kilmainham Treaty, according to which Parnell and his associates were released
from prison in return for promising to suppress the anti-rent movement. Subsequent to the
change George was hesitant to support the organization:

> The only class in my opinion worth considering in any country is the class which
> these proposed measures totally ignore—the laborers. Not that they are the only
> class worth thinking about, but until they are affected nothing general or
> paramount can be attained…. and while I have sympathy with the Irish people in
> their political oppressions I have no faith in new political movements of any
> kind…. I cannot think that any mere political change could do anything to
> improve the condition of those classes of the Irish people who most desire our
> sympathy and most need our aid.

While George was sympathetic to nationalism, he possessed a prescient sense that, detached
from economic reform, could become a revolving door for political elites. Even when he trained
his eye across the Atlantic, his primary concern was the “laborers.”

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143 The first sentence of the book is “In this book I have endeavored to determine whether protection or free trade
better accords with the interests of labor, and to bring to a common conclusion on the subject those who really
desire to raise wages.” Henry George, *Protection or Free Trade* (New York: The Caxton Press, 1891), v. Henry
George Jr. also indicates that the book was “intended primarily for workingmen,” and George himself reiterates it
March 23, 1885, box 19, Powderly Papers.


145 Henry George to Terrence Powderly, July 25 1883, box 8, Powderly Papers.
If George were to reach the working people of America it would be through the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, the largest labor movement of the 1880s. Founded in 1869 as a secret society, the Knights, as the honorifics in their title suggested, were designed to elevate the status of the laborer. While, politically diverse, they were inclined toward the brand of labor republicanism that perceived wage labor as degrading and sought to stymie or reverse its advance. In a statement to the National Grange in 1886 it declared that their organization believed:

As Thomas Jefferson did, that dependence, by its subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue and prepares fit tools for the designing and ambitious; and, also, that corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators of the soil is a phenomenon of which no age or nation has ever furnished one example.

Their republicanism meant that they sought to alleviate class conflict, and, like George, tended to dislike the strike as an instrument for change. Like George they saw working people as a broad class of producers that included farmers, artisans and some entrepreneurs; the only groups forbidden from membership were bankers, stockbrokers, distillers, and gamblers.

Most importantly, they developed directly out of the same free soil politics that George had. Their constitution called for “The reserving of the public lands—the heritage of the people—for the actual settler; not another acre for railroads or speculators.” The relationship between George and the Knights was more flexible and historically contingent than is often recognized, but historian John Thomas was essentially right when he called the Knights “the institutional embodiment of George’s economic views and faith in educational politics.”

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146 Records of the Proceedings of the Special Session of the General Assembly Held at Cleveland Ohio May 25 to June 3 1886, p 70, box 113, Powderly Papers
147 Thomas, Alternative America, 183-184.
In 1883 the leader of the K. of L., Grand Master Workman Terence Powderly, issued a circular to K. of L. members urging them to read *Progress and Poverty*, a dictate which many reportedly heeded. That same year, as Mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, Powderly made a public declaration against land speculation. “The lots that lay idle are either free from taxation or else pay a nominal sum; the improved lot adjoining because labor has been expended upon it, must pay a high rate of taxation,” complained the Grand Master Workman. In defining the interests of labor penalized by land speculation, Powderly drew a broad circle claiming that the current system thrust “all, or nearly all, the burdens of taxation upon the houses and improvements of the working men, the stores and dwellings of the business men and the shops and mills of the manufacturer.” Powderly recommended that speculative land be taxed “at not less than the highest rate of taxation assessment upon the nearest unimproved property of like character.” His recommendation was, in essence, a crude form of land value taxation, because it would tax property at the value of similar, unimproved lots, but did not try to scientifically ascertain the actual value of each lot. The measure made no progress in the city council, but Powderly was able to push through more objective methods of assessment that increased property tax returns from around $9,000,000 to nearly $12,000,000.

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149 “The Mayor’s Message,” April 1-9, 1883, box 8, Powderly Papers. Vincent J. Falzone, “Terence V. Powderly: Politician and Progress Mayor of Scranton, 1878-1884,” *Pennsylvania History* 41 no. 3 (July 1974), 305-6. That same year Powderly also commissioned the construction of a road based with all the funds provided by taxes on abutting property. These sort of special assessments were common before Georgists obtained influence in municipal affairs. Georgists, however, were inclined to rely particularly heavily on them, believing them to be analogous to land value taxation. File of Common Council no. 9 1883 “An Ordinance Providing for the Grading and Paving of an Alley extending from River to Hickory Streets in the Seventeenth Ward,” undated, box 12, Powderly Papers.
Within a couple weeks George heard news of Powderly’s actions as Mayor and wrote him ecstatically. George revealed that he had joined the Knights a couple months before and predicted that, after the long history of failed labor organizations in the United States, Powderly’s was the “standard that [could] lead to victory.” George entirely ignored the crudeness of Powderly’s method of taxation, and claimed that it thoroughly accorded with his own methods. George noted that the two of them held differences of opinion regarding free trade, but tried to minimize the importance of that issue. George seemed more concerned that the organization’s paper “lack[ed] … definite purpose, commensurate with the greatness of the organization or the magnitude of the objects to be obtained. Small measures may, as you say, be good enough in their way, but you cannot upon them build up a great organization or arouse that enthusiasm which will enable it to hold its membership, and drive its power to a common end.”

The correspondence revealed a consciousness on George’s part about the importance of broad ideas for forming political coalitions. None of the differences between Powderly and George amounted to much; when Powderly was under consideration to lead the newly founded Bureau of Labor Statistics, the philosopher happily forwarded his recommendation to President Chester Arthur.  

In 1885, at the annual meeting of the Knights of Labor in Hamilton, Ontario, Powderly would both push the Order’s land plank closer toward Georgism and tie the land question directly into the order’s larger preoccupation with eliminating wage labor. He claimed that because of land monopoly “The man who goes to the West to-day and is willing to toil must toil for another, and the fruit of the soil which his labor produces must be given to the stranger.”

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150 Henry George to Terrence Powderly, April 19, 1883, box 8, Powderly Papers. Henry George to Powderly, June 22 1884, box 11. Powderly Papers
151 *Proceedings: General Assembly Knights of Labor, Hamilton, Ontario 1885, Cleveland, Ohio 1886, Richmond Virginia 1886*, p13, box 113, Powderly Papers.
Powderly recommended the elimination of alien landownership, confiscation of all land used for speculative purposes, and a cap of one hundred acres on land holdings. All of these were closer to the old free land ideology than George’s idea, but Powderly also proposed the creation of “boards of industry” to “guard the interests of trade and labor.” These boards of “workingmen or friends of workingmen,” would observe city councils to influence questions of “The letting of contracts to employees of cheap or alien labor, the levying of taxes, the collection of taxes and assessments, the assessing of property, and other matters which come before councils.” The only one of these questions Powderly dealt with in detail was that of tax assessments, where he recommended that workers push for higher assessments on unimproved property as he himself had done in Scranton.\textsuperscript{152} Powderly’s proposal portended a long history of working-class agitation for higher municipal land taxes.

There was evidence even at the 1885 meeting, though, that some segments of the Knights were gravitating toward orthodox single-tax thought. The most orthodox piece of Georgism at the convention, came from Freeborn Lewis, a Rail Road Clerk from Omaha, Nebraska, who proposed the Knights support exemptions of improvements to property of up to $1,000 – a measure which essentially meant that most people would be subject to land value taxation. The convention approved the proposal and the local which proposed it would subsequently rebrand itself “The Henry George Assembly.”\textsuperscript{153}

This piecemeal progression toward something approximating the single tax, however, suggests that the dominant sentiment fell short of complete identification with George. Most members likely saw George as reaffirming their original land plank that declared against speculation. George’s influence was subtle. He was pushing the organization to the same

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 164-5. John Lewis to Terence Powderly, August 12, 1893, box 81, Powderly Papers.
revelation that he had only slowly embraced: that the public domain was no longer a meaningful resource for economic policy. As his influence grew in the K of L, so too did the popularity of various land taxes, usually falling short of the single tax, but rooted in the consensus that underutilized land should be penalized.

The Knights’ interest in land reform reached a crescendo in 1886. The order was on the cusp of what would be known as the “Great Upheaval.” A series of strikes in the preceding year had sent the Order’s membership soaring to an all-time high of over 700,000. Knights made runs for office across the country. Coping with this tremendous expansion, the organization held a special meeting. The Legislative Committee gave an address on land reform in which it declared itself against:

a system which compels some citizens to buy from other citizens the right to till the unoccupied soil of their common country… the inevitable result of which is to enable those who do not work to reap the earning of those who do, to impoverish the farmer, mechanic and laborer, while enriching the forestaller and monopolist, and by depriving those who possess only the power of labor of any opportunity to make a living for themselves….

The committee’s recommendations were similar to those of Powderly at the preceding convention, only they now recommended that large landholdings be taxed at full rental value, rather than confiscated. J. P. McGaughey, Secretary General of the Co-operative Board, got into the spirit by noting that agriculture was the most opportune venue for co-operative venues. He optimistically observed the progress of land reform and concluded “Give us the land, and we will give you back the fruits of the land in the form of strong-limbed, strong-hearted, well-educated and honest workmen and women, independent citizens and intelligent voters.” By tying land reform into the question of cooperativism, he was making it even more central to the

155 Ibid., 72-73.
mission of the Knights and was reiterating a connection which George himself had established in *Progress and Poverty*.

In New York, the strikes of the Great Upheaval impressed upon labor the need for political power and directly precipitated the beginning of Henry George’s political career. The Central Labor Union (CLU) led a strike against the local streetcar company. The strike was broken by cops sent to work as scab labor, making it evident that political power was a prerequisite to industrial power.\(^{156}\) Shortly afterward 360 out of 409 delegates in the Central Labor Union voted to nominate George as their candidate for mayor. George had a close relationship with the CLU; he had spoken to it on several occasions and his lieutenant, Louis Post, served as the organization’s legal counsel. When the CLU organized the nation’s first Labor Day parade in 1882, they had invited George to speak, but he was on tour in England; at subsequent parades he was given a seat of honor reviewing the procession.\(^{157}\) The CLU, founded in 1882 to unite the assorted trade unions and K of L locals, also had strong roots in the agitation of the Irish Land League. Thus its first plank declared, with a notably internationalist subtext, that “The land of every country is the inheritance of the people.”\(^{158}\)

George’s close relationship with the CLU did not change the fact that he was not interested in running or mayor and endangering his reputation; George declined the nomination. The CLU insisted and George promised he would stand for election if 30,000 citizens signed a

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petition asking him to run. To acquire the signatures, the CLU organized a massive volunteer campaign. This proved to be a brilliant move. If George was compelled to join the race, he would have a ready-made campaign machine and built-in momentum. The CLU eagerly secured the necessary signatures; Henry George would be United Labor Party’s candidate for mayor of New York.

George’s mayoral campaign was unusual in that the candidate was less concerned with winning than campaigning. The state constitution did not provide the municipality with the power to enact George’s tax or utility reforms, but he thought the campaign would “bring the land question into practical politics” and do more to “popularize its discussion than years of writing would do.”159 When the Democrats offered George a seat in Congress if he dropped out of the race, they informed him that he could not win and would only cause trouble. George responded, “You have relieved me of an embarrassment. I do not want the responsibility and the work of the office of the Mayor of New York, but I do want to raise hell!”160 During the campaign, the United Labor Party established a paper, the Leader, edited by Louis Post, which reached a circulation of 50,000. George also began a vigorous public speaking campaign, speaking seven times a day at open-air meetings outside of factories, by train stops, and on street corners.161 Those who did not want to brave the elements could read about George’s politics in the newspapers. There a series of epistolary debates with Abram Hewitt, the Democratic Party’s candidate for mayor, were published. According to Samuel Gompers, they were “read and discussed in practically every home and public meeting in New York.”162

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159 Thomas, Alternative America, 222.
160 Thomas, Alternative America, 222.
George’s platform has been characterized by historians as narrow, with little in the way of concrete and pragmatic enticements to working-class voters. That claim, however, is shortsighted. It is true that George’s public statements invariably focused on his land tax, but the appeal was not necessarily the tax itself, but the revenue it offered. He promised that with the funds derived from confiscating rent he could create “public accommodations, playgrounds, schools, and facilities for education and recreation.” Speaking at Cooper Union, a free institution of higher education which often hosted his events, he said that the city should build “twenty such institutions as this.” He wrote that the railroads should be owned by the people and operated free of charge; that the benefit of this would accrue to the land so that the cost would be recouped by the single tax. According to this logic, the single tax would provide the foundation for a perpetual stream of social improvements.

There were abstract promises, like the idea that taxing the wealthy would somehow break their hold on government and cut down on corruption. There were also concrete promises, the logic of which were hard to follow, like his promise that the land tax would allow every citizen the opportunity to purchase “a house and a home,” for example. Setting aside these more complicated appeals, we still have a program of expanded parks, free higher education, and free public transit that would constitute a fairly generous social welfare program in contemporary America. In Gilded Age America it was positively utopian. One satirical cartoon depicted George enticing a workingman with demands slipping out of his “horn of promises:’ “no taxes,”

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Any individual putting up a big building, such as the Morse building, Cyrus Field building, the Western Union Building puts in an elevator. But he does not put in that elevator a man with a bell-punch strung around his neck to collect fares. He gains the advantage in the incremental value of his building.... We could take those railroads and run them free, let everybody ride who would, and we could pay it out of the increased value of the people’s proper consequence.” Louis Post, An Account of the George-Hewitt Campaign in the New York Municipal Election of 1886 (New York: John W. Lovell Company, 1886), 27-28.
“free land,” “free lunch,” “free cigars,” “free rides,” “free theater,” “free boycotts,” “no police,” and “no boss.” For contemporary Americans, George’s campaign promised a social welfare state the likes of which had never before obtained such prominent expression in mainstream politics.

Hewitt raised the specter of class conflict throughout the race—the Republican candidate, Theodore Roosevelt, went largely unnoticed—and George repudiated these charges by arguing that he represented all producers. George was branded a communist and an anarchist by the press. Hewitt’s most serious charge was that in his opponent’s campaign “an attempt is being made to organize one class of our citizens against all other classes, and to place the Government of the city in the hands of men willing to represent the special interests of this class.” This was hard for a candidate on a Labor Party ticket to deny, and even future labor leader Samuel Gompers paid special attention to refuting this charge during the campaign. George famously rebuked the idea that he stood for workingmen only, responding “I am for men.” Statements like these have been taken to mean that he rejected the mantle of working-class leadership thrust upon him. But, George proudly declared himself the “candidate of organized labor” and repeated with regularity the claim that emancipation would only precede upon its organized political efforts. George inverted Hewitt’s argument to claim that in standing for the working men, he was standing for the general public interest. He quoted the Biblical edict that “Thou shalt earn thy bread by the seat of thy brow” to prove that in a just society all would be workingmen. Even under current conditions, “The men who earn their bread by manual labor are, in this as in every community, the vast majority. Their interests must be the interests of the community at large.”

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166 Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 2:318-19
To the ranks of manual labor he added “editors, reporters, teachers, clergymen, artists, authors, physicians, store-keepers, merchants – in short, representatives of all classes of men who earn their living by exertion of hand or head.” The only group George would not represent as mayor was “that class who live by appropriating the proceeds of the toil of others.” George committed himself to the same producerist interpretation of class that the Knights of Labor advanced. With this device he was able to contend that it was Hewitt who, by opposing working class organization, represented a special interest.

George was ambivalent about possibly becoming mayor, but as he observed the coalition assembling at his feet, he began to believe that it was likely. The local Church hierarchy had begun to show some signs of opposition, but Father McGlynn’s appeals successfully fostered a nascent brand of Catholic social justice. Patrick Ford rallied Irish nationalists, most of whom were already sympathetic. A majority of Germans and Jews sided with George, probably because of their close associations with the labor movement and socialism – most socialists supported George in 1886. George was also able to incorporate a handful of middle-class reformers, even though many were uncomfortable sharing the stage with assorted immigrant communities. On the second of October, George received a second nomination from a group of middle-class supporters, including the future leader of the Socialist Labor Party Daniel De Leon. He also won the support of economist E. R. A. Seligman; future NAACP founder Charles Edward

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168 Post, The George-Hewitt Campaign, 23. In listing the actual professions that he represented, George was using a powerful and inclusive populist rhetorical device that would be replicated later orators in that tradition. Kazin, The Populist Persuasion, 234-235.

169 George is quite clear that he did not initially want office, but increasingly saw it as likely “When I was nominated few men among you held out to me any inducement that by any possibility would I be elected. If I had thought your nomination equivalent to an election I would not have accepted it. I did not want the office; I did want the fight. And so well—so well did the fight go on, so strong did the enthusiasm grow as, the great popular heart was stirred, that I began to believe I should be elected.” Post, The George-Hewitt Campaign, 171.

Russell; novelist William Dean Howells; Karl Marx’ daughter, Eleanor; and Robert Ingersoll, the nation’s leading agnostic writer. That Ingersoll fought alongside Father McGlynn, whose Catholicism often veered toward mysticism, is indicative of how variegated the campaign to elect George had become.\(^{171}\) A spate of aging NRA land reformers supported George, including Frederick William Evans, brother of George Henry Evans.\(^{172}\) In addition to picking up a handful of abolitionists, several black campaign clubs were formed to support George. The leading African American journal in New York, the *Freeman*, declared that “colored men do not hesitate to say that Henry George’s party is the party of the colored man.”\(^{173}\)

Labor, particularly from the lower-middle and middle ranks, constituted his base. Powderly, Grand Mater Workman of the Knights, shied away from the race because he was afraid of retaliation, but when rumors began to circulate that he opposed George, he traveled to New York and gave a rousing speech in which he called upon those present to vote for George: “Let it be known that there are things besides strikes… and that these other things are a proper regulation of the land system which will guarantee to every man that which is justly his, and no more.”\(^{174}\)

There was enough continuity between Georgism and the earlier tradition of free land that many former NRA members found themselves in Henry George’s camp. George’s mayoral campaign attracted a litany of aging activists like Henry Beeney, John Keyser, Joshua Ingalls, Lewis Masquerir, and George W. Lloyd.\(^{175}\) Some of the old guard claimed that George had


\(^{172}\)Mark Lause, *Young America*, 132.


\(^{174}\)*Post*, *George-Hewitt Campaign*, 118-120.

\(^{175}\)Lause, *Young America*, 132.
appropriated their ideas without acknowledgement, but few had actually proposed land taxes. W. F. Evans, the brother of George Henry Evans, more sagaciously saw George’s cause as a natural evolution of the movement. In a personal letter he wrote:

Think of it, George. Take hold of it as, 30 years ago we took hold of things. We got the freedom of the public lands – “voted ourselves a farm” – abolished imprisonment for debt; secured the rights of women to a good degree… abolished chattel slavery. Do you (sic) abolish land monopoly and wages slavery.

Evans praised George, “of all others you are the man to organize the laborers,” yet even then – in the 1880s—he suggested George “pass a land limitation law” that would “double the freeholders in 10 years.” There was ample continuity of spirit between the NRA and George, but land value taxation had never offered itself as a serious solution to a generation of reformers for whom voting one’s self a farm provided such a painless method for securing economic independence.

In an era when average citizens were often more inclined to concern themselves with local rather than federal government, the campaign of a prominent radical for the mayoralty of America’s largest city was a truly national event. The George campaign became the epicenter of the political end of The Great Upheaval, then sweeping across the nation. In nearly two hundred municipalities the Knights of Labor ran candidates for office, oftentimes under the auspices of the United Labor Party – that is to say the platform on which George was running—occasionally with real or symbolic relationships to the New York campaign. In Newark, a devoted follower, Hugh O. Pentecost, ran for mayor on the ULP ticket; in a symbolic gesture of support, George was nominated for mayor of New York at that city’s Labor Day parade. According to Louis Post, the strange procedure of nominating a candidate for office in another municipality

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implied that the “The proposed nomination lost all local significance in the national interest and sympathy it attracted.” George traveled to Kansas City the night before its elections to speak for the labor candidates of that city.\textsuperscript{178} The Richmond nominee for Congress, William Mullen, was an “admirer of George.”\textsuperscript{179} In Rutland, Vermont, ULP candidates won a stunning electoral victory, which they parlayed into a higher property tax assessments, and after a couple of years, a special tax on unoccupied land.\textsuperscript{180} In Chicago the United Labor Party elected seven assemblymen, five judges, and came only sixty-eight votes short of putting a representative in Congress.\textsuperscript{181} As in New York, the platform called for public ownership of utilities and equitable taxation, including “the taxation to the full limit of the law of unoccupied land.”\textsuperscript{182}

On November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, the day of the election, George traveled around town in a carriage with Father McGlynn and Terence Powderly, reinforcing his status as the candidate of God and labor. At the end of the day Hewitt won with 90,552 votes, George came in second with 68,110 votes, whereas Teddy Roosevelt carried the standard of Lincoln to a third place defeat with 60,435 votes.

Controversy has long surrounded the question of whether or not the notoriously corrupt Democratic Tammany Hall machine engineered Hewitt’s victory. It has sometimes been asserted that rumors of voter fraud were an \textit{ex post facto} invention that remained unvoiced in the immediate wake of the election. This is rooted in a naïve reading of George’s concession speech, in which he refrained from explicit allegations that were taken for granted by his audience. He ended the speech with the assertion that no progress was possible under the current electoral

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 26.
system and that the implementation of the secret ballot was a prerequisite for further progress. He claimed that he would have won with “a fair vote.”\textsuperscript{183} Intimidation of voters by poll workers, and multiple voting in different precincts—sometimes even in the same precinct—was so routine that George’s audience would have anticipated it.\textsuperscript{184} George did not need to venture specific claims to telegraph his accusation; as far away as Germany, Friedrich Engels concluded that the election was won by “a colossal mass of fraud.”\textsuperscript{185} The debate over whether there was fraud is anachronistic; the charge was articulated with greater frequency as time progressed only because the introduction of the secret ballot shortly thereafter meant that it was no longer taken for granted. The only real question is whether George was rightfully elected mayor of New York but there is no way to determine how many voters were turned away from the polls, or, conversely, invited back for seconds.

Ultimately, the conclusion of the election was the best result George could have hoped for. Michael Davitt wrote to congratulate him: “Some of your worst enemies out here hoped you would be [elected]. The votes polled for you demonstrate your influence with the Labor Party and you have gained a great victory without experiencing the terrible risk you would have to run in the hopeless task of clearing out the City Hall.”\textsuperscript{186} George would make a concerted effort to promote political proxies, especially Tom Johnson, because he recognized the risk that the routine accommodations necessary for politics would tarnish his reputation, perhaps even his

\textsuperscript{183} Post, \textit{George-Hewitt Campaign}, 169.  
\textsuperscript{186} Michael Davitt to Henry George, Nov. 4, 1886, box 4, George Papers, New York Public Library. F. W. Evans expressed a similar view “I send you my congratulations... That you are not mayor nor congressman is better than otherwise. You represent an unmixed truth... Being in office, to you would be what it was to Lincoln; what the election... was to Greeley. It killed the one and spoiled the other.” Elder Evans to Henry George,” Special Collections, Library of Congress.
philosophy. Conversely, he had succeeded impeccably at his goal of raising hell. Raising the
specter of the George campaign, Governor of New York, David B. Hill, pushed through a spate
of labor legislation including regulations for child and female labor, the establishment of Labor
Day as a holiday, the abolition of prison contract labor, the ten hour day for railroad workers, and
a ban on “iron-clad” contracts that required workers to sign away their right to unionize.\textsuperscript{187}
George managed to win approximately 30 times the votes that various small labor campaigns in
New York had traditionally garnered and, because of voter fraud, his defeat was only
“nominal.”\textsuperscript{188} It was a moral victory that also acted as a rallying cry for a reform that he had long
promoted, the secret ballot. In his concession speech on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, George proudly claimed
“I would rather have one such glorious defeat as this than ten thousand elections in the ordinary
way.”\textsuperscript{189}

For a short period of time, the magnitude of George’s electoral returns caught the
attention of observers from around the world, to whom it suggested a radical, new juncture for
American politics. While Friedrich Engels believed the working-class movement in America, as
directed by Powderly and George, was theoretically antiquated, he found the United Labor
Party’s rapid electoral gains to be “absolutely unheard of.” He warned that “if we in Europe do
not hurry up the Americans will soon be ahead of us.”\textsuperscript{190} Such predictions were ventured with
equal fervor by those who feared this development. London’s \textit{Saturday Review} contended that
George’s success presaged a time when the “socialist vote” would “become as important a factor
in American politics as the Irish vote.” In fact, the author suggested that the national Republican

\textsuperscript{188} Post, \textit{George-Hewitt Campaign}, 172.
\textsuperscript{189} Post, \textit{George-Hewitt Campaign}, 171
\textsuperscript{190} Engels to Sorge, Nov. 29, 1886, in \textit{Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ Correspondence, 1846-1895} (London: Martin
Lawrence Ltd., 1934), 450-451.
Party had encouraged its local representatives to support the “Socialist Candidate” in order to ingratiate the party to Irish voters, probably a reference to Roosevelt’s anemic performance in the election.\textsuperscript{191} One British travel writer who happened upon a 40,000 person K. of L. march for George observed that “In America the relations between labour and capital will call for discretion and self-denial not less than in the countries of the Old World.”\textsuperscript{192}

George’s defeat at the polls was far less troubling than the dispute with the Catholic Church that followed. On November 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th}, Archbishop of New York Michael Corrigan issued a letter warning against “certain unsound principles and theories which assail the rights of property.” Corrigan included a message to labor organizations which allied themselves with George:

True, indeed, in many painful instances, the rights of the toiler are trampled on, and fruits of his labor snatched from his grasp. True this is done too frequently with the concurrence, or at least the connivance of law. This is the evil that needs redress, but such redress can never be brought about by denying a fundamental right or by perpetuating a radical wrong.\textsuperscript{193}

Father McGlynn, already suspended for his political advocacy was called to Rome on December 4\textsuperscript{th}. McGlynn refused to go. The Church responded by taking away his parish and excommunicating him. McGlynn was indignant and refused to give up his evangelizing, even if he no longer had a Catholic pulpit to preach from. As President of the Anti-Poverty Society, he preached a version of the gospel of George deeply infused with religious undertones. Corrigan refused to countenance McGlynn’s heresy and punished any Catholics associated with the organization, even denying some the right to burial in Catholic cemeteries. Furthermore, Corrigan removed Rev. Richard Burtsell, from his parish in New York City as punishment for

\textsuperscript{192} Brassey, “A Flying Visit to the United States,” The Nineteenth Century, December 1886, 906.
supporting McGlynn. On January 20 1889, Corrigan made attendance at McGlynn’s meetings a reserved case, meaning that it was a sin that could not be absolved without recourse to the bishop. Many of George’s Irish supporters, including Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World* and one of George’s most important connections to the Irish community, split with the movement as it was branded a heresy.

The Catholic onslaught on George became a political liability for Grand Master Workman Terrence Powderly and his organization. Powderly, like many members of the order, was Catholic and had worked assiduously to protect the K. of L. against a Church hierarchy which distrusted it both for its secrecy and its perceived intention to pit class versus class. The year of George’s campaign, the Church had already officially condemned the Canadian branch of K. of L., raising questions about the status of the American branch. A meeting of Archbishops in October of 1886 failed to reach a consensus on whether or not to condemn the order, meaning that the matter would be referred to Rome at the same time that the Papacy was considering McGlynn’s case. Corrigan, who had led the assault on McGlynn, also joined in denouncing the Knights, but recommended patience before issuing a controversial condemnation. To be associated with the ideas of McGlynn, which the Church hierarchy had already taken action against, would threaten the good status of the Knights, though the ways in which the two questions were intertwined, did not always work against the Knights. Cardinal Gibbons, in a letter to the Archbishop of Cincinnati wrote that he was

… preparing an elaborate paper showing the injustice, the danger and the folly of denouncing them [Knights of Labor]. We see the excitement occasioned by the suspension of Dr. McGlynn because he is regarded as the friend of the workman—what a tumult would be raised if we condemned the workers themselves.  

194 Browne, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor*, 335.  
Whether for better or worse, the case of the Knights of Labor would be settled along with that of Father McGlynn.

As the K. of L. lingered under the papal ax, it retreated from radicalism. Their position was further eroded by anti-labor sentiment after seven police officers were killed at a protest for the eight-hour day at Haymarket Square in Chicago. The K. of L. found itself beset by negative press coverage and a concerted effort by employers to crush the organization. At the 1887 convention, Powderly spent much of his annual address proving that he was not an anarchist and rebuffing claims that he had once been member of a socialist party. He asked for a formal declaration that the order was opposed to anarchism. M. J. Butler, a United Labor Party Candidate in Chicago, similarly rejected the charge that he was an anarchist and turned the question around on his accusers within the order: “If anything could increase the respect and esteem I have always had for our General Master Workman, it is the stand he took in support of Henry George, in New York; yet permit me to state, that by doing so he left himself open to the charge of being an anarchist just as much as some of his less gifted brethren in Chicago did.”

The legislative committee, which had once made bold policy proposals, limited itself to a reporting of the happenings in Congress, with a brief rebuttal of accusations by Hewitt, emanating from the George election that the Knights had undue political influence over their followers. For the first time, the Order began to move further away from Henry George. When

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197 Proceedings of the General Assembly, Eleventh Regular Session, Oct. 4-19 Minneapolis Minn. 1877, p 1494, box 113, PP.
198 Ibid., 1461.
a straight single-tax amendment was proposed in 1888, the organization simply deemed the question “inexpedient to legislate.” 199

The Order’s retreat, especially Powderly’s decision not to stand by McGlynn in his trials with the Church, drew harsh fire from radical elements in the movement. The *Avant Courier* of Portland, Oregon condemned Powderly "He is indeed ignorant of the history of the Roman Catholic church (sic) who does not know that it invariably strives to head off every movement of the people… the various rumors that were from time to time afloat as to the proposed Papal Bull against the K. of L. were but a common advertising trick, working, up the excitement of Mr. Powderly’s humble submission of our constitution to the divinely-instructed judgment of his Excellency Cardinal Gibbons at Baltimore." 200 The *Denver Labor Enquirer*, in an article clearly meant to condemn the embattled leader, published a series of controversial questions that it wanted Powderly to take a stance on, including whether he believed in the ideas of Henry George, whether he supported the persecution of McGlynn, and whether it was true he had submitted the K. of L. preamble to the Catholic Church for approval. 201 The harshest attacks came from McGlynn, who implied that Powderly had bribed Catholic officials for a positive decision. Powderly believed that McGlynn was “acting at the dictation of George in this slander” though it was unlikely because the two men had themselves begun to draw apart. 202

The Catholic Church’s decisions regarding the Knights of Labor, Henry George, and Rev. McGlynn proved to be nuanced enough to express disapproval, without provoking a backlash. In September of 1888, Powderly was informed by Gibbon that the Church would

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200 "Mr. Powderly’s Position.” Avant-Courier, November 20th, 1886, Box 27, Powderly Papers.
201 Proceedings of the General Assembly Eleventh Regular Session, Oct 4-19 Minneapolis Minn. 1877, p 1508, box 113, Powderly Papers.
202 Browne, The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor, 308.
tolerate the Knights if they made minor changes to their constitution. Corrigan lobbied to have the works of Henry George condemned by the Catholic Church, but the consensus was that such a pointed criticism would only provide George more exposure. The Archbishop of Cincinnati recommended a broader decision that would treat the subject of George implicitly: “It is desirable to have a clear statement of Catholic doctrine on all these questions of rights and duties in regard to property—labor—wages etc….But such exposition of doctrine ought to embrace the various questions – of property… and only treat George’s particular notion as an incidental part and without reference to his name or his book.” O’Connell, who represented the American clergy to the Vatican, determined that the majority supported “an expression of Catholic doctrine without any allusion to George.”

On February 6, 1889 the Church condemned George’s books sub secreto, and on May 15th 1891 it released Rerum Novarum, the definitive encyclical on economic issues. Rerum Novarum condemned any ideology that denied private property in land or capital and posited as an alternative its own corporatist vision of social welfare. On December 23, 1892, Reverend McGlynn was allowed to return to the Church on the condition that he accepted Rerum Novarum.

The Catholic Church had essentially condemned George’s philosophy, but it had done so subtly enough that Powderly, cleared by the Church, could bring the K. of L. more firmly into the fold of Georgism than it had ever before been. Powderly spoke positively about land taxation in a Baltimore Sun interview, provoking George to write and encourage him to go further.

Powderly expressed concern that his opinion would mean nothing without a great labor union to lead and also showed more than a bit of personal animosity over the McGlynn affair. George

\[\text{\textsuperscript{203}}\text{Ibid., 320.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{204}}\text{Ibid., 336}\]
seems to have effectively assuaged both of these concerns. At the annual meeting of the K. of L. in 1889, Powderly, pushed for a land value taxation plank and the preamble was altered to say that:

The land, including all the natural resources of wealth, is the heritage of all the people, and should not be subject to speculative traffic. Occupancy and use should be the only title to the possession of land. The taxes upon land should be levied upon its full value for use, exclusive of improvements, and should be sufficient to take for the community all unearned increment.

The Knights of Labor had long been partners with George, evolving along parallel lines, but this change essentially made them disciples. George announced that it was the “most important event… the Standard has been able to record.” George sent Powderly a letter of congratulations, though there is some indication in the letter that he understood the event was less significant than he reported.

George quickly passed over the change in the constitution to touch on a different subject: “I think your idea of making a junction between the Knights and the Farmer’s Alliance of the greatest promise. A junction between the farmers of the country and the workingmen of the cities on the lines of radical reform in which both have a common interest is the most important thing that can now be effected....”

George’s focus on the Farmer-Labor Alliance was prescient; The Knights were in decline, and their last significant historical contribution would be their work with the Farmer’s Alliances. From 1886 to 1888 the membership in the Knights plummeted from 700,000 to 259,578. The K. of L. had encountered an array of difficulties. Failed strikes exposed

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205 Henry George to Powderly, January 31, 1889. Henry George to Powderly, Feb. 28 1889, box 51, Powderly Papers.
206 Proceedings of the 13th General Assembly 1889 Atlanta, p 43, box 114, PP.
207 Browne, The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor, 339.
208 Henry George to Terrence Powderly, Nov. 24 1889, box 57, PP.
weaknesses in the structure of the organization, employer organizations engaged in repressive measures, and many unskilled locals formed at the height of the Great Upheaval found that they lacked the necessary funds to stay in operation. Though the organization left no record of religious affiliation, the collapse was most distinctly felt in the urban centers where Catholics predominated; in 1886 urban workers made up 44% of the K of L, whereas by 1888 they comprised only 31%. But before they entirely withered away, they met with the Farmer’s Alliance in St. Louis at a conference that would lay the foundations for the Populist Party. Ultimately, their contribution to the new party was small, but in St. Louis they did manage to put a piece of their land plank, with its undertones of Georgism, into the third party’s platform.

The K. of L. —and Georgist labor unionism more broadly—would also face competition from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) formed in 1886 under the guidance of Samuel Gompers. The cigar maker and George had been allies during the mayoral campaign, but Gompers had initially opposed the creation of a labor party and seems to have been forced into the campaign by its political momentum. He would very shortly thereafter attack George’s tax for promising neither “present reform, nor an ultimate solution.” Whereas George believed the purpose of organized labor’s was to give political power to the workingman, Gompers was reluctant to engage his organization in electoral politics. Conversely, he was happy to employ strikes, a tactic that George, like Powderly, considered corrosive to the republican unity that was the ultimate goal of their economic reforms. The philosophical difference between Georgism and the AFL would create a noticeable divide between the two movements. This ambivalence was

211 *Leader* (New York) July 25, 1887.
exacerbated by the suspicion, resulting from Gompers rapid about-face, that he had adopted his anti-political stance in response to backlash from the 1886 campaign.\textsuperscript{212}

The break between George and labor was the most severe downturn the movement would encounter until the 1920s. But the power of his cause had been proven. George’s philosophy evolved out of his relations with established traditions of land reform, active engagement with the political process, and his own experiences on the margins of labor market. According to John Dewey “the life history of Henry George is typically American even though it has few parallels in this country.”\textsuperscript{213} He had fit naturally within the ideological context of the nation’s largest labor union. But he had also attracted a diverse array of support from businessmen, conservationists, and abolitionists. He had thereby justified his confidence the single tax could foster a powerful coalition because it was a “fundamental issue, that involves large principles and includes smaller questions.”\textsuperscript{214}

The decline of the Knights of Labor was a major setback for George. But the single-tax philosophy retained some hold in the ascendant American Federation of Labor. The only time that Samuel Gompers was ever unseated from the presidency of the AFL it was by the onetime Knight of Labor, turned Populist, John McBride, who campaigned on getting the union into politics, government ownership of utilities, and the single tax. Ultimately, Gompers came back around, declaring at a meeting of the San Francisco League for Home Rule in 1913 that he “count[ed] it a great privilege to have been a friend of Henry George, to have taken the stump for Henry George for mayor in New York…. You speak about the Single Tax and I believe in it

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{212} \textit{Public}, Jan. 25 1919, 78.
\end{thebibliography}
with you."215 It is unclear whether Gompers was once again bowing to expediency as the single tax gained momentum, or if, as Gompers suggested, he was impressed by the benefits land value taxation had brought to urban workers. Either way, in the perspective of time, the dark days of the late 1880s were not, as they have sometimes been portrayed, the zenith of the movement.216


[127]
Chapter IV

The Democracy of Henry George
Incremental Reform and Integration into the Democratic Party

“We both need and want the assistance of these people.”

John Altgeld to William Jennings Bryan, (1897). ¹

After 1886, George’s movement made a rapid about-face. As its working-class support dwindled it reinvented itself as the “single tax” movement to appeal to the liberal middle class. It abandoned independent politics in favor of working within the Democratic Party. Even land value taxation itself was thrust aside—temporarily—as its supporters came to believe that it would be possible only after a much larger and broader battle to reconstruct American politics. This was the period that would define the socio-economic base and political strategies of the movement for the remainder of its existence, as it entered major party politics and engaged in a multiplicity of causes that were believed to facilitate the single tax. Some historians have looked at Georgists who followed this prescription as, in some sense, breaking with George because they immersed themselves in a wider progressivism not exclusively concerned with land value taxation.² Actually, as this chapter shows, George worked assiduously to force a sometimes

²This perceived incongruence has led many historians to reject the self-identification of many prominent Progressive Era figures with Georgism. This is one of the reasons why the single tax plays a much smaller role in historiography than it ought to. Of course, it is condescending to imagine that we have a better sense of someone’s ideology than they did and the notion that one needed to refrain from all political causes other than the single tax to be Georgist is false. The latter is an absurd rubric by which George himself would have himself not been a Georgist. Alan Ryan, John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995), 115. Dominic Candeloro, “From the Narrow Single Tax to Broad Progressivism: The Intellectual Development of Louis F. Post,” The American Journal of Economics and Sociology 37 (July 1978): 325-336. Jack Tager is in the anomalous position as denouncing as unsound historical scholarship that counts Whitlock as a single-taxer, while also quoting his professions of adherence on several occasions. His justification was that Whitlock inquired with another single-taxer about how to implement land value taxation. More context would make it clear that, because it is a complicated mathematical process, even a devoted follower would need expert help administering it. One would think that trying to grapple with the process would actually suggest a deep interest. Jack Tager, The Intellectual as Urban Reformer: Brand Whitlock and the Progressive Movement (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968), 108-11.
recalcitrant movement to join this wider progressive current. In the end, he sacrificed his life to make his movement part of an insurgent coalition in the Democratic Party.

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In August of 1887, Louis F. Post mounted a platform in Syracuse and delivered a speech in support of Henry George’s candidacy for Secretary of the State of New York. He let out a vigorous cry in favor of cross-party unity: “The aristocrats of the Democratic Party and the Aristocrats of the Republican Party have got to come together” because, “when we get both of their heads on one pair of shoulders it will only take one blow to cut off two heads.” Continuing his harangue, Post added, “We will make one of these old parties feel it – one of them, I say; I don’t know which one. (a voice “Tammany Hall!’) I don’t know which one, and, between you and me, I don’t care which one.”3 No one in the crowd that day could have imagined that two decades later the speaker would be serving in the administration of a Democratic President. But the process by which Post would join a panoply of George’s followers in leading roles within the Democratic Party—or “the Democracy,” as the parlance of the day dictated—was already taking shape.

The first step toward mainstream politics had been taken a year earlier with pleas for electoral reform in the wake of George’s failed 1886 mayoral bid. George had first proposed the implementation of a secret—or Australian—ballot in the 1870s. At the time, he claimed that if the government printed ballots those of little means would not be excluded from office by the expense of printing their own. A decade later, rumors of electoral fraud during George’s mayoral campaign also suggested that as long as parties administered elections the opportunities for intimidation would preserve elite control of government. On November 6, exactly four days after

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the close of the race, George gave a concession speech at Cooper Union at which he proposed a campaign to implement the Australian ballot. George asked, “Do you suppose that the Irish peasants, under the thumb of their landlords, could ever have begun their great struggle which has been going on the other side of the water under our electoral system?” This final meeting of the campaign established a permanent advocacy group to promote ballot reform.

Two years later, in 1888, Louisville became the first city in the country to enact the secret ballot. Arthur Wallace, who proposed the bill, attributed the idea to one of George’s articles in the *North American Review*. The experiment spread rapidly, with five states enacting the secret ballot the following year. It garnered support from across the political spectrum, but followers of George often formed the vanguard. *The New York Times* reported that, in Brooklyn, the cause was “started by Georgeites, nourished by prohibitionists, aided by Democrats, and abetted by Republicans.” The bill that established the Australian ballot in Missouri was introduced by future Speaker of the House Champ Clark, but had initially been drafted by that state’s Single Tax League. Single-taxers took great pride in the not entirely unfounded notion that they were responsible for establishing fair elections. In their 1886 defeat, single-taxers learned that land nationalization might not be immediately realizable, but that great changes which might facilitate its advance could be won by cooperating with mainstream parties.

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This success was in stark contrast to George’s efforts at independent politics. He made one final effort with his campaign for Secretary of State of New York in 1887. The election was a stunning defeat which made it abundantly clear that the defrocking of Father McGlynn and Church’s apparent rebuke of the movement had eliminated his mass base in the Irish community. His return across the state of New York was 72,281—barely larger than what he had polled in New York City alone the previous year. Within the city, his vote had nearly been cut in half.\(^{10}\)

This turn of fortune has sometimes been attributed to George’s ideological inflexibility, but more probably it was due to the row with the Catholic Church. Before the election, members of the Socialist Labor Party were expelled from the ULP. Historians have interpreted this as part of George’s plan to purify the party and create a strict single-tax organization.\(^{11}\) In fact, members of the Socialist Labor Party were expelled because of legitimate fears that they were trying to hijack the ULP; they had used a parliamentary trick to capture the party organ, *The Leader*, even though they had a minority stake in the paper.\(^{12}\) Either way, it is doubtful this split was electorally significant; the competing party formed by socialists, garnered a paltry 5,000 votes in the state election that year.\(^{13}\) More significant was that Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World*, now denounced as anti-Catholic the movement he had done so much to create.\(^{14}\)

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12 According to Louis Post this hostile takeover was possible because votes were determined by a majority of stockholders, not a majority of shares. Members of the SLP therefore had apparently spread out their shares to have a majority of shareholders, even in the absence of a majority of shares. Since the paper was founded during the 1886 campaign, it is probable that they had intentionally positioned themselves to capture the paper from the beginning. *Public*, Nov. 17, 1911. John Commons, *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 19350, 456-458. Alexander Speek, *The Singletax and the Labor Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1917).
Although certain members of the faithful, especially Reverend McGlynn, tried to keep the United Labor Party alive, George wanted no more to do with third party politics. The campaign of 1887, which George had reportedly only pursued under pressure from his supporters, was an embarrassing defeat. Years after the fact Louis Post suggested that George’s discontent was compounded by a secret political scandal. According to this story Gaybert Barnes, the political manager for the 1886 and 1887 races, was collaborating with Republican Senator Thomas Platt to use a prospective George Presidential campaign in 1888 to split the Democratic vote. To avoid charges of impropriety, George left the party. Later, Post would write that at first the single tax “seemed easy to popularize and therefore the obvious first step. Since then, however, experience has demonstrated the necessity for making the first step a shorter stride.” This moment when the sagacity of an incremental strategy became apparent was almost certainly somewhere amid the political catastrophes of the late 1880’s.

The evaporation of Irish support meant that, to remain viable, the movement needed to rebrand and attract new constituencies. In the native-born, urban middle class George found a less numerous, but more influential base of support. Post framed this change as a transition from the “Labor phase” to the “Singletax phase” where “class contests and class interests” were shuffled aside. Up until the late 80s, “land nationalization” was the moniker with which George was associated. In 1887, Thomas Shearman, a successful lawyer began to promote the use of the 

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15 *Public*, Nov. 17, 1911.
16 Louis F. Post, “Living a Long Life Over Again,” p 199 (a), Box 4, Post Papers.
phrase “single tax.” George had used the term at least once but found it imperfect because “It only suggests the fiscal side of our aims.” However, by emphasizing the idea that land value taxation could be used to remove taxes from labor and capital, the movement was able to build a broader producerist coalition that embraced not just working-class but also many middle-class Americans—even some of rather abundant means. In principle, George was troubled by Shearman’s approach, but he concluded that “the very fact that he approaches the matter in another way enables him to reach a class of people whom men like myself could not affect.”

The constituents of the reconstituted “single-tax” movement tended to come from a socio-economic station much like that of George. Its leaders were generally part of a self-made entrepreneurial class that prioritized economic mobility and the right to protect the proceeds of their labor from the encroachments of both rent and taxation. The outlines of George Creel’s biography, for example, are almost identical to those of the Prophet of San Francisco – with a couple of eccentric touches thrown in. After dropping out of high school he traveled to New York and attempted a career as a satirist, only to serve a short stint as an amateur boxer before founding and editing his own newspaper, *The Independent*. Creel’s journalism made him influential in Missouri reform circles and, as had been the case with George, ultimately earned him a political appointment. While a handful of very affluent radicals made their way into the movement, they also came from modest backgrounds. George Foster Peabody’s father owned a general store in Columbus, Georgia, a solidly middle-class background, but he was not wealthy enough to put his financier son through college. Tom Johnson was born to a family of aristocratic slave-owners ruined by the Civil War; he grew up an orphan.

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George’s fear that Shearman’s approach overemphasized the “fiscal” side of his argument were well founded; some entrepreneurs joined the movement in the hope of freeing their own interests from taxation and defiantly repudiated causes like public ownership of natural monopolies, which George perceived as integrally related to the single tax. Thomas Shearman, who had coined the term, precipitated a division in the ranks when he argued that the full confiscation of land values was unnecessary and that land should only be taxed at the rate required to maintain a limited state. The idea struck at the heart of George’s vision of a perpetually expanding revenue base that would fund a growing social state. George called Shearman’s plan the “single tax limited” and contrasted it with his own plan for “a single tax unlimited.” While George made clear that he differed from Shearman on this point, he refrained from breaking with him and losing the support he brought.

Debates over the “single tax limited” would fade away after the 1880s, but a persistent, often uneasy incongruence lingered. Thirty years later, Clarence Darrow could still observe a similar split: “There are two kinds of Single Taxers… one class who believes that all taxation should be placed upon land values because it is the simplest and easiest and the fairest way to collect taxes” and those “who really believe in the common ownership of the land” and that “it should be a part of the public wealth, should be used for public improvements, for pensions, and belong to the people who create the wealth.”23 The latter progressive group was destined to become the more prominent of the two. To obtain success, the movement needed to insert itself into an incremental reform program and those who clung tightly to most of the strictures of Gilded Age capitalism had no place in that process.

The year after George’s mayoral bid proved pivotal not only because of the collapse of the movement’s third party and the adoption of a more bourgeois orientation but also because new opportunities to cooperate with the Democratic Party appeared on the horizon. In 1887, President Grover Cleveland proposed tariff reductions in his message to Congress. With George still reeling from his recent loss, Cleveland’s new path made assimilation into the Democratic Party the obvious choice.

George believed in free trade, partly because he saw it as a means to a freer, more competitive market, but also for pragmatic reasons. As Louis Post observed, cutting the tariff would reduce government revenues, creating the need for a new source of funds, thereby, hopefully “bring[ing] the single tax to the front of politics.” In Protection and Free Trade, George explained: “The political art, like the military art, consists in massing the greatest force against the point of least resistance; and to bring a principle most quickly and effectively into practical politics, the measure which presents it should be so moderate as (while involving the principle) to secure the largest support and excite the least resistance.” He continued, “We have, ready to our hand, in the tariff question, a means of bringing the whole subject of taxation and, through it, the whole social question into the fullest discussion.” The current tariff discussion would be more radical than England’s anti-corn law debate in the first half of the century because industrialization had “made the distribution of wealth the burning question of our times.”

But George was now thinking outside of the framework of an immediate and total shift to the single tax. While he contended that some sort of land value tax was a feasible outcome from

24 Yanosky, “Seeing the Cat,” 338.
26 Henry George, Protection or Free Trade (New York: Trow’s Printing and Bookbinding Company, 1888), 341-346.
the debate, he was willing to offer a variety of other solutions to eliminate a regressive levy on consumer goods. In *Protection and Free Trade*, he discussed the possibility of what would now be regarded as quantitative easing—printing paper money to fund the government—as well as progressive sources of revenue like the income tax and inheritance tax. He suggested replacing the liquor tax with a public monopoly on the sale of alcohol—an example of his faith that anything that was judged to be public in nature, should be treated as wholly so.27

When Cleveland lost his reelection campaign in 1888, George choose to remain with the Democratic Party and fight to keep the tariff issue alive. This was feasible because the first wave of single-tax Congressmen were elected in 1890. During this period a “coterie of Single Taxers,” including Tom Johnson and the populist Jerry Simpson, developed in Washington DC and held regular meetings at which they “joked, philosophized, and planned together.” 28 The leader of this group was Tom Johnson, of whom George admitted he had “a tinge of superstition or reliance on destiny.”29 Johnson was George’s representative in politics because he has “more positive strength than any other man in politics. As for myself, I am even clearer ... that my best usefulness is outside of politics.”30 Aside from this tight-knit group that rallied around Johnson there was perhaps a wider circle of sympathetic congressmen. According to Johnson there were approximately twenty representatives who thought the single-tax argument “unanswerable”—though when the question came to a head only five were actually willing to vote for it.31

In the months before Cleveland’s third campaign in 1892, Johnson conceived of a dramatic way to ensure that free trade would dominate the campaign. After consulting with

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27 George, *Protection or Free Trade*, 345-346.
29 Henry George to Tom Johnson, August 11, 1893, Reel 6, Henry George Papers.
30 Henry George to August Lewis, May 24, 1894, Reel 6, Henry George Papers.
George, Johnson convinced five other congressmen—William Stone, Jerry Simpson, Joseph Washington, John Fithian, and Thomas Bowman—to read George’s *Protection or Free Trade* into the *Congressional Record*. The stated objective was to use franking privileges, which allowed congressmen to send the *Congressional Record* to their constituents free of charge, for the mass distribution of the book. 1,024,000 copies of the book were distributed via frank in the months before the election.\(^{32}\) The unprecedented size of the operation and the apparent abuse of congressional privileges provoked a national controversy; the *New York Times* expressed “emphatic disapproval and disgust” at the way the franking privilege was exploited to distribute the book.\(^{33}\)

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, single-taxers had circumvented Cleveland and made *Protection or Free Trade* the “principle [document] of the campaign.”\(^{34}\) Because Democrats refused to disavow Johnson’s stunt, Republican Congressman Bowers claimed that it was “essentially the Democratic platform as adopted by this house.” He was aware of the radical implications of his accusation; “The Democratic Doctrine,” he claimed was “opposed to private property in land.” A more short-sighted political actor might have relished the free distribution of his work, but for George “the best of it (was) the Democratic endorsement, that will force them largely to defend it, single tax and all.”\(^{35}\) Democratic congressmen were, in fact, forced into a degree of association with the cause. They returned fire to Bowers’ charges with criticisms of the tariff and proposals for an income tax, without refuting his claims that the Democracy had fallen into the hands of Henry George.\(^{36}\)

\(^{32}\) Henry George to Tom Johnson, Feb. 17, 1893, Reel 5, Henry George Papers.  
\(^{33}\) *The New York Times*, July 2, 1892.  
\(^{34}\) *The Chicago Tribune*, May 9, 1892.  
\(^{35}\) Henry George to Dr. (no specific name provided), Apr. 19. 1882, Reel 5, Henry George Papers.  
With a national profile, Johnson redoubled his efforts to make free trade the primary issue of the 1892 election. At the Democratic National Convention, Johnson convinced Lawrence T. Neal of the Resolution Committee to put on the agenda a resolution calling not just for tariff reductions—the traditional issue of the Democratic Party—but absolute free trade. Johnson canvassed the convention for support and was one of three people to speak on its behalf. Despite apparently tepid support, the resolution passed 564 to 324.\(^{37}\) The popular wisdom was that the measure had become intertwined with political intrigue; Cleveland’s opponents voted for it as a test vote to determine their strength and his supporters voted for it to prevent a recognizable test vote that would have undermined their power.\(^{38}\) However, the distribution of a million copies of *Protection or Free Trade* doubtless also gave Johnson clout at the convention; constituents had often forwarded requests for the book through their own representatives, so that all Congress would have been intimately familiar with the scale of the operation. Regardless of its origins, Cleveland was so concerned about the plank that, after the convention, he invited Henry George, Tom Johnson, and Louis Post to his house to discuss the subject.

Cleveland was right to be concerned. The free trade plank gave Johnson a weapon to batter Democratic protectionists with, allowing him to charge in the ensuing tariff debates that they were being unfaithful to their pledges.\(^{39}\) Future Republican President William McKinley claimed its adoption signaled that the Democrats had “abandoned their old policy of raising revenues from customs.... They have given up their old theories of taxation and are ready to accept the land-tax scheme of Henry George.”\(^{40}\) While this assessment was a doubtless an


\(^{38}\) *New York Times*, July 7, 1892.

\(^{39}\) *Cong. Rec.*, 53\(^{rd}\) Cong., 3\(^{rd}\) Sess. (Jan. 24, 1894), 1330.

\(^{40}\) *New York Times*, Aug. 3\(^{rd}\), 1892.
exaggeration, that it was plausible enough to be alleged by such a prominent figure suggests how effectively George’s followers had bullied the Democratic Party into association with their ideas.

Even with the major figure George cut in the election, Cleveland was triumphant in 1892 and a host of single-tax congressmen were brought in with him as part of the Democratic landslide. The tariff bill did, as George predicted, precipitate debates about new sources of revenue but the effort to incorporate a land value tax failed, with only five congressmen voting in favor. The first peacetime income tax was passed with the support of single-taxers. Johnson proposed an income tax amendment, slightly different from the one ultimately enacted, that had been drafted by Thomas Shearman.\footnote{Cong. Rec., 43rd Cong., 3rd sess. (Jan. 30, 1894), 1652.} Shearman’s analysis of the misdistribution of wealth became a popular subject, referenced by a litany of Congressmen fighting for the income tax.\footnote{Cong. Rec., 53rd Cong., 2nd sess. (May 24, 1894), 5202. Cong. Rec., 53rd Cong., 3rd sess. (Jan. 30, 1894), 1672-3. Cong. Rec., 53rd Cong., 2nd sess. (May 24, 1894), 6687, 6714. Cong. Rec., 53rd Cong., 2nd sess. (April 9, 1894), 3561.} Johnson also proposed an interconvertible bond bill drafted by George that was intended both to increase the volume of currency in circulation and ingratiate Johnson to the rising tide of farmers invested in the issue of inflation.\footnote{Tom Johnson to Henry George, Feb. 17, 1893, reel 5, Henry George Papers. Henry George to Tom Johnson, August 8, 1893, reel 6, Henry George Papers.} Johnson’s bill died in committee, but attracted the notice of the Midwestern press and was reintroduced in the Senate by the Silver Republican, William Stewart.\footnote{Cong. Rec., 53rd Cong., 1st sess. (August 18, 1893), 446. Almost a decade later, Louis Post advocated the same policy in \textit{The Public}: “The objection urged against this policy is that the greenback system is inflexible…. If greenbacks were made easily interchangeable for bonds and bonds for greenbacks, the volume of paper currency would adjust itself automatically to demand.” In public, George’s position was generally to ignore the issue of currency or to vaguely suggest the use of greenbacks. That Post advocated precisely the policy quietly put before Congress by George suggests that \textit{The Public} was representative of many trends in George’s thought that were too advanced for his own time. Public, Sept. 8, 1900, 342.}

An extremely successful congressional career suggested to George that “Politically, Johnson is steadily coming to the front. He has now got out over three million of the January
speeches, and scattered as they are, all over the United States they are having a very great effect. I think his position as a ’96 possibility is becoming more and more clear.” George’s hint that Johnson might be a Democratic presidential candidate was more openly articulated by major papers like the *Chicago Tribune*. George made it very clear that he wanted to play the role of disinterested philosopher and it helped that he had found someone who could tread through the muck of electoral politics for him; Johnson consulted with George so regularly that he referred to George as a “private tutor” in politics.

In light of these accomplishments, George chose not to attach himself to the third party that was beginning to take root in the western states. The People’s Party did pose a serious dilemma for George because, while it appeared sympathetic, his experience had instructed him against the wisdom of independent politics. Post attributed populism’s origin to a “gathering of the Farmer’s Alliance, the Knights of Labor and the Single Tax Clubs.” He also noted that two of the top leaders of the Kansas People’s Party, Jerry Simpson and George Canfield, were avowed single-taxers.

The direction of the Populist Party was shaped, in part, by friendly members of the Knights of Labor; the party’s “Omaha Platform” took liberally from the platform of the St. Louis Industrial Conference, conducted in association with that sympathetic labor organization. Hamlin Garland claimed that he and fellow single-taxer Jerry Simpson had “conspired” at the conference to introduce a Georgist land plank. The largest farm organization the country was unlikely to pass a measure in favor of land taxes. The single-tax plank in the preamble of Knights of Labor Platform, however, was incorporated into the Omaha Platform, with explicit reference to taxation

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45 They wrote that he “… will not refuse a nomination for the presidency when the Democracy gets ready to present it to him.” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 11, 1894. He was also reported to be “wooing the Presidential bee.” *Chicago Tribune*, July 30, 1894.
46 Tom Johnson, *My Story*, 63
eliminated. What remained was still a powerful call for communal rights to land, declaring that: “The land, including all the natural resources of wealth, is the heritage of all people, and should not be monopolized for speculative purposes.”

Despite these optimistic signs *The Standard*, George’s personal paper, regularly encouraged its readers to avoid the new party declaring that: “the advantage to the single tax movement of prodding the Democratic Party on in the way … it has been going … over that of playing at politics with a third party that must first be constructed and then converted, is too obvious for discussion.” But *The Standard* still celebrated when the Populists beat the odds in Kansas and won on a third-party, reformist platform. After William Peffer was elected Senator it beamed: “For once in the history of Kansas a United States Senator has been elected without the aid of Money. For once, a Kansas Legislature has risen superior to corruption.” As much as the single tax movement and the Populist Party were divided over questions of practical politics and their respective economic interests in the land question, single-taxers were able to find some sympathy for a party that seemed to represent the demands of common people.

Adhering strictly to major party politics, George also eschewed attempts to realize the single tax through utopian communities, though several were formed against his wishes. George was concerned that the failure of such experiments would bring his cause into disrepute, but this trepidation was uncalled for; single-tax communities both survived and expanded into the present day. Fairhope, Alabama, founded in 1894, and Arden, Delaware, founded in 1900, were—and

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are—private corporations that own the land and charge rent to cover the personal taxes of their members and fund public projects. They became a model which inspired famous visitors like Upton Sinclair—a long-time resident of Arden—Sherwood Anderson, Scott Nearing, Elizabeth Mead, Wharton Escherick, Clarence Darrow, and John Dewey. Harold Ickes both visited Fairhope and served on the advisory council to the local Organic School; fellow New Dealer Arthur Morgan enrolled his son there. The roll of notable visitors tends toward the artistic more than the political, reflecting the bohemian orientation of the communities. This was particularly the case for Arden, whose cottage style architecture and open spaces took inspiration from William Morris’ arts and crafts movement and Ebenezer Howard’s green belt communities. Arden, despite its small size, housed several artists of note, including Robert Rautenberg, responsible for some of the statues at the entrance to the Library of Congress.

In the realm of practical politics, however, land value taxation was pushed to the background as the movement shifted toward a broader approach. In 1888, at the Union Square office of the Standard, George met with Thomas Shearman, William T. Crosdale, and William McCabe—the half Irish, half Maori writer for the Standard. Shearman recommended an organization that would garner business support with a platform of local option in taxation. In 1901, the constitutions of twenty five out of thirty three states featured uniformity clauses, relics of Jacksonian populism, which mandated that all types of property be taxed at the same rate. Permitting municipalities to determine their own rates of taxation would potentially free

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businessmen of the dreaded personal property tax, but also allow for local implementation of the single tax. Shearman’s recommendation was initially brushed aside.

George’s followers choose to focus on direct agitation for land value taxation, gathering 115,502 signatures for a land value tax petition presented to Congress in 1892, but not even the faithful believed that it was anything more than an “opportunity … for finding our friends and bringing them together.” Jackson Ralston led a successful fight to institute the single tax in the small town of Hyattsville, Maryland. The Maryland Court of Appeals, however, revoked that legislation, declaring it a violation of the state uniformity clause.

 Appropriately, as Hyattsville illuminated the constitutional obstacles to the single tax, Shearman’s home rule idea was even then coalescing into the New York Tax Reform Association. That organization came to be, if anything, too successful at attracting businessmen, who ultimately muscled out the single-tax element in the organization. Through the first few years of the twentieth century though, it made considerable progress under the leadership of the genteel technocrat Lawson Purdy, who parlayed his work into a decade long assignment as New York City’s tax assessor.

In stark contrast to the budding success of local, incremental tax reform was the final effort at an independent third party. In 1896 single-taxers from all over the country flocked to Delaware to campaign for the short lived Single Tax Party. The hope was that by concentrating resources on a small state, they could have a disproportionate effect. Canvassers went door to door, prominent supporters from around the nation spoke at a constant stream of events, and

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56 Public, Nov. 22, 1912.
single-taxers founded a local campaign publication, *Justice*. However, a discouragingly small 3% of the electorate sided with new party during an election cycle in which William Jennings Bryan’s presidential campaign monopolized the spotlight. Among those who focused their attention elsewhere was George himself, who spent the majority of the year reporting on Bryan’s presidential campaign in a series of nationally syndicated editorials.

At the Single Tax Conference of 1893, proponents of a movement narrowly focused on land value taxation won a Pyrrhic victory, the long-term effect of which was to undermine the prospects for Georgist organization. George had written into the charter of the Single Tax League a provision calling for public ownership of telegraphs, railroads, gas, and other natural monopolies. A majority at this conference swayed by, in George’s words, “a strong tendency to anarchism,” voted to eliminate this clause. “There was pathos,” wrote Post “in the picture as I saw [George] marching demurely up the aisle at the tail-end of the minority procession of the negative voters.”

The somber drama of George’s alienation from the organized efforts of his own movement reinforced preexisting biases against organization. According to Post, George “was never sympathetic with attempts at permanent organization. He believed that such organizations had a tendency to prejudice the public mind as to close it to those processes of clear thought without which economic progress is impossible.”

Almost a decade earlier, in *Social Problems*, George had espoused a theory of ideology as a structure for defining action, independent of and superior to organizational authority: “Social reform is not to be secured… by the formation of parties …. Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and where there is correct

thought, right action will follow."\textsuperscript{59} That this sentiment preceded the schism engendered by the single-tax conference suggests that the liberal proclivity toward individualism contributed to the disorganized character of the movement. That organization had not naturally preceded from the early enthusiasm of the movement also suggests that an absence of class solidarity played a role.

But George’s position had hardened. The year after the Single Tax Conference, when the movement was struggling with whether or not to endorse the Populist Party, George argued against any sort of collective action because “organization had always, so far as the single tax was concerned, been a failure.” Instead he recommended that his followers should “work … as individuals.”\textsuperscript{60}

At the same time, the experiment with the Democracy had begun to sour. Cleveland stalled on tariff reform to push gold standard legislation out of tune with his constituents and the radical tone many new democratic congressmen had adopted. When tariff reform was addressed in the Wilson-Gorman Tariff Act of 1894, the reductions were so moderate that the president, though he did not veto the bill, refrained from signing it as a symbolic demonstration of his disappointment. Discontent over failed governance was exacerbated by the Panic of 1893, a particularly severe economic downturn. A Republican tidal wave swept many democrats out of office, including Tom Johnson. George finally broke in dramatic fashion with Cleveland when the president sent federal troops to Chicago to crush a railroad strike. George incensed at the president’s response to the Pullman strike declared that he

\textsuperscript{59}Louis Post expressed a similar notion about the importance of ideas in structuring action: “The man who merely lives right, needs watching; but the man who thinks right, will live right without being watched. \textit{Public}, Jan. 8 1909. Henry George, \textit{Social Problems}, 242. The notion that ideas structured action shares certain similarities to the principles of pragmatism as advanced by William James, but there is no reason to believe that George was influenced by James’ ideas or James by his. The congruence of these ideas does, however, lend itself the notion that pragmatism reflected popular assumptions in American intellectual life.

would rather see every locomotive in this land ditched, every car and every depot burned and every rail torn up, than to have them preserved by means of a Federal standing army….That is the order in keeping of which every democratic republic before ours has fallen. I love the American Republic better than I love such order.61

He believed Cleveland was “more dangerous to the Republic than any of his predecessors.”62

Though the world looked bleak in that moment, Louis Post looked back on Cleveland’s many betrayals with pleasure. George’s acolyte thought it was worth the misfortune because “William J. Bryan’s nomination by the Democratic Party on the free silver platform of 1896 was a logical result” of Cleveland’s incompetence.63

Bryan, running with a nomination from both the Democrats and the Populists, was ideally suited to reconcile the remaining tendencies toward third-party politics in the single tax movement. George attended the Democratic National Convention, reporting for William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal, and wrote, optimistically, perhaps presciently, that the Democratic Party that “emerge(d) from the Chicago convention is not the old Democracy.”64

George supported Bryan, thought he cared little for Bryan’s pet issue—silver currency—preferring instead the still radical notion of paper money printed by the government.

Not all single-taxers were content with their leader’s effort to rally them around a candidate whose platform shared little in common with their own, but George argued that they should ally themselves with all movements that represented “the people” against “the interests.” A group led by Thomas Shearman, issued a public declaration, reprinted by The New York Times, condemning George’s work to attach their movement to Bryan.65 The day before the

61 George Jr., The Life of Henry George, 577.
62 George Jr., The Life of Henry George, 588.
64 New York Journal, July 11, 1896.
election, George returned fire against “those friends of mine, the few single taxers who, deluded, as I think, by the confusion, propose to separate from the majority...” To them he wrote:

The banks are not really concerned about the legitimate business under any currency. They are struggling for the power of profiting by the issuance of paper money, a function properly and constitutionally belonging to the nation…. They are concerned about their power of running the Government and making and administering laws.  

In many ways, George’s statement was bolder than a direct engagement with the silver issue would have been; he claimed the producers and “the forces of aristocratic and special privilege” were locked in battle over control of democratic government. “All great struggles of history have begun on subsidiary issues,” claimed George. The single tax would not stand alone, but as part of a larger battle against “privilege.” By reframing populist policies as part of a battle between the masses and the classes which would eventually culminate in the single tax, George was forcing the movement into a coalition with a broader current of dissent while stifling opposition as to the policy merits of any particular piece of legislation. According to George Jr., “Tom L. Johnson, Louis F. Post, and a great majority of the single taxers” followed into Bryan’s camp. This transformation of party loyalties would grow progressively more distinct in the following decades.

After Bryan lost the election, George made one last effort in 1897 at the mayoralty of New York. Superficially similar to his more famous campaign, it was actually demonstrative of how far George had moved his movement out of independent politics and inserted it into the progressive mainstream. Twenty years ago, George had run on the United Labor Party ticket; now his party was “The Democracy of Thomas Jefferson.” The name implied that he was not

68 George Jr., The Life of George, 581-583.
running as an independent so much as he was reclaiming the mantle of the Democratic Party. Former US Senator, Carl Schurz observed that the campaign was “started by Democratic organizations outside of Tammany Hall.... They found in the failure of Tammany Hall to endorse the free-coinage plank of the Chicago platform a welcome opportunity to set up for themselves a claim to be recognized as the ‘regular’ Democratic organization in New York.”

Socialist leader Daniel De Leon, similarly claimed that George was being used as a “pawn” in an internecine Democratic feud. George, however, was not hoodwinked by a conspiracy. In his acceptance speech at Cooper Union on October 5th, he proclaimed that:

> A little while ago it looked to me at least that the defeat that the trusts, the rings and money power, grasping the vote of the people, had inflicted on William Jennings Bryan was the defeat of everything for which the fathers had stood, of everything that makes this country so loved by us, so hopeful for the future....You ask me to raise the standard again; to stand for that great cause; to stand as Jefferson stood in the civil revolution in 1800. I accept.

At the heart of the most important speech of the campaign, George positioned his race as a continuation of the larger one which had convulsed the country a year earlier. The party’s platform called for municipal ownership of franchises; for expanded parks, libraries, and museums; and an end to court injunctions against striking workers. Most importantly, it declared for the Chicago Platform that Bryan had campaigned on.

In private, unobscured by flowery rhetoric, George’s campaign agents made it clear that their intent was to force New York’s conservative Democratic machine to adopt Bryan’s national platform of reform. Willis Abbot, chairman of the campaign committee, wrote to Bryan that he had “started the campaign to keep in agitation the issues of the Chicago platform. I succeeded by

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69 Carl Schurz, “Mr. Henry George in the Municipal Campaign,” *Harpers Weekly* 41, October 23, 1897, 1047.
forcing the Tammany people, who ignored our platform in their local platforms, to discuss all our national issues on the stump.” Another member of the campaign committee wrote Bryan that “You can’t hope for anything from Tammany Hall except so much as you are able to extort from them. The leaders do not like you nor the platform. Only the pressure from the ranks made them pretend to support you last fall.” 73 George was a bludgeon battering Tammany Hall into allegiance with the party’s peerless leader.

Tammany’s agents appealed more vigorously to Bryan for an endorsement but in the process only reinforced the arguments of the George campaign. They professed that they had been entirely “true and loyal” in the 1896 campaign, a claim that even a generous judge would find dubious. 74 They asked Bryan to “write a letter of encouragement for them; in this great political struggle that is taking place in Greater New York…. Is it but fair to expect as the regular organization of Greater New York that they should receive your hearty support?” Evincing a decidedly Gilded Age notion of how democracy works, they asked, “What right has Henry George and his followers to undertake to destroy and to kill, politically, an organization that was as true as true could be, and ought you to stand still and not raise your voice in defense of this regular organization….?” 75

The appeal was a daft political move that only indicated to Bryan that George had the power to chastise enemies within the party. It was leaked, almost certainly by Bryan, to the press which interpreted it as evidence that Tammany was “afraid of George.” 76 Tammany had little to fear from George personally but was rightly concerned about the campaign more generally. It

74 Kazin, *Godly Hero*, 65
75 Frank Campbell to William Jennings Bryan, Oct. 14th, 1897, box 20, Bryan Papers.
would be several decades before the Tammany Tigers were brought to their knees by the crusading prosecutor Samuel Seabury; Seabury, however, was just then getting his first taste for the war against machine politics as one for the campaign managers for his lifelong idol—Henry George.77

During the campaign, Bryan received advice from respected corners in the Democratic Party to incorporate the insurgents into the party. John Altgeld’s governorship of the Republican-leaning State of Illinois had made him the party’s leading representative of urban reform. A month after George accepted the nomination in New York, he wrote Bryan:

Where in Nebraska and in perhaps most of the agricultural states, the silver question is the one that principally interests the people, there are in Chicago and in fact in all the great cities, and even in the country in some of the Eastern States, large bodies of men whom we cannot interest in silver at all….I have found… that the majority of what are called the ‘Henry George’ men, a large portion of the progressive element of the Republican party, feel very little interest in the silver question, but are becoming intense on the question of municipal corruption, government by injunction, etc., etc., and they are ready to act with us solely because they believe that fundamentally we are right on these questions.

The chance to flip party membership was a rare opportunity in an age where lingering civil war animosities made loyalties remarkably stable. But this was not the only advantage to reaching out to Georgists. Altgeld wrote Bryan that “we both need and want the assistance of these people. As a rule, they are an active class, and are successful in forming sentiment.” Altgeld agreed with Bryan about “the danger of attempting to do too many things at once” but observed that “it’s very important to draw the entire thinking and investigating portion of the American people in our direction.” In the long run, Bryan was one of the most important figures in the party’s outreach to urban constituencies, and, after George’s second mayoral bid, single-taxers

were one of the groups that he courted most assiduously.\textsuperscript{78} A week after Altgeld sent his letter, a rumor broke in the press that Bryan had written associates in New York appealing to them to oppose Tammany in the mayoral election.\textsuperscript{79}

It is clear that George did not consider what he was doing in this second campaign a minor footnote, because he embarked upon it with an awareness that it would be a death sentence. In 1891, George had suffered a bout of aphasia; in retrospect he appears to have suffered a severe stroke from which he probably never fully recovered. His doctor had informed him that the campaign would likely cost him his life, a diagnosis that he appears to have accepted. Before embarking upon the campaign he asked his wife leave to surrender his life for his cause. More precisely, he reminded Annie that she had taken the position in 1882 that duty required Michael Davitt to return to Dublin to be with his people, though “it should cost him his life.”\textsuperscript{80} His consciousness that he would not make it to Election Day reinforces that he was less concerned with the office than with the political import of the race. This awareness in no way tempered the zeal with which he had always campaigned, though he was now noticeably weaker. On October 28th, with five meetings scheduled, he spent all day speaking. The next day, four days before voters went to the polls, George died.

Attendance at George’s funeral was estimated at two hundred thousand. Daniel Beard, who, along with Lawson Purdy, had introduced George at his last public event, remembered that:

\begin{quote}
The funeral of Mr. George was the most impressive one I have ever witnessed, and in a way it was the most solemn one. I witnessed General Grant’s funeral and was deeply impressed by the loyalty of the mass to the great general, but on the occasion of Henry George’s funeral it was deep affection and reverence that
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{79} “Bryan Makes a Stir,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, Sept. 28, 1897.
\item \textsuperscript{80} George Jr., \textit{The Life of Henry George}, 597.
\end{footnotes}
seemed to permeate the crowd. As the cortege moved along, men and women stepped out into the street, fell on their knees and prayed.\textsuperscript{81}

After the procession, the crowd assembled at Grand Central Palace for a truly ecumenical service. Catholic followers were represented by Reverend McGlynn. On the other hand, the prominent Protestant Minister, Lyman Abbott, also spoke, beginning his oration: “he who lies before us in death was honored by all men.”\textsuperscript{82} The theme of universal acclaim was continued by the noted German-American Rabbi, Gustav Gottheil, who claimed that “friend and foe stand side by side in reverent awe by his lifeless frame.”\textsuperscript{83} The final speaker was a largely unknown single-taxer, who gave a secular speech in which he positioned George in the liberal tradition, referencing Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence.

George, with his poor health, was unable to split open the Democracy in 1897, but he did earn the gesture from Bryan which had probably been the real object of his campaign. Bryan sent a statement praising the deceased leader: “He was one of the foremost thinkers of the world. His death will prove a loss to literature, society, and politics.” Bryan betrayed his political instincts with an ambiguous statement that would allow partisans of either side of the single-tax issue to believe that he was sympathetic: “Those who agreed with his theories found in him an ideal leader, while those who opposed him admitted his ability and moral courage.” That Bryan praised George with a clear eye to political ramifications only makes the statement more impressive. George entered politics with a declaration of war on the two party system, but in death he was escorted out by the Democratic Party’s peerless leader.\textsuperscript{84} It was a precedent that

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Addresses at the Funeral of Henry George, Sunday, October 31, 1897} ed. Edmund Yardley (Chicago: The Public Publishing Company, 1905), 23.
\textsuperscript{83}\textit{Ibid.}, 30.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{New York Times}, Oct. 30, 1897.
paved the way for progressively closer relations. Tom Johnson, George’s handpicked successor, would literally be carried to his grave by Bryan.\textsuperscript{85}

Chapter V

Seeing the Cat

Modernity, Secular Faith, and the Impact of Single-tax Ideology on Progressivism

Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and when there is correct thought, right action will follow.  

Henry George, (1884)¹

Its greatest lesson lies, I think, in its vindication of the truth that real power and effectiveness in men lies in uncompromising and unswerving fidelity to ideals. After all is done and said neither the peace nor pomp which flows from success in sympathizing with the world’s prejudices produces a fraction of the satisfaction which must beautify the life of a man who can say that he has not yielded a jot or title of his allegiance to the truth as he saw it; and if happiness be the true end of life who could hesitate a moment to choose between the lot of Henry George and that of any man of his time?

From Newton Baker’s marginalia in The Life of Henry George, (1902).²

In historical accounts, George has always overshadowed the movement he inspired, encouraging a regrettable tendency to imagine that the movement expired with its master. The dearth of organized effort on its behalf exacerbates that impression. Single-tax organizations were generally local clubs or front groups, designed to build coalitions around single-issue campaigns. The only major national organization, the Fels Fund Commission, was not formed until 1909 and primarily sponsored local activists.

Yet, even with a reticence to organize inherited from George, single-taxers developed a fairly coherent movement. It was a loosely coordinated group of activists, brought together by correspondence and periodicals. Even without institutions, they acted more or less in unison because they shared a comprehensive worldview. The only major rift in the movement was created by a group—like those who had opposed George’s campaigning for Bryan—that

¹ George, Social Problems, 319.
² This quote is taken from the marginalia in Newton Baker’s copy of The Life of Henry George. Willis Thornton, Newton D. Baker and his Books (Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve University), 44.
distrusted the state and shied away from any political engagements not directly related to land value taxation. The changing constellation of political alliances and the disparate backgrounds of George’s adherents did little to rupture this intellectual concord. That is because for many reformers, Georgism was like a religion, and in the intensity of belief that it inspired superseded other political affiliations, which were typically pragmatic alliances formed for the sake of the single tax. This ideological zeal did more than inspire collective action, it fostered a level of dedication that made single-taxers the vanguard of progressive reform. While they were not the most numerous group of the period, they were often the first to question established institutions and the most willing to dedicate resources to the long, painful struggle required to create a new political order.

This chapter illustrates how the movement was held together by institutions and ideology. It demonstrates both that the single tax inspired devotion and structured the way that its followers perceived social issues. Though they served as leading figures in a host of economic and political reforms, these were often understood as stepping stones toward the single tax, or, at least, reflected the philosophical priorities George propagated. While progressivism is often remembered as a value-neutral faith in efficiency and professionalism, here it is clear that an ideology nearly as strict as a religious faith vivified much of the vanguard of reform.

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That the movement lacked formal organization does not mean it was entirely bereft of the sort of internal hierarchy that ensured ideological conformity. Without George, single-taxers turned to his intimate associates for guidance. Lawson Purdy indicated that when controversies over doctrine loomed “both sides appealed to Henry George, Jr. He saw that, however important such questions might be, they rarely involved any real principle that was fundamental. He took
sides seldom and kept the respect of all. When any principle seemed to be at stake he was firm in his decisions, but always patient with those who differed from him..."3 George Jr. helped to prevent the outbreak of sectarian disputes over minor theoretical debates the likes of which kept American socialism perpetually fractured, while at the same time ensuring that Georgists followed along the lines laid down by his father.

George Jr. steered his father’s followers in the direction of a wider progressive ideology, focused on socializing monopoly. Like the deceased founder, George Jr. saw more to the movement than land value taxation.4 The Menace of Privilege, a book he published in 1905, pointed to a variety of “legal privileges” that he believed were creating a new hereditary aristocracy. The “princes” that he excoriated were railroad magnates, land speculators, and those who exploited natural resources.5

Furthermore, ideas were often refined informally through an exchange of letters that George Creel compared to Jefferson’s Committee of Correspondence. The principal participants, as he described it, were Tom Johnson, Newton Baker, Fred Howe, Sam Jones, Brand Whitlock, Ben Lindsey, Francis Heney, and William U’Ren.6 When Creel initiated a campaign in his Missouri paper, The Independent, against prostitution, he wrote Whitlock for advice. Whitlock, in response, informed Creel that punitive sanctions against prostitutes were ill-informed and that prostitution was the natural result of poverty and gender inequality.7

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3 Public, April 6, 1917, 330-331.
6 George Creel, Rebel At Large (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947), 50.
7 George Creel, Rebel At Large (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947), 71.
Consequentially, Creel abandoned his campaign and, when he became police chief of Denver, adopted the more ideologically consistent policy of providing prostitutes with a farm outside of the city on which they could support themselves. At a meeting of the People’s Institute at Cooper Union, he explained: “The condition caused by commercialized vice, is not a moral question, but purely an economic one. It is due to housing conditions, tenements, and low wages. And that gets us back to the big fight, the fight against involuntary poverty, and then you get back to the single tax.”

There was a strain of logic here; if all crime resulted from poverty and all poverty from the misappropriation of land rent, the only correct approach to prostitution was not enforcement, but access to land. As Creel’s initial response indicates, it was not an entirely self-evident strain of thought, but it was followed with surprising consistency by single-taxers operating in municipal government around the country, in part, because there was a collaborative effort to define the practical implementation of George’s ideas.

The principal means of reaffirming the implication of George’s philosophy, however, were newspapers. There were a multitude of local papers of various types, and one national periodical, *The Single Tax Review*, which served as the mouthpiece for the anti-statist wing of the movement. *The Public: A Journal of Democracy* was the undisputed mouthpiece of the more politically influential progressive wing. Louis Post, former editor of George’s *Standard*, ran *The Public* in collaboration with his wife, Alice Thatcher Post. Louis believed that “the reform advocated by Henry George is not a substitute for all reforms, as superficial reformers have lightly inferred, but that it is, as Henry George himself declared, the only foundation on which other social reforms can be secure and effective.”

As the title suggests, *The Public* placed single-tax thought within the broader context of democratic movements. Although it was

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9 “Where are the Pre-War Radicals?” *Survey Geographic* (Feb., 1926), 560.
typically affiliated with the Democratic Party, he insisted that it was not a party paper but a ‘small d’ democratic paper, in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Henry George.\textsuperscript{10} In fact, he rarely split with the Democratic Party, except on the issue of race, over which he clashed with the racist southern wing of the party.\textsuperscript{11} Throughout its twenty-one year run, it took up causes as diverse as anti-imperialism; the commission form of government; initiative, referendum, and recall; scouting; progressive education; price controls for urban transit; government ownership of railways; Zionism; and proportional representation. At various stages in its existence it published regular columns on women’s suffrage, cooperativism, and “the color line.” – the publication of \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} was emphatically hailed by the paper.\textsuperscript{12}

The writers of \textit{The Public} believed that the single tax was intimately tied to these other causes and worked assiduously to demonstration the logical connections. They were zealous enough in this effort to veer frequently into reductionism, perhaps nowhere more severely than on the issue of race:

> Those who talk about the black menace or the yellow peril are merely thinking of the possibility of the black or yellow man monopolizing a particular part of the earth and preventing the white man from making a living. Some day we shall learn that the earth is big enough, and that if we will but remove the barriers there are plenty of jobs for all men regardless of color.

\textsuperscript{10} “Intelligent Newspaper Reading,” Louis F. Post Papers, box 6, Articles, Post Papers. Although the paper leaned heavily toward the Democratic Party, it did make exceptions. For example,
\textsuperscript{11} “There are too many democrats, in the party sense of the word, who are strenuously opposed to the doctrine of political equality in its application to negroes... They are not for the masses, but for the classes.” The article followed with an extended critique of Southern Democrat Ben Tillman, written by a black single-taxer from Michigan named Frank H. Warren. \textit{Public}, August, 25, 1900, 308. When Democrats in North Carolina was disenfranchising black voters, \textit{The Public} advocated that its readers in that state support the Republican or Populist parties. \textit{Public}, June 9, 1900.
Nevertheless, *The Public* did not succumb to the pitfall of indifferent waiting for the coming dawn. It continued: “Is there to be done until this millennial day of industrial and economic freedom? Yes, much. Men who work in powder mills must learn not to scratch matches. Racial animosities can never be extinguished until the cause is removed. But we can prevent these critical outbreaks which mark our national record.”

Along these lines, *The Public* editorialized against housing discrimination, which it argued was a conspiracy to create artificial scarcity in housing and exploit African-Americans with high rents.

Initially produced almost exclusively by the Posts, *The Public* grew into a respectable paper with an impressive cadre of supporters. David Starr Jordan, the first President of Stanford, became a regular contributor. Others included the feminist Charles Perkins Gilman; the father of Chinese nationalism, Sun Yat-Sen; Samuel Seabury; and the novelist Herbert Quick. Even Syngman Rhee, who would go on to be the first president of South Korea, contributed an article. *The Public* cultivated an aura of respectability, advertising endorsements by leaders of public opinion. One issue cited the “educational leaders of America who have endorsed THE PUBLIC,” including David Starr Jordan, William Jennings Bryan, Ray Standard Baker, Horace M. Kallen, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Frank Crane, Thorsten Veblen, Ordway Tead, and Carrie Chapman Catt. The magazine distributed advertising circulars that highlighted its elite connections. One brochure included endorsements from local Chicago notables like Governor of Illinois, John P. Altgeld; mayor of Chicago, Edward Dunne; Jane Addams; four local judges; two university of Chicago professors; four local religious leaders; and five attorneys. A similar brochure intended for a national audience included Congressman John Dewitt Warner; William

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13 *Public*, Aug. 9th, 1919, 844-845.  
15 *Public*, Sept. 20, 1919, 1031.  
16 “Circuit Court of Cook County, Chambers of Judge Murray Tuley,” May 12, 1905, box 9, Post Papers.  

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Lloyd Garrison II; the Governor of Rhode Island, Lucius F. C. Garvin; managing editor of *The Commoner*, William Maupin; Congressman William Sulzer; and mayor of Kansas City, William W. Rose.\(^1\) *The Public*’s circulation grew from a modest 3,500 to 16,000, but its supporters emphasized the quality not quantity of its reading public.\(^2\) William Lloyd Garrison II said of Post: “You teach the teachers, and the good goes broadening down surely if slowly.”\(^3\) Looking back, one editor, by the name of George Knapp, contended that Post had “helped to form the men who have formed the liberal thought of America…. Its circulation was never large; but its influence could not be measured by that yardstick. It went to editors and editorial writers all over the land…..”\(^4\) Despite these qualifiers, its circulation was far from insignificant; until 1916 it outstripped that of the *New Republic*.\(^5\)

In its early years, when its circulation was still low, *The Public* seems to have served principally as a central forum for a network of single-tax activists who were simultaneously coordinated through correspondence. In 1909, the journal ran a humorous piece on the occasion of Lincoln Steffens’ purchase of a typewriter. An array of leading single-taxers, including James Maguire, Bolton Hall, Francis Heney, James Barry, William U’Ren, William Marion Reedy, and W. G. Eggleston contributed comments. “It is another illustration,” one remarked “that nothing can stop the onward march of the Single Tax.” Daniel Kiefer joked that “Now I’ll quit dreaming after reading one of Steffens’ letters, that I’m translating ‘Progress and Poverty’ from Turkish into Japanese.” That Steffen’s handwriting was a running joke among all the chiefs of the

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movement is illustrative of how tight-knit it was. That an inside joke about an individual’s handwriting could be the subject of the movement’s principle national journal suggests that, at its core, the movement was essentially an elite social club.\textsuperscript{22}

William Jennings Bryan would cultivate relations with many single-taxers, but few so assiduously as the diminutive editor who held the keys to progressive Georgism. In 1900, two years after Post began his paper and three after George’s death, Bryan proposed a “clubbing arrangement” with several papers, whereby subscribers could receive his own paper, \textit{The Commoner}, for a reduced price with subscription to \textit{The Public}.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{The Commoner} advertised Post’s paper and the two exchanged material for publication.\textsuperscript{24} Over time Bryan came to consider Post “amongst the soundest as well as the most discrete of” his “political advisers,”\textsuperscript{25} and wrote to him in 1912 for advice about who to support in the Democratic National Convention. Once Bryan left the Wilson administration, he even sent agenda items for Post to present to the cabinet.\textsuperscript{26} The connection seems to have been fostered, in part, by Bryan’s insinuations of support for Post’s cause. In one letter Bryan wrote:

Knowing as I do your devotion to things which you regard as more fundamental, I have appreciated the interest that you have given to the things that I have advocated – some of them measures which deal with symptom (sic) instead of with the real disease…. It seemed wise for me to (not necessarily for others) to fight with the army for the things that can now be secured.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Public}, Nov. 19, 1909.
\textsuperscript{24} Bryan assures Post that, in reference to \textit{The Public}, he would like to “widen its circulation,” as he promises to advertise it in his own paper: William Bryan to Post, Dec, 20 1901. Bryan asked Post to write an article on the single tax for \textit{The Commoner}: William Bryan to Post, Oct 9 1901. In one issue \textit{The Commoner} published articles by Johnson and Post: William Bryan to Post, July 14 1903. Post sent letters of Tolstoy to Bryan, which Bryan subsequently published in \textit{The Commoner}: Charles Bryan to Post, Sept 28, 1905. Charles Bryan authorized Post to publish his brother’s comments about Tom Johnson’s death: Charles Bryan to Post, July 5, 1912. All listed Box 1, Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{25} William Jennings Bryan to Louis F. Post, Nov. 12, 1907, box 1, Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{26} William Jennings Bryan to Louis F. Post, Sept. 2, 1919, box 1, Post Papers.
\textsuperscript{27} William Jennings Bryan to Louis F. Post, Feb. 29, 1921, box 1, Post Papers.
The quote suggests that Bryan agreed with Post’s cause but followed a cautious approach for political reasons. However, because there are many accounts of Bryan arguing with single-taxers regarding the validity of their cure, there is good reason to believe that the real act of political manipulation was in persuading the spokesman of the single tax movement to rally the troops behind the Democratic Party.  

Bryan, however, offered more than nice rhetoric, he bridged the gap with single-taxers by appealing to the issue of local option, or, as it was sometimes called, home rule. The case of Hyattsville had shown that state constitutions prevented municipalities from enacting land value taxation. While Bryan might not support the single tax, as a man of democratic principles, he could at least endorse the right of people to vote for it. In regards to local option, Bryan said he was “very glad to endorse the experiment. I believe that a new system should be experimented with before it is generally adopted in order that the theory may be tested by practice and it is entirely in harmony with the idea of local self-government.” Shortly thereafter, in February 1902, *The Commoner* published an editorial supporting local option on similar grounds: “Every good citizen is anxious for the ultimate triumph of a correct principle, and the correctness of a principle can only be determined by experiment.” When Bryan was invited in 1906 to contribute recommendations for the constitution of Oklahoma, he suggested the legislature should have the “plenary power” to tax as it wished, including a tax on land “the improved or unimproved value… as experience may prove best.” That constitution, established in 1907, provided for local home rule in taxation.

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29 William Jennings Bryan to Louis F. Post, Feb 10, 1902, box 1, Post Papers.
30 *The Commoner*, Feb. 21, 1902.
The integration of Georgism into the wider progressive currents of the time was facilitated by the expansiveness of George’s philosophy. James Maguire, a Democratic Congressman from California, said of its effect:

There are pictures which, though looked at again and again, present only a confused labyrinth of lines… until once the attention is called to the fact that these things make up a face or a figure. This relation once recognized is always afterwards clear. It is so in this case. In the light of this truth all social facts group themselves in an orderly relation, and the most diverse phenomena are seen to spring from one great principle.  

By interpreting all social phenomena as aspects of mankind’s relationship to natural resources, George promoted a worldview in which all political questions were intertwined with the single tax. Maguire coined the term “seeing the cat” to describe the process of “complete and absolute mental transformation” that conversion produced. He derived the term from a landscape picture, which, if looked at from the right angle, revealed the image of a cat. In his account, Maguire struggled to find the cat, but once he had, it was all he was able to see. 

One of the most significant people to “see the cat” was Frederic C. Howe. Howe had studied law at John Hopkins and taken courses with Woodrow Wilson, but he believed his real education began under George’s lieutenant, Tom Johnson:

I got the better part of my education from Tom Johnson. From him I acquired a simple, vivid picture of life. Political economy became a matter of a few principles which could be applied to any problem. The confusion of thinking which I had brought from the university was cleared up by his penetrating understanding… My mind became receptive and retentive. History took on new meanings. I found myself able to make extemporaneous speeches on political questions with ease.

Howe became one of the most prolific and influential writers of the Progressive Era. He wrote about such a wide variety of subjects that it can be hard to imagine how all of they were all based

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33 Yanosky, “Seeing the Cat,” 127.
on “a few principles which could be applied to any problem.” However, a clear pattern is evidenced in his work. Howe wrote books about municipal government and the way that land management shaped standards of living and democratic government; books arguing that imperialism was the result of tariff policy and the search for natural resources and land; he even wrote about the need to compensate World War I veterans – with, not surprisingly, land. The notion that the single tax helped Howe make extemporaneous speeches appears extreme, but speaks to the extent to which it simplified the world into a handful of simple axioms. George himself, was famous as an extemporaneous speaker, and Johnson spoke on his feet with such alacrity that he was one of two congressmen during his tenure in Washington who spoke too quickly for the stenographers to keep pace.35 Howe’s compatriot in Cleveland, Newton Baker, was also particularly famous for his talent for extemporaneous speech.

The ability to draw logical connections between the single tax and other causes was highly-prized evidence of intellectual acuity within the movement. According to The Public, A. B. du Pont – descendant of the Physiocrat Pierre du Pont—was “one of the ablest exponents of the Singletax doctrine,” because “as he apprehended it, the philosophy ramified in more diverse directions and to more remote conclusions than the average so-called Singletaxer could dream of.”36 This made single-taxers susceptible to the charge that they believed their remedy could cure anything. In a letter to John Reed, Amos Pinchot brushed aside his doctor’s diagnosis of arthritis with the joke that “it is as easy as pie to cure, especially in the case of a radical who

believes in single tax and government ownership of railroads. We can cure anything with those.”

Pinchot’s self-deprecation aside, the idea that the single tax would reduce the incident of disease actually did have currency in some respectable circles. In a pamphlet published by the Fels Fund, William Gorgas claimed that the single tax would end the poverty that caused most of the world’s disease and that it would provide funds to build hospitals to treat the poor. He also pointed to vacant lots, which would be taxed out of existence by the single tax, as a major source of disease. Gorgas, however, was not a marginal crank. He became one of the most famous medical professionals of the era because of his pioneering work in the treatment of malaria; at the time of the speech he was Surgeon-General in the Wilson Administration.

George and the Single Tax League had endorsed women’s suffrage, but it was so small a part of his platform that, though many of his followers were proponents, few seemed to derive the idea directly from George. George did, however, preach a radically egalitarian democratic vision that was ultimately incompatible with suffrage restrictions. Tom Johnson “had never given any thought” to the issue of women’s suffrage until Frederic Howe’s wife, Marie asked him “Mr. Johnson you who are so democratic in everything else, why are you not democratic about women?” Johnson was immediately struck by the incongruence of these ideas: “Perhaps I am wrong. I never thought of it that way. I come from the South, you know, and the women I have known have had the Southern point of view.” Johnson took time to consider the issue, but ultimately his democratic principles trumped the prejudices he had inherited. Within a few weeks

39 Barker, Henry George, 588-89.
of his conversation with Mrs. Howe, he spoke publically in favor of women’s suffrage, becoming one of the first in Ohio’s Democratic Party to do so.\textsuperscript{40} Marie Howe, a devoted feminist, had a similar effect on her husband, who underwent a slow evolution from ignorance to concerted advocacy on women’s issues.\textsuperscript{41} George Creel was more active, becoming a topic of public comment when he informed his wife, noted actress Blanche Bates, that marriage would in no way require her to abandon her career. Bates was surprised, noting that she had expected to be an “old fashioned” wife; “Mr. Creel’s ideas of married life differed so from mine. He considered marriage an equal partnership agreement, while I thought I was to be a silent partner.”\textsuperscript{42} Creel served on the executive committee of the Men’s League for Women suffrage, along with Frederic Howe; George Peabody was honorary President.

Despite this sympathy for women’s causes, women played a surprisingly small role in the movement. Single-taxers sometimes minimized the significance of women’s issues, on the premise that equality would follow naturally upon fundamental economic reform.\textsuperscript{43} However, apathy or latent prejudices only go so far to explain the dearth of female participation because, in a formal, organizational way, women often did have a meaningful role to play. Alice Thatcher Post was managing editor of \textit{The Public}.\textsuperscript{44} The suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt was a director of

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\textsuperscript{40} Howe, \textit{Confessions of a Reformer}, 137-8.  \\
\textsuperscript{41} Kenneth Miller, \textit{From Progressive to New Dealer: Frederic C. Howe and American Liberalism} (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2010).  \\
\textsuperscript{42} “Changed her Ideas of a Wife,” oversized 4, p 227, Creel Papers, Library of Congress.  \\
\textsuperscript{43} “I do not think you get the purpose of this paper. We are not for either men or women, but for human beings and human interest. We are for the restoration of natural human rights to men and women alike, believing that when those rights are restored artificial sex discriminations will disappear and that there is no other way to get rid of such discriminations effectively. We have not the faintest interest in any special measure short of this. Subjects like those you suggest have plenty of advocates elsewhere, but we are concerned with advocating something which is fundamental to all of them and without which we believe none of them will ever become properly effective.” Albert Jay Nock to Ellen Winsor, Dec. 29, 1920, Albert Nock Papers.  \\
\textsuperscript{44} “Women as Managing Editors” \textit{La Follette’s}, box 11, Post Papers. Alice Thatcher Post was given credit for much of the success of \textit{The Public} and her role there was perceived as somewhat exceptional. She endeavored to
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the Fels Fund Commission. Anna George and Mary Fels were both prominent figures within the movement. Nor were women who were drawn to the movement generally inclined to acquiesce to gender norms. Elizabeth Magie Philips, inventor of the precursor to the board game *Monopoly* made national news when she bought space in the newspaper for a sardonic advertisement in which she described herself as a “young woman American slave,” ready to submit to the bondage of marriage in return for financial support.45

Formal organizational roles, however, meant little for women because the focus of the movement was always on electoral politics. There women were subject to legal and cultural barriers that excluded them. There are at least some indications that their male counterparts recognized and loathed this fact. James Barry complained that women, “not only ‘miss all the joy of battle.’ But oftimes they bear the brunt of it. Do you think I could have published the *Star* so long without the aid and sympathy of my wife? No, indeed. Yet, I receive all the credit.”46

Women during the period sometimes did serve a useful ancillary role in politics, because they were perceived as authorities on moral behavior. But their contributions were usually only accepted in so far as they bore upon the traditionally feminine sphere of family life. They directed public opinion on subjects like charity and the suppression of vice, both of which single-taxers deplored as paternalistic palliatives, distracting citizens from the root cause of immorality. While the contemporary female anarchist Emma Goldman obtained fame as an opponent of charity and moral legislation, it was not the sort of notoriety that any candidate for elected office would covet.47

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46 William Barry to William U’Ren, Jan. 21, 1913, box 14, Barry Papers.
The ideological connection between Georgism and criminal law reform was more substantial and direct than its relationship to gender equality. Not only had George indicted poverty as the cause of crime, he had admitted to nearly resorting to murder to feed his family. Clarence Darrow developed a critique of punitive justice, including the death penalty and imprisonment, based on George’s ideas. In Darrow’s youth his house had been a way station for abolitionists, but since then he had devoted his life to improving the economic status of his family through legal practice, still a preferred avenue for poor men to acquire wealth, because a degree was not required for entrance into the profession.\textsuperscript{48} Then he read \textit{Progress and Poverty}, which served as his “introduction to what I believe are revolutionary ideas.” He added that “where I may wander in all my fields of intellectual thought and discussion in which I am prone to wander, I believe that what I learned here will remain with me as a fundamental guide to the end.”\textsuperscript{49} At a speech to prisoners in Chicago he linked poverty to crime and speculated that the free land of the frontier had served to mitigate the incidence of crime. Replicating those conditions would have the same effect:

\begin{quote}
I will guarantee to take from this jail, or any jail in the world, five hundred men who have been the worst criminals and lawbreakers who got into jail, and I will go down to our lowest streets and take five hundred of the most abandoned prostitutes, and go out somewhere where there is plenty of land, and they will be as good people as the average of the community.
\end{quote}

He told the crowd that prison was not the answer to their problems: “The only way in the world to abolish crime and criminals is to abolish the big ones and the little ones together …. Abolish

\textsuperscript{49} Clarence Darrow, “Henry George Address at Henry George Anniversary Dinner of the Single Tax Club Chicago” \textit{Everyman} (Sep-Oct 1913), 17-23.
the right of private ownership of land, abolish monopoly, make the world partners in production….”

Economic reform, not punishment, was the optimal means of abolishing crime.

Clarence Darrow, like many other contemporary single-taxers, was influenced in this direction by an extreme Georgist philosophy of non-resistance, propagated by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. The canonical text in what came to be known as the “Golden Rule” school of thought was Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, wherein an aristocrat becomes interested in the fate of a poor prostitute, converts to Georgism, distributes his land on the basis of the single tax; and ultimately concludes that “society and order in general, exist not because of these lawful criminals who judge and punish others, but because in spite of men being thus depraved they still pity and love one another.”

Because it violated the dictum of turning the other cheek, the judicial system was morally corrupt, but as George predicted, it would gradually disappear after the implementation of the single tax spread prosperity, making it, in Tolstoy’s words, “possible for men to be honest, just, reasonable, and noble.”

That Tolstoy so directly juxtaposed Georgism to his philosophy of nonresistance in *Resurrection* is likely because land nationalization seemed to offer the ideal conditions for eliminating the conditions that necessitated a criminal justice system. Because Tolstoyan nonresistance resonated so well with many of the values of Georgism, it rapidly developed a strong current of support among American single-taxers.

In practice these tendencies manifested themselves in reforms that reoriented the justice system from punishment to rehabilitation. Ben Lindsey, famous for promoting juvenile courts,

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was coy about his attachment to George, but appears to have shared Darrow’s faith. He was first introduced to George in 1890, before he began his illustrious career. In his public speeches, he would point to the way “‘special privileges’ and the monopoly of the people’s natural resources… corrupt men, women and children.” \(^5^3\) Lindsey’s first book, *The Beast* meticulously traces how, during the course of his public work, he had come to “see the cat,” though he does not mention George specifically in evoking the movement idiom.\(^5^4\) Lindsey was involved in organizational work for the single tax as a participant in Fels Fund conventions, but he kept his rhetoric decidedly oblique outside of private correspondence.\(^5^5\) To the evangelist Billy Sunday he wrote:

> If you could only point out a little more definitely the fundamental causes of poverty and injustice and therefore one of the chief causes of sin, you would perhaps be doing in this world one of the greatest works since Christ came to earth. I wish you would read ‘Social Problems’ and ‘Progress and Poverty’ by Henry George.\(^5^6\)

Lindsey created his juvenile court contemporaneously with another in Chicago, both of which claimed to be the first. By and large they were actually contemporaneous, but Lindsey’s experiment better anticipated later juvenile courts by establishing the principal that young offenders should be reformed rather than punished. Lindsey created an informal court atmosphere in which he exercised considerable leeway to bend the law for the child’s benefit. Largely forgotten today, at the time Lindsey’s court served as a model for many throughout the country and was studied by foreign governments.\(^5^7\)

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\(^5^3\) Address by Ben Lindsey at Citizens Mass Meeting, Nov. 21, 1909, box 277, Ben Lindsey Papers, Library of Congress.


\(^5^5\) *The Single Tax Conference: Held in New York City Nov. 19 and 20, 1910* (Cincinnati: Fels Fund Commission, 1911), 40.


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The ultimate objective of George’s economic policies was to foster a citizenry with the time and resources to educate itself for democratic politics. Not surprisingly then, many single-taxers saw education as an essential part of their philosophy. George Foster Peabody, said, in reference to his “long-time interest in and acceptance of the general principles laid down by Henry George” that

These economic principles, which I have so long held to be true, are the main-spring of my activity in urging educational opportunities, especially in the South, and of my continued deep interest in politics. I am convinced that the future successful progress of our great experiment in democracy is closely related to the continued spread and deepening of educational development of the South.  

Peabody was an important philanthropist and activist for the cause of African-American and Southern education. His philanthropy would earn him the position of Treasurer at Penn Normal Industrial and Agricultural School and trusteeships at a litany of schools: Hampton, Tuskegee Institute, Colorado College, Fort Valley Normal and Industrial Institute, and the University of Georgia. At the University of Georgia he played a pivotal role in creating the schools of agriculture and forestry, the latter of which bears his name. Peabody also engaged in political action on behalf of education. He served as treasurer and financier of the Southern Education Board, which lobbied local governments for higher taxes to fund education.  

Often this interest in education took a form consistent with George’s critique of professional authority. In 1907 the members of Fairhope invited the education reformer Marietta Johnson to open a school; the Georgist philanthropist Joseph Fels provided one thousand dollars for support. The Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education became one of the leading progressive educational institutions in the nation. Johnson saw self-directed education as a way

59 Louise Ware, George Foster Peabody: Banker, Philanthropist, Publicist (Athens: University of Georgia, 1951).  
60 Marietta Johnson, Thirty Years with an Idea (University of Alabama Press, 1974), 14, 34.
to facilitate the single tax. She suggested that “If sincerity and openness of mind could be preserved in every school by eliminating external standards” it would ameliorate the “inability of the man in the street to recognize the fundamental injustice of our monopolistic economic order.”  

Like George, who spent much of his career lambasting professional economists, Johnson believed that hierarchical education enshrined elite interests. She also saw education as the ultimate end of Georgism:

Henry George long ago pointed out that all social problems are due to ignorance, indifference, or contempt of human rights. A fully developed individual earnestly seeks to understand the rights of others, and is keenly interested to see that fundamental justice prevails. The waves of crime which so often sweep over us are proof of wrong conditions of growth. All bitterness in religious controversy indicates arrested development. All race prejudice is also due to underdevelopment; our international problems will be solved when man comes into the full statue of manhood.

Johnson’s school received its most important endorsement from John Dewey who claimed that “On the whole, it’s the best I’ve ever seen.”

Dewey himself saw Georgism as integrally connected to his thoughts on social intelligence. The philosopher of progressive education explained his attraction to George as a function of his focus on the “imponderables:”

Henry George… puts stress upon the fact that community life increases land value because it opens a ‘wider, fuller, and more varied lire.’ So that the desire to share in the higher values which the community brings with it is a decisive factor in raising the rental value of land. And it is because the present system not only depresses the material status of the mass of the population, but especially because it renders one-sided and inequitable the people’s share in these higher values that we find in ‘Progress and Poverty’ the analysis of the scientist combined with the sympathies of a great lover of mankind.
Behind Dewey’s difficult prose was the Georgist argument that the growth of culture and learning increased land values in centralized areas, segregating the poor geographically from high culture. Whereas Hamlin Garland wrote about the frontier as a cultural no man’s land, populated by those who could not afford rent in civilization, Dewey placed emphasis on the way that the poor were segregated into slums, wherein they were hermeneutically sealed off from the educational opportunities of the city. 65 Breaking the grasp of land monopoly, therefore, was necessary for creating a society in which various groups intermingled to build a higher, more democratic social intelligence.

While many of the ideological commitments that single-taxers held – like education and democratization – were by no means extraordinary for liberal-minded Americans of the era, their views of racial equality distinguished them from their contemporaries. 66 The entire edifice of George’s philosophy rested on the principle that environment, not biology, was the driving force in social development; to support that assertion in Progress and Poverty he had pointed optimistically to indications that young black students outperformed young white students until social factors caused them to diverge. 67 In the 1886 campaign, when George was asked by a black supporter if he would be able to do anything about landlords’ refusal to rent to people of color, he responded “I think so. If you will notice the men into whose minds these ideas have entered, you will find them rising above all prejudices of nationality, or race, or color, because the bottom principles for which we contend – the whole basis of the theory – is that we are all the equal creatures of a common God. As these ideas grow in the mind, so appears the sentiment of

67 George, Progress and Poverty, 441.
the brotherhood of man.” In Social Problems, he obliquely objected to racial discrimination in public accommodations. George’s followers realized this policy, when, at one of the annual meeting of the Fels Fund, black delegates were denied service at the hotel hosting the event. The entire convention was moved to a more tolerant venue, which was as close to a movement wide condemnation of segregation as was possible. Such an attitude might not be terribly surprising for Louis Post, who early in his life had worked for the Freedman’s Bureau, or for Brand Whitlock, who idealized his grandfather for engaging in a gun fight with authorities to help fugitive slaves evade the law – but it was A. B. du Pont, born and raised in the South, who led the movement to change the location of the convention.

Du Pont was not special; when George’s economic views crossed the Mason-Dixon Line they often brought racial liberalism with them. William Lloyd Garrison II observed of Tom Johnson that “born in a slaveholding state and in a family actively identified with the Confederate cause, he has emancipated himself from his early influences and stands unflinchingly for universal rights, regardless of race, sex, color or condition. A disciple and close friend of Henry George ... he has grasped the fundamental principle upon which alone self-government can rest.” Similarly George Peabody, from Georgia, became one of the nation’s largest contributors to black educational uplift; Newton Baker, a Virginian by birth, proposed to

68 Post, The George Hewitt Campaign, 89.
69 The quote is uncharacteristically obscure for that book, but that is to be expected for such a politically sensitive subject: “Thus when one opens a store or an inn, or establishes a regular carriage of passengers or goods, or devotes himself to a special trade or profession of which all may have need” it “leads to the establishment of habits and customs which make resort to his a necessity to others, and which would put those who were denied this resort at a great disadvantage as compared with other individuals. Thus to secure equality it becomes necessary to so limit liberty of action as to oblige those who thus take upon themselves quasi-public functions to serve without discrimination those who may apply to them upon customary conditions.” George, Social Problems, 240.
70 Public, June 28, 1919.
71 Public, Sept. 27, 1902.
the Carnegie Foundation a study of racial problems in the United States, which, written by Gunnar Myrdal, became the groundbreaking work, *American Dilemma*. George Creel was a distant cousin of Stonewall Jackson, his family was ruined financially by emancipation, and his relatives fled to Mexico rather than live under Yankee dominion. Yet, even with this background Creel spent the prime of his political career denouncing preachers of racial hatred, including the KKK, as not just wrong-headed, but as fundamentally un-American.

This rare olive branch of racial amenity did not go unnoticed. The Colored Farmer’s Alliance was one of the first large, national organizations to give the single tax an unmitigated endorsement, though it is hard to disentangle how much of this was due to George’s racial liberalism, and how much was due to the economic interest that tenant farmers had in taxing large estates out of existence. T. Thomas Fortune, who for a brief period at the turn of the century was perhaps the leading black journalist in the nation, came to the conclusion after reading George that private property in land was the central axis for black oppression. Hubert Harrison, one of the leading minds of the Harlem Renaissance, engaged in occasional single-tax work. Ideologically, Harrison was more at home with the Socialist Party, and spent the majority of his political career working with them, but felt compelled to leave because of their abdication to what he called “Southernism” – a mixture of socialism and white supremacy that in various forms pervaded the party. In contrast, the Single Tax Party offered Harrison a candidacy as State Senator, money for speaking engagements, assistance publishing his book, and gifts.

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Harrison had declared years before that he did not believe in the single tax, but he found the group more hospitable than its socialist competitors and in return helped them in their outreach to the black community.\footnote{Jeffery Perry, \textit{Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Renaissance} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). October 14- November 2\textsuperscript{nd} 1922, box 9, folder 1, Hubert Harrison Papers, Columbia University Library.}

An environmentally driven interpretation of social development carried with it a critique of another of the great fads of progressivism—eugenics.\footnote{Thomas Leonard, “Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era,” \textit{American Economic Association} 19, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 207-224.} Brand Whitlock hoped the field would expand practical knowledge of venereal disease, but otherwise sarcastically observed that it was “probable that the world will not be saved by the new race of athletes that are scientifically to be bred, and may still have some use in its affairs for the minds of the cripples who in all times have contributed so much to its advancement.”\footnote{Brand Whitlock, \textit{Forty Years of It} (New York: Appleton 1925), 292.} Louis Post noted that, according to phrenology, Lincoln’s head was not only too small for his body, but particularly deficit in the realms of causality and comparison, where every reasonable person would recognize him to be particularly gifted.\footnote{Public, Apr. 30, 1898, 14.} Clarence Darrow remembered that George had come from a lower class family. On this basis he concluded that “Nature somehow, does not seem to know much about eugenics.” He predicted that “if the people who are standing for all the fads as they come along, especially eugenics, could have their way and have a political convention to determine the fathers and mothers of the human race, then it is pretty sure that few of the great would be born.”\footnote{Clarence Darrow, “Henry George Address at Henry George Anniversary Dinner of the Single tax Club Chicago,” \textit{Everyman} (Sep-Oct 1913), 17.} That single-taxers as a group rejected one of the most popular causes of the progressive movement suggests the fallacy of understanding them simply as progressives who believed land should be taxed.
A complete consensus on something as volatile and ingrained as race was improbable, but fascinatingly the axis along which questions of race were most divisive was not the Mason Dixon Line, but rather the continental divide. The leaders of the movement in California, notably James Barry and James Maguire, were old associates of George from his time as a leader of anti-Chinese nativism. In 1893 Maguire introduced restrictive legislation into the House of Representatives, causing William Lloyd Garrison II to respond in print with a harsh attack on the Californian. George intervened to discourage infighting, only to receive the stern rebuke from Garrison that “It is not a difference of opinion but a question of human rights.” Garrison indicated furthermore that Maguire’s agitation was out of line with the national movement and its philosophy:

You minimize the probability of dissension in the Single Tax ranks. Already it is cropping out. The men and women who were drawn to your great truth by its universality and its brotherly love for all mankind are beginning to measure such professions with the defense of such a flagrant contradiction as the Geary Act…I have no hesitation in saying that the majority of single taxers, outside of California, will be a unit in this regard.  

George seems to have been so thoroughly chastised that he refrained from arguing further with Garrison. Garrison’s prediction that the national movement would stand against any association with anti-immigrant sentiment was justified in later years. When James Barry’s paper *The Star* began to push the issue again in 1902, *The Public* flatly rejected nativism as “racial intolerance.”

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81 William Lloyd Garrison to Henry George, Dec. 4, 1893, Reel 6, George Papers. It is worth noting that John Thomas used quotes from this correspondence to suggest that George was sympathetic with Barry and Maguire on this point. This is terribly unclear because we do not have George’s original letter, only what Garrison quotes of it. The fact that Garrison frames it the debate as a question of “opinion” vs. “human rights” suggests that George took the middle of the road position that it was a question of popular preference rather than natural law.

82 *Public*, Jan 18, 1902. Even the California single-taxers believed that environment was more important than heredity. In at least once case, this faith in the single-taxes universal redemptive power was precisely what incensed their ethno-nationalism. “In the distant future some dark skinned race, digging into the ruins of the white race, will ‘discover’ a simple, common-sense method of taxation. That will be after all the wrong methods have
controversy, it is perhaps indicative of George’s personal influence that one of its most significant schisms occurred along a fault line established by one of his own greatest intellectual inconsistencies.

The temptation to fight for the single tax along tangential lines or to engage in intermediate reforms was fostered by the large presence of middle-class Americans for whom the radicalism of the single tax was literally bad for business. One contributor to the *Star* requested that James Barry, “kill in that article my reference to a statement of the fact that I am a Single Taxer,” adding that “the publication of it might seriously interfere with some business negotiations I have on hand in San Francisco. It is not that I am ashamed of being a Single Taxer, but that some other men, whose minds I cannot control, have certain prejudices.”

Retaliation against single-tax businessmen was often economically devastating. When the Oregon reformer William U’Ren began campaigning for the single tax he lost so many clients that his law firm was unable to cover office expenses. Many former clients bluntly declared that they would not come back while U’Ren was “working for Singletax.” U’Ren believed his attachment to George was the only thing preventing him from becoming a US Senator. Lincoln Steffens promised to refrain from discussions of radicalism even in private correspondence with Francis Heney, after that Californian reformer was shot for prosecuting political graft in San Francisco. It is no accident that two of the most outspoken single-taxers, George Peabody and Tom Johnson, were also wealthy enough to be immune from financial retaliation.

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83 William Eggleston to Barry, May 12, 1926, box 4, Barry Papers, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.
84 William U’Ren to Joseph Fels and Daniel Kiefer, Jan. 9, 1913, Box 14, Barry Papers.
85 Lincoln Steffens to Francis Heney, May 5, 1909, Steffens Papers, Columbia University Library.
86 In fact, directly before beginning his mayoral career “Mayor Johnson had lost one fortune and gained another; and ... adjust[ed] the latter so that could not be financially intimated.” *Public* July, 21 1911.
Most of George’s followers reconciled their political and business commitments by making their Georgist faith more subtle. J. J. Pastoriza, elected mayor of Houston in 1917, looked back at both his own career and the broader tendencies in the movement. He complained:

Later on I saw clearly that we Singletaxers acted as though we were really afraid that we might get the Singletax, so we kept on giving it to our auditors in sugar-coated doses, as though we were ashamed of the philosophy which we had espoused. Within the past few years I have decided that we have all made a mistake and should correct it at once by preaching the Singletax as written by Henry George, or stop claiming that we are Singletaxers.87

The most visceral opponent of this species of accommodation was Antonio Bastida, a Cuban-American financier, active in the New York Single Tax Club since George’s first mayoral run. In a pamphlet entitled “Emasculated Single-Tax or Common Property in Land,” Bastida asked “Are Single Taxers known as abolitionist of property in land? Does the democratic party reward confessed abolitionists of private property in land with appointments and nominations… the truth is Single Taxers are not preaching the abolition of private property in land.” He traced the problem back to Thomas Shearmam’s initial coinage of the term “single-tax,” which inaugurated efforts to hide the true meaning of their philosophy behind a moderate veneer. He parodied their routine rhetorical evasions with a section devoted to translating single-tax sayings to express their real, radical implications. Underlying Bastida’s concern was a stifling need to conform to the dictates of electoral politics. He criticized one single-tax politician who had denied the charge that he intended to confiscate land. Such a break in ranks, Bastida suggested, might be excusable because “as he failed of election he is not an Honorable, I may therefore possibly criticize him without being excommunicated.”88 Such exhortations however had little impact on

87 Public, Apr. 6, 1917.
88 Antonio Bastida, “Emasculated Single Tax or Common Property in Land” Oct. 27, 1914, 3, 5-6, box 126, Amost Pinchot Papers.
the wider community of single-taxers, who, according to Brand Whitlock, were “the most opportunistic of reformers.”

Even with these accommodations, single-taxers often sacrificed dearly for their beliefs. For, U’Ren, like many others, these sacrifices were justified because the single tax gave him “ideas and ideals worth living for, writing and fighting for.” He noted that single-taxers, like Senator Bourne of Oregon, had spent thousands, in Bourne’s case, approximately a hundred thousand dollars, for the cause they believed in, remaining “fully satisfied that the service rendered by him to the people was worth to him all it had cost.” Tom Johnson “got very full dividends for the money and the life he put into the work he loved…. From the banker’s standpoint he died on the red-ink side of the ledger, but he didn’t think so.”

James Barry diverted thousands of dollars a year from his printing business to fund The Star, was imprisoned by the Supreme Court of California for contempt of court, and spent $12,000 fighting the court, bringing his business to the brink of collapse. Still Berry felt “that I have gotten all back, with dividends regularly paid and interest compounded.”

Herbert Quick said of his faith “It changed my whole life. It was a barrier to advancement to the best places in my profession of the law, but it made my life richer in every other respect.”

The Public asked “What is it that leads men to brave the scorn, the hate, the persecution of mankind?” “The servants of Truth,” it answered, “are paid by the knowledge of the Truth, for them alone is it given to know the good from the bad, the right way from the wrong.”

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90 William U’Ren to Joseph Fels and Daniel Kiefer, Jan. 9, 1913, box 14, Barry Papers.
91 James Barry to William U’Ren, Jan. 21, 1913, box 14, Barry Papers, Bancroft Library.
92 “Extracts from the Henry George We Knew” Will Atkinson 1925-27, box 1, James Barry Papers.
93 Public, Nov. 17, 1900, 502.
Fin de siècle America was a place where such knowledge of good and evil had a
significance greater than fiduciary concerns. The Civil War had impressed upon Americans the
importance of great causes but social and scientific developments had left Americans bereft of
many of their traditional commitments. Darwin threw religious doctrine into question.
Industrialization and the rise of corporations undermined the independence of labor so highly
prized by Jeffersonians. Urbanization precipitated the decline of self-contained communities
with their stable value systems. New modes of transit and communication, like railroads and
telegraphs, reduced the cultural isolation and uniformity of small town America. Middle-class
affluence made struggle superfluous for a significant segment of the population.94 The single-tax
provided Americans with something to believe in when so many of their traditional faiths had
come into question.

In 1880 George Beard coined the term “neurasthenia” to describe the plight of civilized
Americans who lost the will to live. Many of the leading minds of the period experienced
symptoms, including William James, who spent five years as an invalid before resolving to
become a philosopher. In his new trade he became the leading proponent of pragmatism, a mode
of thought which emphasized the necessity of attaching oneself to a line of belief.95 He would

95 This is an admittedly reductionist interpretation. Any worthwhile school of thought is too complex to be
summarized in a line, so I am here emphasizing the feature most pertinent to my point. In fact, pragmatism is built
on two fundamental principles one of which undermines faith while the other of which reifies it. The first is that
established beliefs are mostly wrong and subject to constant revision, much as science is subject to constant
change. The other is that belief guides action in a way that makes it more powerful and obviates psychologically
unhealthy levels of doubt. The titles of the early texts of pragmatism very clearly point to the preeminent
importance of the second of these two principles, including “The Will to Believe,” ‘The Fixation of Belief,” and “The
Moral Equivalent of War.” James effectively became a leading figure in Protestantism, and even Pierce, who had
the most scientific orientation of the group, wrote “let a man venture into an unfamiliar field, or where his results
are to continually checked by experience, and all history shows that the most masculine intellect will oftimes lose

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famously justify Christian faith, not because it was true, but because it relieved a troubled mind.

Clarence Darrow hit upon the same problem, but resolved upon a different cure:

I have always believed in peace, in a way, but there is something worse than war—peace without purpose is worse than war, for it releases the petty and small and insignificant in man…. Men and nations must have an inspiration to live. Henry George had it….. We can learn from Henry George… that one must have a meaning, one must devote himself to something, or he cannot live.  

his orientation and waste his efforts in directions which bring him no nearer to his goal... he is like a ship in the open sea, with no one on board who understands the rules of navigation. And in such a case some general study of the guiding principles of reasoning would be sure to be found useful. Charles Sanders Peirce The Essential Peirce ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1:112-113. John Dewey was famously the inspiration for C. Wright Mills' critique of the empiricism of the 1950s. His contention that ideology is important in inspiring radical action and locating social injustice is of course one of the overarching arguments of this dissertation. I am effectively arguing that a group with a nearly religious ideological devotion played a disproportionate role in setting the agenda and leading the fights in an era of reform known for the primacy of technocrats. Kevin Mattson, Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism 1945-1970 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

Of course there is also an understanding of pragmatism's political impact which emphasis its second fundamental proposition, doubt. James Kloppenberg argues that uncertainty and accommodation defined the era by conflating these things with a political middle road between capitalism and socialism. This is founded on a false bipolarity that assumes there are only two ideologies; George is nothing if not ideological, but conforms to most of the essentials of the political current he describes. In fact many of the figures he describes are potentially subject to the charge of Georgism, up to and including perhaps his most important one. Dewey exhibited nothing of the anti-ideological, flexibility attributed to him when he attacked the New Deal on single-tax grounds: “Take the measures of the New Deal that are intended to improve present conditions. You will not find one that is not compromised, prejudices, yes, nullified by private monopolization of opportunity. Slum clearance and a vast housing program are necessary. But land owners without ones stroke of work, save writing their names to pieces of paper ... are going to appropriate the socially created new values. Take the T.V.A project, the most promising enterprise of the New Deal. The new values that will result from it are going to be absorbed by those who monopolize the land...” Ultimately, because both George and Dewey are looking for ideas that guide moral behavior, it is probably rarely of any practical political moment that one considers these ideas more or less eternal and fixed, the other sees them as contingent. Dewey writes about the differences between the two and why they ultimately don’t matter: “The importance of a knowledge of this underlying philosophy is urged in spite of the fact that the present writer does not believe in the conceptions of nature and natural rights which at first sight seem to be fundamental to the social philosophy of Henry George. For, as I see the matter, these conceptions are symbols expressed in the temporary vocabulary of a certain stage of human history of a truth which can be stated with other language without any serious injury to the general philosophy implied…. Personally, I have little difficulty in translating a considerable part of what George says on nature over into an assertion that economic phenomena as well as legal and political cannot be understood ... apart from ... human good; that is, part from moral considerations.” John Dewey, "Socialization of Ground Rent" The Collected works of John Dewey 1882-1953 ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2003), 31:256-257. John Dewey, “Forward to The Philosophy of Henry George” The Collected works of John Dewey 1882-1953 ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2003), 29:301-302. James T. Kloppenberg, Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Though (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Darrow’s statement could have been a direct response to William James’ essay “The Moral Equivalent of War.”

In his only dialogue, John Dewey—the foremost exponent of pragmatism in the twentieth century—explored how the single tax shared, despite differences, a similar emphasis on the importance of faith. In this text Dewey pit a materialist adherent to land nationalization against a group of idealist philosophers. The land nationalizer was informed that beneath his materialism was a faith “inspired by the divine vision of justice.” The interlocutor identified with Dewey’s pragmatism concluded in favor of the land nationalizer that “it is indeed true that problems are solved only where they arise – namely, in action.”

The Public praised Dewey’s article effusively for incorporating economic reform into academic philosophy. But the Georgist and the pragmatist in the discourse differed fundamentally; adherents of the former believed in a natural law that distinguished right from wrong. Pragmatists believed truth was contingent upon circumstances. However, both, during a period of widespread disillusionment, could agree on the need to coalesce around a fundamental faith that would serve as a guide for action.

Pragmatism and the single tax with their separate and rather different origins, were nevertheless congruent because they grew out of shared preoccupation with finding meaning in a world that had been stripped by modernity of its traditional moorings. George’s followers were both cognizant and expressive of the way that the single tax provided them with a

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99 Public, August 27, 1909.
psychologically comfortable sense of purpose. Herbert Bigelow, the preacher at the People’s Church in Cincinnati and one of Tom Johnson’s closest associates in Ohio, acknowledged:

I owe more to Henry George than to any other man, living or dead…. He has given me a purpose in life, something to work for which is eminently practicable, capable of immediate and progressive application, yet fundamental is its character, appealing to the loftiest patriotism and the purest religion.100

The single tax was “capable of immediate and progressive application” – that is to say one could take pleasure in realizing it through intermediate reforms like tax revisions and electoral changes. It was a philosophy of action. But it was particularly effective at addressing the dislocations of modernity because it adapted many traditional American faiths, including Christianity, liberalism, producerism, and Republicanism, to modern circumstances. In doing so it provided a bridge to the past flexible enough to accommodate the shocks of modernity. As Bigelow noted, it appealed to “the loftiest patriotism and purest religion,” but it did so in fundamentally new ways. It remade republican land policies for an urban setting, reduced religion to a loose, emotive call for social justice, and treated social norms as a mere manifestation of socio-economic conditions.

Many of the keenest observers of the early twentieth century pointed to this faith as the primary motive force for the reforms of the Progressive Era. Historians have not given much credence to these claims; one cited them as ipso facto evidence against the value of contemporary attributions of significance.101 There is an element of hyperbole to these statements and the broader outlines of them are simply impossible to verify. However, a closer look at these sources reveals fairly nuanced explanations for why Georgism was significant. None of them pretend—and some flatly deny—that the movement won an overwhelming following or that a national victory for land value taxation was ever an imminent possibility.

100 Public, Sept. 7 1901.
Instead they point, over and over again, to three arguments: George brought into public service many of the most “active” and “dynamic” political entrepreneurs of the period; his followers were particularly adept at “molding public opinion;” and George made people question the status quo in ways that would not have occurred to them otherwise. While these factors may not justify the claim that George was somehow responsible for progressivism, they were operative in the passage of many reforms, including the Australian ballot. (See Appendix A)

Referencing Newton Baker, Brand Whitlock, Lawson Purdy and William Jay Gaynor, a clique with which he was intimately connected, Albert Jay Nock testified that “Outside of the movement, or on the fringes of it, some of the ablest men in the country were ‘under conviction’ as old-time Methodists used to say.”102 The comparison between single-tax philosophy and religion was persistent. While they were oftentimes subtle about their beliefs for political purposes, mainstream supporters of George were deeply animated by his thought. It served as an orienting philosophy and a source of evangelical zeal in the thankless job of reconstructing America’s constitutionally inflexible state apparatus. That George, rather than someone else, served as inspiration for many of the most important political entrepreneurs during America’s Age of Reform is more than incidental. The result was a project of reform that focused less on class conflict or European style social welfare than on public rights to natural monopolies.

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When Progress and Poverty turned twenty-five, two hundred and fifty notables assembled in New York to celebrate. The list of attendees included many predictable names: Louis F. Post, Henry George Jr., William Lloyd Garrison II., Hamlin Garland—who served as toastmaster—and Daniel Beard. Congressman John De Witt Warner was there, as was Edwin

Markham, a young Samuel Seabury, Norman Hapgood, Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, P. F. Collier, and Judge Martin Keogh. George Bernard Shaw sent a letter. Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the *The Nation*, declined the opportunity to participate but reassured George Jr. that he “hope(d) the time will come when I can publically record my affection of your father’s many public” works.¹⁰³ The keynote speaker was William Jennings Bryan.

In his speech, Bryan spoke little of George, eschewing the predictable encomium. Instead Bryan began:

> The greatest day of my life was that day a little over a year ago which I spent with Tolstoy. There were two Americans of whom he spoke to me. The son of the one of them sits here at my right, the son of the other at my left. [Henry George Jr. and William Lloyd Garrison II] He spoke in the highest terms of Henry George and indorsed his economic theories. He showed me something he was reading, a preface to the life of the older Garrison. It is interesting to-night for me to meet here for the first time the poet whose words have touched the consciences of so many. It is a notable thing that there should be at this board the son of Henry George, the son of William Lloyd Garrison, and Edwin Markham.¹⁰⁴

Rather than single out the author of *Progress and Poverty*, Bryan chose to focus on the people in the room. George’s movement, not George, was the object of his praise. It was alive; it was known around the world; and even the voice of the Democratic Party could be awed by it. The title of Bryan’s speech was “equal opportunity.” He did not endorse the ideas of George, but he made it evident that he shared his faith in that value. It was no political program, but it was enough for a working coalition.

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¹⁰³ Oswald Garrison Villard to Henry George Jr., Dec. 25, 1904, box 14, Henry George Papers. The word followed “public” in the quote was illegible, but the quote continued “the greatest of which ... (illegible) Free Trade or Protection.”

Chapter V
A Great and Glorious City
The Single Tax and Urban Reform in Ohio

I cannot play upon any stringed instrument; but I can tell you how of a small village to make a great and glorious city.

Epigraph to Book IX of Progress and Poverty, “Effects of the Remedy” —
Attributed to Themistocles

The novel, the theater, architecture, decoration, poetry, the form of the essay, sex, the family, religion, history, even clothes, have been modified and liberated since Tom Johnson and the ‘interests’ wrestled naked in the public streets of Cleveland.

Stuart Chase, (1926).

Before his death, Henry George purchased a plot in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn directly adjacent to the family plot of Tom L. Johnson. He chose to be buried by Johnson’s side because after Johnson’s congressional career it was obvious that the former streetcar magnate would be the man to bring his philosophy into practical politics. Johnson continued—and surpassed—George’s legacy as a mayoral candidate; he became the hegemonic political force in one of America’s largest cities, a model for other mayors around the country, and one of the more successful municipal statesmen the country had ever seen. He would execute a great variety of the ideas that George first espoused, serving as a model that would often be returned to for what they should look like in practice. While some historians have struggled to see in this record something other than the realization of George’s ideas, those efforts are deeply flawed.

A powerful set of factors bound the single tax, from George to Johnson, to the current of municipal reform. Single-taxers saw the city as the cradle of democracy, a place where culture and society were centralized so as to foster popular edification. There they were able to appeal more effectively to the issue of rent and to exercise direct control over the property tax system.

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1 George, Progress and Poverty, 432.
2 “Where Are the Pre-war Radicals?” Survey Geographic, February 1926, 563-4.
Outside of cities, a higher ratio of property owners, fearful of taxes levied on their land, proved an insurmountable barrier to statewide power. In the ensuing conflict between municipal and state governments, single-taxers labored to expand the power of their enclaves around a rhetoric of local control, even an idea of semi-sovereign democratic city-states that harkened back to ancient Greece and the Renaissance. Cleveland became a national experiment station, popularizing the principle of urban home rule, municipal ownership of utilities, and a litany of other new inventions. Most importantly, perhaps, Johnson took an industrial center, whose working class voters had believed that their prosperity was dependent upon regressive tariffs that kept the jobs safe and demonstrated that taxes on the wealthy could be used to fund valuable new social services.

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In July of 1900, the Democrats met in Kansas City to renominate William Jennings Bryan for President. Tom Johnson, a delegate to the convention, took the stage to present a bust of the candidate sculpted by Richard George, son of Henry George. The symbolic gesture underscored the alliance between Johnson’s movement and the Democratic Party. Many of the prominent signatories of the petition against hitching the movement to Bryan in 1896, including E. J. Shriver and John Dewitt Warner, now backed Bryan; even William Lloyd Garrison II bolted the party of abolition. The rest of the American people, however, did not follow; Bryan lost in a landslide. While the years after George’s 1886 mayoral election have been depicted as a nadir for the movement, single-taxers held several congressional seats through the 1890s. Attached to a Democratic Party whose ties to urban voters had been severed by the Bryan’s 1896 campaign, they had one – Robert Barker of Brooklyn, New York.

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3 Public, July 7th 1900.
4 Public, July 14, 1900 & Sept. 1, 1900.
The principle reason that single-taxers now flocked to the Democratic Party was Republican William McKinley’s plan to annex the Philippines, assailed by Bryan as a blatant foray into imperialism. The single tax had obtained prominence because of its perceived congruence with Irish nationalism and most of George’s followers saw colonization as an outgrowth of economic privilege. Land rights themselves had typically been obtained by conquest. The *Johnstown Democrat* explained: “every single taxer understands, that imperialism has but one spur—and that is greed…. It has gone for loot. It has gone to grab franchises, to gobble up land, to appropriate valuable natural opportunities, to grasp new privileges and through these to exploit labor.” The paper, edited by future congressman Warren Worth Bailey, then asked, “But what would happen to adventurers if here at home a rear fire should be poured in upon the whole fabric of privilege?”

The most sophisticated analysis of colonialism came from the British economist J. A. Hobson, whose canonical work, *Imperialism*, was also the basis for Vladimir Lenin’s theory of imperialism. Hobson argued that economic inequality created a dearth of consumer demand and that corporations lobbied governments to conquer other nations as an outlet for surplus goods. To remedy the situation, he recommended “A sound system of taxation,” which he defined as one based almost exclusively on “unearned increments of land values” that would “strike at the very root of the malady” by rectifying the imbalance of supply and demand. Within a year of its publication in 1902, the Tulane Professor James Dillard introduced readers of *The Public* to Hobson’s theory.

The bullet, fired by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, that killed President McKinley and put Theodore Roosevelt into the Oval Office, is sometimes perceived as inaugurating

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5 *Public*, May 17, 1902.
7 *Public*, May 30, 1903.
progressivism. \(^8\) Roosevelt’s appeal, however, was decidedly muted among single-taxers, who largely adhered to the Democratic Party and Bryan, even though the party was marginalized in national elections. Louis Post immediately recognized in Roosevelt’s “strenuous life” a jingoistic thirst for war that would not be quenched with island dependencies but would ultimately demand combat with Europe. \(^9\) The Republican Party remained the high tariff party, which were antithetical both to George’s faith in open markets and hopes for internal, progressive taxation. While Roosevelt, like single-taxers, impugned monopoly, he fought for regulation, which Georgists believed would become a tool for the further aggrandizement of those with the wealth and power to manipulate legal structures. More appealing, in fact, was Roosevelt’s conservationism, considered by Georgists like William Kent as a step in the direction of government ownership of land. Still, only a small minority of single-taxers made their way back to the party that, with its abolitionist past, had once been the natural home for figures like Louis Post and William Lloyd Garrison II.

Most fundamentally, that single-taxers were attached to a party hobbled on the national level was of little moment to a group whose principal concern was the essentially local institution of property taxation. Even in Protection or Free Trade, which was aimed at influencing national politics, George confessed that “In the United States the most direct way of moving on property in land is through local taxation…. And that is doubtless the way in which

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\(^8\) For the clearest articulation of this idea see: Eric Rauchway, Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt’s America (New York: Macmillan, 2007). Of course, even here it is understood that there were forces already at foot compelling the nation toward progressivism. The chance contingency of McKinley’s assassination did allow that movement to obtain national authority in a way that it otherwise showed little likelihood of doing in the imminent future. But as I indicate here, there was a very different form of progressivism already developing on the local level.

\(^9\) “War with European powers would foster the strenuous life among our young men much better than the slaughter of little brown fellows like rabbits in a corral.” Public, July 14, 1900.
the final and decisive advance will be made.” The tariff question was relevant primarily for propaganda purposes, because “a question can be brought into discussion much more quickly and thoroughly as a national than as a local question.”

Even as the tariff debate was raging, Johnson chose to dedicate a major portion of his congressional career to municipal taxation. He joined the Committee of the District of Columbia, where he lobbied for and led the Select Committee to Investigate Tax Assessments in the District of Columbia. His committee’s report claimed that land values in the District were under-assessed by $224,000,000. Assessors refused to entirely rectify the shortfall, but they did increase assessments by 25%, including a $125,000,000 increase on the assessments of land value. Later the Bureau of the Census conducted a study demonstrating that in 1900 real property was assessed, on average, at 59.4% of its actual value; in Washington D.C. it was assessed at 80.4%, far closer to actual value than anywhere else in the country. Johnson left Congress confident that “there is not much to be done there. The place to begin is in the city.”

The Governor’s Mansion would perhaps have been the best destination for anyone hoping to reform the property tax, but state office proved difficult for single-taxers to obtain over the stalwart opposition of farmers. In 1898, California’s Democrats nominated for Governor James Maguire, a blacksmith turned lawyer who had worked with George as he was drafting Progress and Poverty. Republicans targeted Maguire for his professed faith in the single tax, even including a plank in their platform denouncing George’s plan. It would greatly injure small farmers, they claimed. Maguire apparently sensed that he was vulnerable on this point, because

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10 George, Protection or Free Trade, 321.
rather than defend his case he argued that the single tax was unconstitutional in California, so the only real issue in the campaign was public ownership of railroads. Maguire lost across the state, even in his home district of San Francisco. This defeat was abetted by a number of factors, including the patriotic appeal of the Republican Party, fresh off a victory in the Spanish American War. Also Maguire, a lapsed Catholic, lost every side of the religious issue. This perhaps portended the perennial difficulties that this group of liberal republicans, fixated on individualism and the transcendence of group interest, would have navigating identity politics.

A more direct indictment of the single tax’s prospect with farmers was its defeat in Colorado. There James Bucklin, a Democratic State Senator – like many single-taxers recently converted from the Republican Party – convinced legislators to authorize a study of land value taxation in Australia and New Zealand. The favorable report inspired the State Legislature to move forward with a constitutional amendment for local option in taxation. This amendment went to referendum, where it was assailed as a step in the direction of the single tax and lost rural districts in a landslide, though it was a rather moderate form, merely allowing local governments to determine their own systems of taxation.

Still, the dream of state power was appealing to Georgists, so much so that in 1898, The Public was too preoccupied with the Maguire race to give more than passing notice to first stirrings of municipal radicalism in Ohio. That year Samuel Jones was elected mayor of Toledo. Jones had amassed a fortune in oil and then embarked on a career in manufacturing. He was taken aback, however, by the hardships his workers endured following the Panic of 1893. He went in search of a new philosophy and found the Christian radicalism of George Herron and Leo Tolstoy. Imitating Tolstoy’s decision to forfeit his land, Jones invested the profits from his

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Acme Sucker Rod Company in benevolent projects, including a school, park, auditorium, higher wages, eight-hour days, paid vacations and a cooperative insurance system. Samuel “Golden Rule” Jones – a moniker that came to embody for an American audience Tolstoy’s doctrine of Christian non-resistance—was so thoroughly opposed to coercion that he refused to make his employees clock in. Nor did he institute any provision for fraud protection in his co-operative insurance.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps the most idiosyncratic elected official the country has ever seen, he was a vegetarian and was prone to meditate—even give public speeches—standing on his head. His attire was that of a Gilded Age Bohemian, marked by a “flowing cravat” of the sort which Brand Whitlock observed “for some … reason artists and reformers wear.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{The Public} also perhaps gave little notice to Jones initially because it was – and still is – hard to discern how well he adhered to their doctrine. Jones, with his post-millennialist faith in an earthly kingdom of god, targeted streetcars, land, and other natural monopolies as special privileges, but ultimately hoped that mankind would transcend the competitive market place altogether.\textsuperscript{17} His principles influences, George Herron and Tolstoy, were Christian single-taxers. To varying degrees members of this religious element, that could be said to include also J. Stitt Wilson and Walter Rauschenbusch, believed in a divinely ordained millennium that would transcend many of the institutions of a modern competitive market place that George held dear. In effect, this group provided a rare opportunity for socialism and the single tax to cooperate in a regular, systematic way; \textit{The Christian Socialist}, for example, would advertise itself in \textit{The Public} as an organ of single-tax though.\textsuperscript{18} Jones’ work alongside Johnson would be the preeminent example of this sort of alliance.

\textsuperscript{15} Samuel Jones, \textit{Letters of Love and Labor} (Toledo: The Franklin Printing and Engraving Co., 1900), 67.
\textsuperscript{17} Samuel Jones, \textit{The New Right} (New York: Eastern Book Concern 1899), 234-239.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Public}, Feb. 2, 1917, 120.
Philosophically, Jones was awkwardly positioned between socialism and the single tax, but by the beginning of the century his independence had brought him closer to the sphere of Tom Johnson. For, Eugene Debs, future Socialist Party presidential candidate, Jones was both full of potential but also dauntingly unorthodox. In 1899 he wrote Jones that, “I do not hesitate to say that I know of no man I would rather see President… provided only, you are the candidate of a Socialist Party and stand squarely on the platform of international socialism.” In 1900, Jones, troubled by the Spanish American War and the annexation of the Philippines, endorsed Bryan as the most viable remedy for imperialism. This was an intolerable violation of Marxist orthodoxy that evoked an onslaught of criticism from the socialist press and Jones’ one-time admirer Debs. Jones, who was fiercely independent politically, repudiated the attacks as “the spirit of Partyism,” and, essentially grouping the socialists with Tammany Hall, added “one kind of Partyism is as hopeless to me as another.” After that acrimonious incident, Jones gravitated toward Cleveland’s new mayor Tom Johnson, whom he dubbed “The freest man that is at all prominent in partisan politics in America.”

Cleveland at the turn of the century was a transit and industrial hub; the seventh largest city in population and rapidly growing, by 1920 it was America’s fifth city. Like the rest of Ohio, it leaned republican. Ohio’s principle political contribution to 1890s America was William McKinley, who rose to power in the state by campaigning for high tariffs. Mark Hanna, McKinley’s campaign manager, was president of one of the Cleveland’s local traction companies—Johnson had been president of the larger of the two concerns. Despite—or perhaps because of—Hanna’s influence, Cleveland had become a center of opposition to the private

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streetcar system. By the early 1890s the leading influence in anti-streetcar movement was the Franklin Club, a debate club for single-taxers, socialists, and Bellamyites—adherents of Edward Bellamy, who proposed a more or less distinctively American brand of socialism. The leading figures of the club were Peter Witt, Edmund Vail, and L. B. Tuckerman; the first of whom would go on to serve under Johnson.22

Johnson’s election as mayor was predictable after a series of streetcar strikes that encouraged Samuel Jones to run for Governor of Ohio. In 1899, a strike paralyzed the Big Consolidated Street Car Company. The company had increased the speed of cars, running over several pedestrians and sparking a series of bombings that inspired some commentators to compare the city to a war zone. When the company employed scab labor, residents attacked the trains. Hundreds were arrested in riots that persisted throughout the summer of 1899. When the strike was crushed, citizens turned to the ballot box; Jones ran for Governor on a platform of municipal ownership, losing in the state, but winning Cleveland’s Cuyahoga County with more votes than the Democratic and Republican candidates combined.23 A new, radical direction in Cleveland politics was all but inevitable after Jones demonstrated how powerful the cause of public ownership was in that city.

This does not, however, entirely substantiate a historical narrative wherein Johnson came to the mayoralty organically out of spontaneous protest, with little to no agency in shaping the direction of his administration. The single-taxer Peter Witt, an agonistic who had worked as a molder before he was blacklisted for his work with the Knights of Labor, was both the campaign manager for Jones in Cuyahoga county and President of the Cleveland’s Central Labor Union.24

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23 Pierce, Striking with the Ballot, 57-92.
With his biting, irrepressible rhetorical style, honed on top of the soapbox, Witt became one of City Hall’s most fearsome agitators after Johnson came to power. But, as Witt organized the events that precipitated Johnson’s candidacy, he was, in fact, already in the camp of the portly, little politician who stood to benefit. During Johnson’s congressional campaign several years prior, Witt had endeavored to heckle the streetcar magnate as he spoke to a crowd of onlookers. When Johnson invited Witt on stage to discuss issues, the two instantly became friends.\(^{25}\)

Considering Johnson’s penchant for sophisticated machinations and hard-ball politics, it is not outside of the realm of possibility that the preceding year’s unrest, or perhaps more especially the Jones’ campaign, evolved with some consciousness on Witt’s part of how it could facilitate Johnson’s return to Cleveland politics. Marx famously wrote that history repeats itself, fist as tragedy, then as farce. As much as the Johnson candidacy was made to resemble the forced recruitment of an unwilling candidate – like George’s 1886 mayoral run – most astute observers knew better. It was obvious to most that Johnson intended to run no later than 1900, when he gave up his business interests to return to Cleveland after a long absence.\(^{26}\)

Johnson feigned surprise when, in February of 1901, petitioners arrived at his door with 16,000 signatures demanding he stand for office, but less than a month prior he had already begun the campaign with a brilliantly subtle stunt.\(^{27}\) On January 25\(^{th}\), he attended negotiations over a new streetcar franchise in Columbus. The city was entertaining a twenty-five year franchise with five-cent fare, but Johnson intervened with a proposal to operate the franchise at three cents with the right to reduce fares further if the company received an annual return of at


\(^{27}\) *Public*, Feb. 23 1901.
least six percent. Sam Jones declared it “one of the epoch-making manifestations of twentieth century patriotism.” Though this was ostensibly an apolitical business proposition, it was reported at the time that “wily” Tom was meeting with Democratic Party leaders in the capitol in preparation for an undisclosed campaign. Columbus officials refused Johnson’s offer, which was entered too late to receive real consideration. But the rejection of a deal that was clearly better for the people of Columbus fed the narrative that franchises were awarded according to political contributions rather than the public interest. More importantly, it suggested that Johnson was willing to bet his fortune that he had the administrative ability to build an unprecedented three cent line, though he had in fact not really subjected himself to much risk of being saddled with the venture.

Johnson was unique among advocates of public ownership in that he had experience running a streetcar business. He leaned heavily upon this business experience for credibility, suggesting that “there are many propositions which any man would apply to his own business which it seems to me might well be applied to the business of running a city.” The Columbus stunt solidified his reputation as an expert businessman, eager to volunteer his skills for the public interest.

The construction of a three-cent streetcar system became the centerpiece of Johnson’s mayoral career and although it capitalized on a history of working-class discontent in Cleveland, it was not solely a product of that discontent. It was, in fact, proposed several years prior, principally because it was perceived as the streetcar policy that would best advance the cause of land value taxation. In 1898, The Public, which Johnson funded, explained the logic of fare

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29 Marietta Daily Leader, April 20, 1901.
reduction: “upon the principle of dividing to conquer it may be advisable to attack street monopolies first and real estate monopolies afterwards.” While utility taxes might seem to be the obvious tool for George’s followers, the “reduction of fares” was preferable because if the city derived revenue from streetcar operations it would decrease the incentive to tax land values. With a three-cent fare, “arrangements for municipal ownership can be made”—apparently because the owners would be less interested in holding onto the franchise or they would have fewer resources to lobby their case. Most importantly, “the consequent rise in land values, giving to landlords the money value of these municipal benefits, will popularize Henry George’s single tax reform.” Put simply, rents would rise around improved transit services, increasing discontent about the issue of urban tenancy and laying the foundation for the single tax.

Johnson won election in 1900 handily, despite his ideological refusal to appeal to interest groups. He was elected with comfortable plurality of 6,000 votes, carrying a solid majority of working class and immigrant voters, together with a reasonable number of the suburban voters, likely because they relied heavily upon the streetcar system for transportation and stood to profit from lower fares. He choose, however to follow in the footsteps of his prophet who, when accused of representing workingmen exclusively, famously replied “I am for men.” George’s retort was meant to rebut Hewitt’s attacks, but Johnson turned away compliments as well. During the course of his first campaign, he was described at an event as a “friend of the workingman.” He responded, “I don’t know as to that. But I know I’ve been a mighty good friend to Tom Johnson. I lowered the working hours of the men on my street railroad as I raised their wages,

30 Public, May 14, 1898.
31 Public, April, 13, 1901.
but I did not do that because I loved them. I did that because I thought it was the best thing for the company.”

Johnson stepped into gauntlet of class, ethnicity, and financial interest with a resolve to pay none of these forces much mind. Johnson would win Cleveland with the single tax or not at all.

From the moment he stepped into office Johnson showed a proclivity to put his philosophical objectives first, even placing them ahead of the procedure norms of democratic government. Instead of taking the customary two weeks to assume the mayoralty, he orchestrated an *ad hoc* inauguration within two days of the election. His predecessor, Mayor Farley, had granted valuable lakefront property to the Pennsylvanian Railroad Company. Johnson rushed to take office in time to veto the deal and preserve these public land rights, beginning the first of a litany of legal battles. He would subsequently face another law suit over his decision to use public money to fund a “tax school” led by Peter Witt, the agitator responsible for the streetcar strikes two years prior. The purpose of the tax school was to educate voters about disparities in tax assessment; it was the first of many efforts to realize George’s dream of state-sponsored political education, but, more so than most, it was subject to the charge of using public money to advance Johnson’s ideas. It was ultimately ruled unconstitutional.

To achieve his principle goal, reforming taxation, Johnson showed himself willing to use the sort of tactics associated with corrupt urban machines. He found that on this subject he would need to work through a local tax board with six members, to which he was only able to make two appointments a year. Not content with waiting, he offered two members lucrative government job and immediately opened up a majority on the commission, now decisively under his control.

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32 *Public*, March 23, 1901.
To carry outs reforms, Johnson recruited a cadre of highly effective, expert administrators. Among the more distinguished was Professor Edward Bemis, a former social scientist, statistician, Republican, and co-founder of the American Economic Association, who had lost his position at the University of Chicago because he supported the Pullman Strike.\textsuperscript{33} Expert government, for Johnson, was a means to public ownership. When Johnson put Bemis in charge of the water department, he observed that “It is especially important that a public service of this kind should be conducted along business rather than political lines, and there is no better recommendation for municipal ownership of other utilities than to show that the ones now operated are run in the interests of good service, with economical and efficient management.”\textsuperscript{34} Johnson ran his city like a business, because he believed government should actually run businesses. He broke with precedent by firing incompetent public officials from his own party and instituting merit hiring. To establish accountability, he kept an accounting of tasks assigned and the intended completion date. In order to create a true merit system, he stopped assessing public employee’s party contributions, which dried up campaign funds, but kept capable individuals in place, regardless of party affiliation. One of the more distinct successes in the new regime of competent bureaucracy was the Water Department. Under Bemis it constructed a water intake tunnel that cut the price of water, while reducing the frequency of typhoid to a tenth of its previous level.

Johnson’s recruitment of experts does not, however, mean that he belonged to the school of progressive thought – identified in some measure with the Republican Party – that believed the ills of urban government were attributable to the influence of ignorant foreigners, and the redemption of the cities was only realizable only by the return to power of middle-class,

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Public}, June 21, 1902.
educated, and preferably Anglo-American, experts. Johnson believed quite the opposite and spent the majority of his career assailing the most reputable, professional public authorities in the state as fundamentally corrupt. Much as George had argued that professors of political economy were corrupted by privilege, Johnson argued that experts were subject to the influence of the economic system. But, placed under the public heel, they could be useful instruments. In 1908, *The Public* explained:

> A businessman knows better than his experts what he wants accomplished, and to that extent he instructs his experts; but the experts know better how to get what he wants, and to that extent he abstains from interfering with them. So it is with government. The people know what they want better than any expert in government can tell them…. But with reference to the details of what they want, the experts know best. Given a nation in which the people regulate details, and you soon have chaos; given one in which experts determine policies, and you evolve bureaucracy, and ultimately absolutism.\(^{35}\)

According to this line of thought the expert needed to be restricted to a subordinate function, fulfilling the will of the people. Johnson’s utilitarian understanding of expertise meant that he also turned to non-professionals when they could produce results. Thus Johnson relied heavily upon characters, in whom he sensed natural ability, like Peter Witt and Chief Fred Kohler, though they had effectively no experience in public service.

If the public official was supposed to paint the broad strokes and find experts to realize them, in practice this meant that Johnson would school his subordinates in the philosophy of Henry George, and expect them to devise and implement policies consistent with that mode of thought. Johnson found and converted capable young men like Frederic C. Howe, a mugwumpish Republican, who had once seen “reform” principally as the return to power of the educated, urban elite. Howe, later a notable anti-imperialist, had once entertained “a strong belief

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35 *Public*, Nov 6, 1908.
in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon. English-speaking people were the chosen people; they
must be looked to to carry on civilization.”

When he met Johnson he was offended that the radical mayor believed “my class was not as important as I thought it was.” Elected to the City Council from the Republican Party, Howe was won over to the Democracy by Johnson and became one of his representatives both in the City Council and later in the State Assembly, as well as one of his chief propagandists.

Perhaps Johnson’s most gifted recruit was Howe’s college acquaintance, Newton Baker. Also a lawyer, his background was that of a conservative Southern Democrat. He had served as the Assistant to the Post Master General in the Cleveland Administration but bolted the Democratic Party when Bryan was nominated. After meeting Johnson, Baker’s ideas began a rapid transformation. Though perhaps a moderate on the issue of the single tax – he believed it should be applied gradually – he was totally devoted to the mayor, replying to a query about his ideological affiliation with the straightforward assertion “I am a follower of Tom Johnson.”

Johnson’s ideology was a sort of “Democratic Selective Socialism,” in that it would socialize “selective” monopolistic enterprises. Baker remained inflexibly conservative when the expansion of public power over any other sort of business was considered. Regarded by Oliver Wendell Holmes as one of the great lawyers of the age, Baker served as City Solicitor, in which post he acted as the one-man defense against an army of corporate lawyers challenging every action of the Johnson administration. After such a laborious workday Baker, a voracious reader, would come home, sit down with a book and “because he read rapidly, his eye

37 Kenneth Miller, From Progressive to New Dealer (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 69.
38 Warner, Progressivism in Ohio, 64.
comprehending sentence rather than words, a 300-page book was often devoured in an evening. As a matter of course, he perfected the extemporaneous mode of speech that Johnson and George were known for. George Creel wrote that:

Even in those early Cleveland years he had no need for notes, due to the orderly process of his trained mind, and with practice he has developed this facility to the point of genius. No matter how important the address, he speaks without a line of writing before him, yet when he has finished after half an hour or an hour, what he has said could be printed as literature without the change of a word.

Vitally, Johnson was not only building an administration but also a cadre of talented devotees to carry the single tax into the next generation.

Johnson’s first major engagement as mayor was an acrimonious battle with state assessors, who, he argued, undertaxed the property of powerful railroad corporations. He tasked Edward Bemis and Peter Witt with an extensive study of property taxes in Ohio that purported to show that while homes were assessed at 60% of their value, railroads were only assessed at 10% to 20%. Although Johnson thought taxation was a politically flawed way to handle urban streetcars, he believed taxing railroads was the only viable way for him to build a single-tax alliance with the state’s rural districts, where the railroads often constituted such a large percentage of local wealth that a heavy tax could relieve other taxpayers of most of their obligations.

He travelled to meetings of county and state auditors, with a trailing cohort that included his administration experts and occasionally fellow mayor Samuel Jones. There they not only

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42 He claimed these taxes would “be the thin edge of the single tax wedge. It will give us a hearing before the farmers that we could hardly have hoped to get in any other way....” *Public*, June 15 1901. While such taxes would also reduce the necessity of instituting land value taxation in rural districts as it would in urban areas, he clearly recognized this was not immediately feasible anyway, and that at least railroad taxes could provide a basis for some sort of state power. The closing “we could hardly have hoped to get in any other way,” clearly indicates that this might not have been his first choice in terms of political strategies, but that it was the only one he saw at his disposal.
presented hard evidence that railroad property was undervalued, they also impugned the honesty of the gentlemen on the board. Johnson presented statistical evidence suggesting that railroads corporations that gave free passes to assessors were taxed at a lower rate per mile than those that did not. In one particularly brazen moment, Johnson hired detectives to follow assessors and prove that they met with railroad executives to prepare their strategy in anticipation of one of these meetings. It might have been the highest political drama the institution of local assessment boards have ever witnessed and the press eagerly printed news about the retreat of the good men on the board. Rather than mount a substantive defense, they typically tried to ignore Johnson’s presentations, even running away from engagements. The *Stark County Democrat* joked that “All you’ve got to do to produce a scatterment in the throne room at the Stark county auditor’s office is to yell ‘Tom Johnson.’”

These confrontations might be seen as a moral crusade against the interests, but there were nuanced differences in economic philosophy at play. Uniformity clauses established that all property should be taxed equally, but this included only tangible items, not intangibles like stocks or bonds. The essence of the single-tax critique of both real estate and railroad assessments became that they treated improvements as the whole value to be taxed, ignoring the way that land values were affected by location. This was grossly unfair because it meant that a large property in the slum would be more severely taxed than smaller structures in fashionable neighborhoods.

Newton D. Baker explained to the State Board of Equalization that the standard method of railroad assessment was an impossible abstraction: “The franchise to be a body corporate is not taxable, but the value which property derives from its use, from being in a certain place at a

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43 *Stark County Democrat*, May 14, 1901.

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certain time, from its relation to other property, is in reality its entire value and no sound distinction can be made between the physical property and its time and place and use elements.”

Baker went on to compare the assessment process of the board to valuing a house exclusively on the basis of the raw materials from which it was made, without reference to location. Edward Bemis confirmed this judgment by citing the stock prices of the corporations in question. As Baker noted, the stocks were not taxable, but Bemis and Johnson argued that the stock market was setting a higher value for the corporations because it took into account the value of the franchises, which was really the value of the rights of way, or in essence the value of the land itself. If the constitution required all property to be taxed uniformly, this speculative value of land should be taxed but was not.

Though neglected by historians, valuation practice was an important corner of progressivism. State constitution hindered legislative changes to the tax system, so that technical disputes about assessment methodology became an important avenue for reform. In addition to setting tax assessments, utility valuation determined fair rate of return for utilities, both in everyday rate disputes and when purchasing franchises for public ownership. Valuation practice became the central point of contention in utility debates. The discourse remained surprisingly consistent from the days of Johnson’s earliest salvos in Cleveland to the Great Depression; Johnson’s own valuation experts, especially W. A. Somers and Edward Bemis, remained leading figures in the debate.

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44Public, Sept. 14, 1901.
The core dispute in assessment battles was whether utilities should be valued at their original cost of production or their reproduction cost, defined as the price of rebuilding the utilities at the time of assessment. Progressives argued against reproduction cost on the grounds that this mode of assessment would allow utilities to claim rising land values as a cost of business that could legally be levied in higher fares. Bemis argued, on the one hand, that utility land values were taxable assets, but, on the other, that they were not costs that should be considered in determining a fair rate of return. The value of land should belong to the people.\textsuperscript{47}

Johnson was unable to persuade the county and state assessment boards, but he had packed Cleveland’s Board of Equalization with his own men and would use it to enact land value taxation. In July of 1901, Cleveland’s board increased taxes on the Little Consolidated Street Car Company, of which Mark Hanna was President, from $595,000 to $6,000,000. Aside from increasing twelvefold the taxes of one of the Republican Party’s leading contributors, Johnson executed a system of local assessment, designed by W. A. Somers. As an assessor in St. Paul, Minnesota, Somers had experimented with a method for calculating land values.

The Somers System determined the average land value of a block with sale records, often by referencing the least improved lot. The most distinctive feature of the system was a set of maps that were used to determine the variation of land values within a block based off of standard formulas that accounted for statistically average premiums for space on the corner of a block or space abutting roads. After assessment, owners were allowed to state their case for lower valuations, with a representative of the city lobbying for high valuations and assessors

\textsuperscript{47} Proceedings of the Conference on Valuation Held in Philadelphia, no. 10\textsuperscript{th} to 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1916 (Philadelphia: Utilities Bureau, 1916).
acting as impartial judges. Johnson instituted a similar system for taxing riparian rights, assigning a value per square foot to water rights, and then assessing the premium for waterfront property according to the square footage of riparian rights granted by the ownership of the abutting property. At the same time, Johnson blocked all efforts to charge licensing fees for tradesmen, on the grounds that these would be a tax on labor.

While increasing taxes on property, Johnson worked to reduce the city’s revenue stream from vice enforcement. As the San Francisco Chronicle, observed, “whoever believes in… getting extra money from those who… engage in unsocial occupations involving police expenses… can never be ‘single-taxers.” Put simply, if law enforcement were a source of revenue, the single tax would be less than fully single. But single-taxers also tended to view criminals as victims of circumstance and considered many law enforcement practices a means to create corrupt, rent-seeking behavior. This followed on George’s argument that liquor regulations were a way to create artificial scarcity, increasing revenues, and spurring closer interaction between business and government.

48 With this letter I inclose you a pamphlet by W. A Somners, the tax expert of St. Paul Minn., which explains our method. Mr. Somners has been with us some time, giving instructions to the engineers and valuers, and as an improvement of his plan has adopted my suggestion to have a large blackboard at one end of a room in which a hundred people could be seated so as conveniently to see upon this blackboard a map drawn with white chalk showing about one-hundredth part of the city, in blocks, but without property lines. This blackboard will also exhibit in figures the value of the center lot on each of the four sides of each block, these valuations to be calculated in each instance upon the basis of the market price per front foot… of the least valuable property on the block and the side of the block to which the center lots so valued respectively belong. Center lots so valued will serve as standards or units for the valuation by comparison of the more valuable lots.” “...with the aid of the blackboard arrangement I have explained above, we hope to utilize it in such manner as to present the question of bare land valuation to an interested audience. The assessors are expected to act as judges; my representative with be prosecuting attorney, as it were, advocating high valuations; individual owners will be expected to defend low valuations if they can.” Public, June 15 1901.
49 Public, Sept. 21, 1901.
Not surprisingly, Johnson went to the workhouse within a year of taking office and released everyone detained for skipping rail fare, for non-payment of fees, and for inability to support their families.\textsuperscript{52} Johnson eliminated fines for saloons, gambling establishments and houses of ill-repute, with the unequivocal assertion that “if the police court had to depend for revenue upon fines imposed in this way it would have to go without pay.”\textsuperscript{53} Instead, Johnson posted police outside of particularly troublesome institutions and told them to take the names of customers. This sort of intimidation was said to dissuade most consumers, forcing institutions to comply with the law. Similarly, the bounty system, wherein judges were paid by case, was targeted by Johnson’s police commissioner Manuel Levine, for favoring the wealthy. Levine convicted twenty judges of colluding with debt collectors to wrongly convict poor defendants in an investigation that culminated in legislation creating a modern salaried judiciary.\textsuperscript{54} Levine continued his quest to transform the courts from a money making apparatus into a body where people all of all classes could obtain fair representation by introducing small claims court to Cleveland, the first major city in the nation to establish that institution.\textsuperscript{55}

In an age where progressives railed against liquor and “white-slavery” tolerance of vice was rare, but in neighboring Toledo, a variant of Tolstoy’s Georgist anarchism reigned.\textsuperscript{56} As an independent, Jones was an ineffectual economic reformer, forced to work with a partisan, Republican City Council. But, on issues of law and order, Jones had considerable executive

\textsuperscript{52} Public, Oct. 5, 1901.
\textsuperscript{53} Johnson, My Story, 122.
\textsuperscript{54} Master’s Thesis, Oberlin College, 1913, box 184, Moley Papers.
leeway. When the Police Judge was absent the mayor had the authority to appoint a temporary officer; Jones would either appoint himself or his assistant, Brand Whitlock, and they would proceed to acquit everyone who came before them.\(^{57}\) Clubs were taken from the police to make them less menacing. Jones stopped enforcing vice laws, taking a hard stand against those that mandated the closure of saloons on the Sabbath. He argued that “In America, law is not law simply because, by some sort of disreputable trickery, a political machine composed of a few men causes something to be written in a book…. Law in America is what the people will back up. If the people back up what the mayor does, then what the mayor does is law; and if they do not back it up, then it is not law.”\(^{58}\)

Jones put this principle to the test when Gilbert J. Raynor, district superintendent of the Anti-Saloon League, authored a piece for the *Toledo Bee* attacking the mayor for his moral laxity. Jones concluded that he would enforce the most antiquated and oppressive elements of the law as a demonstration of his dichotomy between written law and democratic practice. In the first week of the experiment, the proprietor of the Valentine Theater was arrested for hosting a Marine Band concert on the Sabbath. The demonstration had its intended effect; within a week the City Council convened to strike down Toledo’s blue laws.\(^{59}\)

Jones’s reforms were inspired by Tolstoyan anarchism – a faith that once land ownership was abolished and equality established the state would be entirely unnecessary. This was more radical than orthodox Georgism, which, represented by Johnson, endorsed in a humanitarian approach to crime, which it attributed to economic conditions, but not the complete abolition of state power. Along these lines, Harris Cooley, a single-taxer and Johnson’s Director of

\(^{57}\)Brand Whitlock, *Forty Years of It* (New York: Appleton, 1925), 121.  
\(^{58}\)Sam Jones to Rev. Brooks Lawrence (Ohio Anti-Saloon League) October 15 1903, box 10, Whitlock Papers.  

Charities, purchased two thousand acres outside of the city as an experiment in the reformation of juvenile delinquents and as a home for the poor, sick, and infirm. By demonstrating how well criminals acted when allowed access to the land, the farms were intended, according to Cooley, to make it known “the path up which the crime has come.” 60 Such reformatory farms became a staple policy of Georgist reformers around the country.

The most celebrated of Cleveland’s legal reforms was established in 1907, by Johnson’s police chief, Fred Kohler. He announced that Cleveland’s police officers would use their discretion when arresting minor offenders, particularly those accused of public drunkenness. From 1907 to 1909 the number of arrests in Cleveland declined from 30,418 to 6,000. Yet from 1907 to 1908, arrests for larceny and burglary increased from 169 to 224, despite a decline in the frequency of reported incidents. Essentially, as police shifted their attention from victimless incidents of moral turpitude, they began to more effectively deter serious crime. The Chief was dubbed Fred “Golden Rule” Kohler, in imitation of the similarly liberal-minded mayor of Toledo. Theodore Roosevelt publically proclaimed him the best police chief in America. 61

These libertarian undertones to Georgism gave Ohio progressivism a substantively different tenor than the rest of the country, where it often went hand-in-hand with Christian moralism. The lieutenants in Cleveland and Toledo understood themselves to be at least as much in conflict with the forces of morality as they were with the trusts. While most were Christian,

60 Harris R. Cooley, “Good Opportunities for Prison Labor,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 46 (March 1913), 96. Johnson’s characterization of the philosophy that he and Cooley shared is illustrative of the way that these reforms were rooted in a shared critique of the economic system. “His convictions as to the causes of crime and poverty coincided with my own. Believing as we did that society was responsible for poverty and that poverty was the cause of much of the crime in the world, we had no enthusiasm for punishing individuals. We were agreed that the root of the evil must be destroyed, and that in the meantime delinquent men, women and children were to be cared for by the society which had wronged them – not as charity, but as fellow-beings who had been deprived of the opportunity to get on in the world.” Tom Johnson, *My Story*, 173-4.

they believed that the mainline churches were dominated by the economic elite, which used its religious clout to divert attention from substantive issues with moral crusades.

The new, more tolerant approaches toward criminals and vice propagated by single-taxers met an almost universal condemnation from religious authorities. One assembly of a hundred Cleveland ministers labeled Johnson’s vice policy “diabolic” and unanimously agreed to undermine the mayor from the pulpit. The Catholic Bulletin was even less friendly and published a series of articles declaring the single tax “anti-Catholic” and even “anti-Christian.” Single-taxers responded that crime came from poverty and that charity, which was the remedy most churches offered, was ineffectual, condescending, and, like the traditional largess that noblemen provided their serfs, merely veiled a caste system with the pretense of humanity. Johnson defended his Director of Charity Cooley and his farm for the reformation of criminals by arguing that Cooley was attacking the issue at its root: “How small the work of philanthropists with their gifts of dollars appears, compared to the work of this man who gave them hope … justice and not charity would have to solve the problems with which he was coping.”

Efforts to undermine Johnson and Jones with their local constituencies proved surprisingly futile, but opponents were able to limit their power through state government. Harold Fraser, one of Toledo’s representatives in the State Assembly, introduced a bill that deprived mayors of the right to sit on police benches, putting an end to Jones’ mass acquittals. At almost the same time a bill was passed limiting the power of Jones’ police Chief Benjamin

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64 Johnson, My Story, 174.
Raitz. That same year the legislature granted the Governor the right to veto local tax assessment boards. The Somers System of land value taxation was overturned in Cleveland, as were many of Johnson’s heavy assessments on utilities.\(^65\) All was not lost; some corporations voluntarily increased their assessments to blunt Johnson’s movement. The Electric Illuminating Company, widely understood to be Johnson’s next target after the streetcar system, volunteered to nearly double its rate.\(^66\) While tax revenue for city improvements would increase, a comprehensive system of land value taxation would be impossible until the city freed itself from the state.

Much of the state campaign against Ohio’s radical mayors was blunted, however, by their tremendous popular appeal. Republican Governor George Nash signed into law the Chapman Bill, requiring mayors to procure a two-thirds majority in the city council before they made appointments. If that was not forthcoming, the Governor filled the vacancies, essentially making city government a province of the state in all but the most extreme cases of urban political dominance. Thankfully for Johnson, his was an extreme case. When Johnson ran for reelection in 1903 under the new rules, candidates who signed Johnson’s pledge to support the 3 cent fare, “equal taxation,” and a municipally owned electric company won 23 out of 32 seats on the City Council.\(^67\) On the other hand, Jones won 70% of vote—nearly as much the Democratic and Republican candidates combined—but because he refused to align with any political faction, proved as ineffectual as he had ever been.

Even with his tremendous political clout in Cleveland, Johnson had been deprived of the power to tax by the state onslaught on municipal government. It was in this context, that Johnson began to articulate a new doctrine of urban democracy. In 1903, William Jennings Bryan invited

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\(^65\) Public, June 21, 1902.
\(^66\) Public, Aug. 16, 1902.
\(^67\) Public, March 28, 1903.
Johnson to deliver the keynote speech at his Fourth of July party. There Johnson called upon the
themes of sovereignty and democracy articulated in the Declaration of Independence and
demanded that they be applied to the city: “for the true unit of all government in modern times is
the municipality.”68 George had taught that the best units of government were those that were
simple and directly accessible to the popular will of the people, like the city. But Johnson’s
proclamation of urban self-government followed so soon after he lost the authority to tax that, as
was often the case, his idealism was all but certainly influenced by practical political
considerations. The power to tax became one of the central demands of the home rule campaign
– along with the Georgist planks of municipal ownership and the insourcing of public works —
and, when that campaign was concluded, land value taxation would be one of the first policies
enacted in Cleveland. Home rule was a step in the direction of the single-tax.69

But home rule was not exclusively a pragmatic policy, it also articulated a romantic
vision of urban life, according to which revenues from land value taxation would fund a higher,
more democratic, and egalitarian civic spirit. In *The City: The Hope of Democracy* Johnson’s
lieutenant, Frederic Howe, imagined that “Home rule would create a city republic, a new sort of
sovereignty, a republic unto those of Athens, Rome, and the medieval Italian cities…”70 He
predicted that “Here concerts, lectures, and human intercourse will be offered. A sense of the city
as a home, as a common authority, a thing to be loved and cared for, will be developed.”71 In
addition to providing for the higher needs of its citizens, the city would be able to offer

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68 *Public*, July 11, 1903.
69 The other major issues were the freedom to purchase franchises and to do work directly, rather than through private contract. “The struggle for ‘A City on the Hill’ failed because the city was not free. It could not own or operate things or control private property; it could not levy taxes as it willed.” Frederic C. Howe, *The City: The Hope of Democracy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), 157.
70 Howe, *The Hope of Democracy*, 164.
71 Ibid., 282
healthcare and monitor working conditions. The title of the book alone must have shocked most readers. *The City: The Hope of Democracy* spoke to a vision of the city’s possibilities that was antithetical both to contemporary fears of immigrant political machines and the long tradition of Jeffersonian agrarianism.

But political independence alone would enable these advances, but rather the power to collect new revenue. Howe’s statistics demonstrated that the rise of land values in America’s major metropolises exceeded current municipal budgets, so that an even more ambitious levy upon existing land values would enable the city to assume new social functions. Franchises would be taxed as well, but, following the popular wisdom of the Johnson administration, this was much the same thing as a tax on land values: “for rights of way upon the streets are but site values. Their value is created, as are those of the corner lot, by the growth of society.”

As the battle over home rule was taking shape, a parallel struggle to achieve Johnson’s objective of three-cent fare was underway. On February 10th, 1902 Johnson found a bidder who was willing to build a track to compete with the established lines under conditions that included the right of public purchase at the cost of physical capital with 10% interest, ten-hour working days, union arbitration, and profit sharing with the city after 10 years. The courts invalidated several of these provisions, and construction was stalled by a series of seventy-seven injunctions filed against it over a period of eight years. In the midst of these legal challenges to the new line, the franchise of the five-cent lines expired, but the courts allowed them to continue operation.

As acrimonious as the construction of a three cent line was, the battle to determine whether existing lines would win a franchise to ensure their continued existence was worse, marred by straightforward violations of civil order. In December of 1905, Cleveland annexed

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72Ibid., 265
the suburb of South Brooklyn, which, because it had a small electric power plant, provided a backdoor avenue to public competition with private power. Rumor spread that, in the two days between the filing of paper work and the legal annexation of South Brooklyn, the Village Council planned to consummate a twenty-five year franchise with Cleveland Electric Railway that would legally bind the city of Cleveland to respect the rights of the current system. Johnson was out of town when news reached City Hall.

The radical Peter Witt, acting as City Clerk, took charge. Three police officers were sent to South Brooklyn and placed outside of Town Hall with orders to arrest the councilmen if they convened for a vote. Others were sent to follow the councilmen and intervene if they tried to meet in a private residence. The affair ended without further incident, but even supporters referred to the episode as the “dictatorship of the city clerk.” The following year, Johnson defied a court ordered injunction and tore up lines of Cleveland Electric where the franchise had expired.

In his campaign for three-cent fare and public ownership, Johnson was not just fighting against proponents of the current system but also advocates of the more respectable platform of state level regulation. It is not the case that proponents of both systems were indiscriminately moving toward public control of utilities; in fact, English common law had, for centuries, established that all such enterprises were subject to negotiations wherein the city could demand specific rates or lump sum payments in return for franchise rights. Public control, therefore, had always existed and the struggle over municipal utilities was very much about what type of control the public should exert.

74 Untitled, Box 63, Brand Whitlock Papers.
The doctrine of state regulation was based on the philosophy that urban constituencies were too inept, their governments too corrupt to manage such affairs. Experts could determine sliding rates based on the variable returns of streetcar businesses. Public ownership was assailed as socialistic, which it arguably was. Utility expert Morris Cooke estimated that, in 1910, municipal utilities constituted approximately a tenth of national wealth, a large sphere of the economy to socialize. Placing it in the hands of urban government would provide unprecedented patronage opportunities that could ensconce corrupt machines to an unprecedented degree. Thus the Municipal Association, representing Cleveland’s professional, middle-class reformers, supported Johnson in only one of his five election campaigns.

The Johnson school was rooted in the antithetical assumption that the democratic public was better fitted to adjudicate the issue than experts. The people could effectively run a business, and, to the extent that concessions were made to private ownership, rates should be set by elected officials. State regulation was the demand of the utility interests themselves, as announced by their own trade publications. That is why there was markedly less opposition in this direction. The fight for three-cent fare stretched on for nearly a decade in Cleveland while Johnson was mayor. As a councilman in the more conservative city of Columbus, Washington Gladden was able to secure municipal regulation without any struggle. But, with rare exceptions the experts able to determine rates of profit and capital investment in railroads were themselves former railroad employees. The argument then was that, as George had claimed, regulation gave

76 Morris Cooke, Our Cities Awake (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1918), 233.
78 “In the interest of the public and good service local transportation should be a monopoly and should be subject to regulation and protection by the state rather than by local authorities.” Oscar Crosby “The Code of Principles” The Electric Railway Journal XLV No. 8 (Feb. 20, 1915): 370-373.
79 Warner, Progressivism in Ohio, 45.
advantages to elite economic interests with recourse to the lawyers and experts skilled enough to manipulate the system.\(^8^0\) This resonated with Johnson, who, as a one-time streetcar magnate, had personally tangled with regulatory regimes, and according to his own account, subverted them on every occasion.\(^8^1\) Ultimately, regulation did not go to the root of the issue, it only shifted responsibility to middle class professionals who were supposedly better fitted to govern than the democratic masses. Brand Whitlock complained of one advocate of state level regulation that “the trouble with him … is that he is for good government and thinks that good government means government by the good.”\(^8^2\) Thus, when legislators in Columbus began proposed a bill for statewide regulation, Johnson denounced it as “the worst measure of its kind ever offered for the consideration of any state legislature.”\(^8^3\)

In the midst of these sometimes esoteric utility debates, Johnson inaugurated a vigorous campaign of political education intended to prove the potential of local democracy and realize something like the dream of municipal government envisioned in *The City: The Hope of Democracy*. Raymond Moley, head of Franklin Roosevelt’s Brains Trust, would later remember that, in Cleveland, the “average citizen was as ready in his discussion of such abstractions as franchise, over-head values, and cost of operation per mile as the ordinary citizen is with regard to baseball.”\(^8^4\) Though Johnson’s tax school was ruled unconstitutional, shortly after taking

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\(^8^1\) “He had been a conscious monopolist, knowing all the practices of monopoly; it had been an easy game for him. He had been cleverer than most of his associates. And he was far cleverer than the government could possibly be. Monopoly, he knew, could not be regulated. It was too powerful. Also, too intelligent. Monopoly was on the job all the time. It employed the best attorneys. And it was in politics. Men like himself could always secure the appointment of commissioners or district attorneys or even judges favorable to the interests they were expected to regulation. Howe *Confessions of a Reformer*, 132-3.

\(^8^2\) Brand Whitlock to Lincoln Steffens, Oct. 29 1908, box 16, Whitlock Papers.


office, Johnson proclaimed that parks were for the people, took down the “Stay off the Grass” signs, and allowed all speakers, including anarchists, to address the people without recourse to permits. To realize his dream of public space for public discourse, Johnson commissioned “The Group Plan”—a complex of public buildings, constructed in Greco-Roman style around a large green space. After hours, public schools were converted into “community centers” where political issues were discussed.

The most emblematic symbols of popular education were Johnson’s constant campaign events. His supporters transported giant open-air tents around the city, so that he could travel directly to the people. Johnson had told George that he could never be politician because he had no faculty for long speeches. But, in the tent meetings, his terse, direct style proved an asset. He turned to his audience, inviting them to ask questions and make comments. Responding to Clevelanders in a simple, direct style, he cultivated a constant discourse with the people he governed.

1902 was a good electoral year for the single tax movement; The Public celebrated Franklin Lane’s nomination for Governor of California on the Democratic ticket and Lucius Garvin’s election as Governor of Rhode Island. Garvin became the first Democrat to carry a state in the Northeast after William Jennings Bryan’s first campaign for President.

But none of these races were as compelling to Louis Post as the campaign of Johnson’s hand-picked candidate for Secretary of State for Ohio Herbert Bigelow, because “The condemnation would be so emphatic as to arouse the home rule sentiment and strengthen the

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85 Public, July 13, 1901.
home rule policy all over the United States.” 88 Prioritizing the campaign of a relatively minor official like Secretary of State over that of a historic gubernatorial victory, suggests how rapidly the single tax movement had coalesced around home rule as the issue of the moment. Tom Johnson, Samuel Jones, and William Jennings Bryan all campaigned for Bigelow, even though he had traditionally been affiliated with the Republican Party. 89 Bigelow lost the state in a landslide, but won Cuyahoga County by a margin of 2,500—2,400 more votes than had been garnered by the Democratic candidate in the previous year’s gubernatorial election, evidence that Johnson’s machine in Cleveland was growing more powerful. The Public concluded that the conservative Democratic machine in Cincinnati was responsible for statewide setbacks and suggested that the “two wings of the party must separate.” The prescribed plan, which Johnson would shortly follow, was to commit the party to a platform that conservative elements in the party could not tolerate. 90

The 1902 race did, however, bring into Ohio politics one of its most interesting and influential single-taxers. A somewhat extreme example of the self-made Georgist, Herbert

88 “Single tax men over the country cannot complain this year by the Democratic party in the distribution of nominations for offices in which they might promote their cause. There are a large number of Democratic candidates who qualifiedly indorse single tax principle and methods, and no inconsiderable number are pronounced advocates of this reform. One of these is Franklin K. Lane, the Democratic candidate for governor of California. Another is L. F. Garvin, the Democratic candidate for governor of Rhode Island. Herbert S. Bigelow, the Democratic candidate for secretary of state of Ohio, has been heard upon the single tax platform from coast to coast. William Radcliffe, of Youngstown, one of the oldest single tax men, is the Democratic candidate for sheriff of Mahonine County, Ohio; and Prof. Lybarger, a single tax orator, has the legislative nomination in a Pennsylvania district. For Congress. Edmund G. Vail, of Cleveland, is the nominee of Tom L. Johnson’s old district. Robert Baker has been nominated in the Sixth district of New York. George A. Miller, a prominent New York lawyer, is the nominee Seventh New Jersey district. Vernon J. Rose is running in Jerry Simpson’s old district, the Kansas Seventh. And James O. Monroe is contesting the Eleventh of Illinois.” “In naming several single last week who are Democratic candidates for important office, we by no means named all. Among the others are Henry Smith, a candidate for Congress in Milwaukee, and Robert E. Cresswell and Charles R. Eckert, candidates for Congress in Johnstown and Beaver, Pa., respectively. Mr. Eckert is editor of an excellent single tax paper, the Commoner, of Rochester, Pa., and his election is regarded as reasonably certain. Another of these men who are impressing the Democratic Party with the growing strength of their cause is J. H. Quick, ex-Mayor of Sioux City, Ia., who is a candidate for a vacancy upon the Supreme Court bench of his state.” Public, October 18th and 25th 1902.

89 Public, Sept. 20, 1902.
89 Public, Nov. 8 1902.
Bigelow was a child runaway. He managed, however, to find supportive adopted parents, went to college, and became the pastor as the historic Vince Street Church. Founded because of a schism with a pro-slavery minister, the church became an abolitionist stronghold and a waypoint along the Underground Railroad. After the Civil War, its parishioners fell into a staid confidence that they had inaugurated the best of possible worlds. When Bigelow began preaching the doctrines of Henry George and proposing that blacks be admitted entry into the church, another schism occurred. Bigelow won a small majority of the parishioners and proceeded to revolutionize the church. It became as much a monument to the tradition of radical liberalism—from Democratic Nationalism and Abolitionism to the single tax—as it was to mainline Christianity. He decorated the interior with quotes from Henry George, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, Giuseppe Mazzini and Leo Tolstoy. The motto “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity”—inherited from the French Revolution—graced the exterior.\footnote{Public, March 29, 1902.}

But perhaps the most important outcome of the 1902 election was Johnson’s decision to follow the course prescribed by The Public and drive out the conservative Democrats that had undermined Bigelow’s campaign. After eight Democratic legislators approved a fifty-year franchise in Cincinnati, Johnson brought his tent campaign to their districts and successfully unseated all of them. The franchise question had already been settled, but Johnson was willing to weaken his party to demonstrate that throughout the state its elected officials served at his pleasure. Johnson won the gubernatorial nomination in 1903, though later claimed that his objective was not to become Governor, but to capture the party: “immediately following my nomination I called upon all who did not believe in the principles we were advocating not to vote for me. I invited all the crooks and thieves within the party to get out of it.”\footnote{Johnson, My Story, 199.} These intentions
were clear to outside observers, including the *The New York Times* which reported that when Johnson “ruthlessly unseated delegates, and crushed with an iron heel the frail opposition…. His real object was to insure the sending of a delegation from Ohio to the next National Convention of the party that would stand for the radical programme.” Johnson, the paper insisted, had no interest in the office, he looked “far ahead.” 93 He pushed through a party platform that included Home Rule, Initiative and Referendum, the right for municipal ownership, popular veto power over franchises, replacing the bounty system with a salaried officialdom, and two-cent-a-mile steam railroad fare. According to Howe, Johnson had come “into control of the Democratic Party.” 94

But influence over the Democratic Party would count for little if it did not come into statewide power, and this would require a broader campaign of publicity. Johnson was never short on publicity, but good press was rarer. Over the course of his time as mayor, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Constitution* each mentioned Johnson with an average frequency of more than once a month. They all described him as a possible presidential candidate. However, they never dealt substantively with his practical accomplishments or his philosophical views.

Many of the stories, including references to his son’s arrest, his daughter’s divorce, and an occasion in which he arrested a motorist who wrecked his car, were at best the stuff of tabloids, at worst thinly-veiled efforts to make him appear ridiculous. Articles discussing the fact that Johnson administered his brother’s five cent line in Philadelphia while pushing three cent fares in Cleveland, were obviously calculated to make him appear hypocritical. *The New York Times* raised the question of his presidential prospects only to announce that the “length, breadth,

94 Howe, *Confessions of a Reformer*, 159.
and thickness” of his “economic and political principles” were that of a “rat… Having grown gray and prosperous” who sent out “pious exhortations to renounce gross and carnal pursuits,” that he had pursued when young. 95 In one editorial, The Wall Street Journal claimed that even Americans who did not “question (his) sincerity” would doubt his judgment, and classed him among the sort of politicians that “in other climes, where men are volatile and nature is often more kind … might be accounted statesmen.” 96 Johnson was not just a traitor to his class, he had apparently assimilated the racial features of the fiery, irresponsible immigrant constituents he represented.

On July 12, 1904, Sam Jones died but with his death Johnson gained a new, charismatic, and highly literate partner who would join the campaign to reverse the narrative propagated by the mainstream press. Newton Baker remember traveling to Toledo for the funeral and meeting Brand Whitlock:

He was tall, slender, and strikingly handsome with the easy, unconscious superiority of mind and elevated by uncondescending approach to his audience which marks the only valid distinction permissible in a democracy. His audience consisted of acres of people who packed the lawn in front of the Jones house…The crowd was a family bereft of its father, and Brand was the oldest son and heir, counting up the gains and glorifying the hope for which the family traditions stood. 97

Whitlock easily though somewhat reluctantly – he always preferred to devote his time to literature – was anointed mayor of Toledo as the closest heir to Sam Jones. For practical matters though, Whitlock always looked principally to Johnson “taking him all around among the prominent men of the country… the most thoroughly grounded in sound economic principles.” 98

95 New York Times, Sept. 5 1902.
96 Chicago Tribune, Oct 6, 1902.
98 Brand Whitlock to Clarence Darrow, Nov 22, 1907, box 14, Whitlock Papers.
Whitlock was never as thorough a socialist as Jones, preferring government ownership simply of land and utilities. Unlike Jones, who defied categorization, Whitlock was an announced single-taxer and editor of *The Public*. Although Cleveland and Toledo had similarly tolerant attitudes toward vice, Whitlock adopted some of Johnson’s particular innovations, like the posting of police officers outside of sites thought to foster crime.

While Jones and Johnson had been close, Whitlock went further, integrating many of Johnson’s lieutenants directly into his campaigns and orchestrating a collaborative struggle against the forces of economic and moral conservatism in Ohio. In 1906, Whitlock hosted a series of speeches by Cleveland’s officials; Peter Witt, Frederic Howe, Harris Cooley, and Tom Johnson himself, spoke at Jones’ Golden Rule Hall, with the intention of “work[ing] out some reforms similar to those you have accomplished in Cleveland.” The next year Peter Witt traveled to Toledo again to give “a resume of the work of the past six years.” He would use the opportunity to undermine their enemies, and not just the traction interests: “I can easily sidestep every now and then and hand the preachers something that is coming to them. The thing that

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99 This was not a particularly serious obligation, however, it did entail a degree of authority in the paper’s policy. Specifically “The obligation would be met by private letters of approval or disapproval from time to time, as the general policy of the paper or particular reports or editorials may impress you; and by private letters of information regarding truly democratic developments of a character to be of general interest or concern.” Louis Post to Brand Whitlock, June 6, 1907, box 13, Whitlock Papers. “I am not especially in favor of the inheritance tax, for I think that probably all the good it would do would be much better and more scientifically done by the adoption of a tax on land values, and on this subject Henry George can give you a great deal of light.” Brand Whitlock to H E Easly, March 27th 1907, box 12, Whitlock Papers. Brand Whitlock to Peter Witt, April 10, 1906, Whitlock Papers. Brand Whitlock to Marshall Sheppey, Feb. 27, 1918 The Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock ed. Allan Nevis (New York; D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936), 255. Whitlock was always dismissive of the narrow mindness of reformers, which is often perceived as an attack on the single tax, understood by modern readers to be particularly narrow. Quite to the contrary, Whitlock argued that they were the most practical: “Every leper, says Maarten Maartens, likes his own sores best, and so it is with reformers. Each one is sure that his own reform is the one thing needed to set the old world right. Thus each one learns the patter of his own program, becomes a slave to its clichés, and spends his time decrying all others. Daniel Kiefer, however, had few illusions as to the delays and difficulties he would encounter, or the hard task it set before him, the Singletaxers, anyway, being the most opportunistic of reformers. And so he avoided extremes...” Brand Whitlock, “Daniel Kiefer” *American Magazine* (Sept., 1912).

100 Brand Whitlock to Harris Cooley, March 12, 1906, box 11, Whitlock Papers.
must be made plain is that preachers always commence an agitation for Sunday closing at a time when the people are getting the upper hand of the traction interests. It is the old game of the pickpocket who has you look heavenward while he practices his nimble art.”

Whitlock’s skills as a writer, however, made him a stronger antagonist than Witt for the self-appointed forces of morality. Two years prior to becoming mayor, Whitlock had his first big literary break with the publication of *The Thirteenth District*, a depiction of urban corruption rooted in his own personal experience. The book was praised by both Mark Twain and Grover Cleveland. Whitlock was a member of the realist school of art, according to which art should faithfully represent social conditions – much of his work was taken directly from personal experience. His pessimistic and occasionally graphic style was perhaps too much even for some of the pioneers of the field. Through Altgeld, Whitlock established a close friendship with Clarence Darrow, the two bonding over their shared affection for Henry George and Leo Tolstoy. Darrow introduced Whitlock to William Dean Howells, one of the leaders of realist fiction. Howells complained that Whitlock did not recognize that there was “clean truth in life.” Similarly a representative of Harper & Brothers told him that “… in giving a true picture of political life you have sacrificed the fiction – the novel … You give him (the reader) no help, you only depress him, and that is neither true to life, nor is it good art.” Fascinatingly, when he was struggling, the journal most interested in his work was *McClure’s Magazine* which solicited him for “stories that would have the ring of truth and the stamp of obvious knowledge of political life.”Within a couple of years, *McClure’s* would become known as the principle

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101 Peter Witt to Brand Whitlock, Feb 23, 1907, box 12, Whitlock Papers.
103 W. D. Howells to Brand Whitlock, Nov. 19, 1900, box 9, Whitlock Papers
104 T. H. Dean to Brand Whitlock, June 27, 1901, box 9, Whitlock Papers.
publication for muckraking journalism. McClure’s interest in Whitlock suggests how thin the line was between muckraking journalism and realist fiction.

Realism was a product of economic dissent—a means to give expression to social problems—and so it was natural that Georgists would be attracted to it.\textsuperscript{106} Hamlin Garland’s \textit{Crumbling Idols} was perhaps the best known treatise for a distinctly American literature rooted in the realities of provincial life. Garland exposed the actor playwright James A. Herne to both Georgism and realism, with the result that Herne produced perhaps the first American piece of realist theater, \textit{Margaret Fleming}.\textsuperscript{107} Edwin Markham and George Inness depicted the hardships of farm labor through poetry and painting respectively.\textsuperscript{108} Under the editorship of the famously debauched—even by St. Louis standards—William Marion Reedy, \textit{Reedy’s Mirror} was both the closest thing to a major Southern single-tax publication and a cutting-edge naturalist literary journal, regarded as “the most influential weekly in America for nearly twenty years” by Edgar Lee Masters. Though, Masters was perhaps biased because \textit{Reedy’s Mirror} was the first to publish his own \textit{Spoon River Anthology}.\textsuperscript{109} Daniel Carter Beard made an unsuccessful venture into fiction with a novel about coal miners who seized their town. More importantly though he was the illustrator for America’s greatest realist author, Mark Twain, and on one notable occasion introduced the single tax directly into Twain’s work. \textit{A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court} both satirized one of romanticism’s favorite myths and suggested that modern

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industrial capitalism was fostering a privileged class analogous to the nobility of feudalism. Beard believed that his illustrations should get at the deeper truth underlying the story, and Twain frequently insisted that they did. The single-tax message was conveyed with pictures of a peasant overburdened by bags representing rent and taxation and another in which the Knights of the Round Table were awarded with a prize for being “absorber(s) of unearned increment.” A third featured a tree labeled “The Golden Rule,” rooted in “free land” and “free trade,” bearing the fruits like “progress,” “art,” “science,” and “education.”110

Even single-taxers who were not literati made amateur ventures into fiction, including Stoughton Cooley, Frederic C. Howe, and George Creel.111 Newton Baker, William Jay Gaynor, and Samuel Jones were each known for having a preoccupation with literature, perceived unusual for American mayors. For Whitlock, the connection between artists and reformers was self-evident “their affinity being due, no doubt, to the fact that the reformer be an artist of sort, else he could not dream his dreams.”112

With the publication of The Turn of the Balance in 1907, Whitlock committed his literary talent to the philosophical and political struggles of the Ohio single-taxers. The publication of the book – an indictment of the criminal justice system modeled after Tolstoy’s Georgist Resurrection – coincided with his fight for a statewide ban on capital punishment.113 The book followed the story of German immigrants who had their lives ruined by railroad accident and subsequently succumbed to crime. The poor criminals had little hope of redemption under the current economic system. The heroes of the story were drawn from the great American middle – the producing class: a sturdy, flannel-wearing mechanic, who refused to swear an oath to enforce

111 “How ’Honest Harry’ Sheared the Wolves,” by George Creel, Box 6, Creel Papers.
112 Whitlock, Forty Years of It, 113.
113 Kazin, On Native Grounds.
the death penalty, a rising lawyer who repudiates his class and defends the downtrodden, and the lawyer’s love interest who abandons the traditionally feminine preoccupation with charity when she discovers that it is used as a paternalistic mechanism to establish the moral authority of the city’s better citizens. This Anglo-American elite, however, enjoyed aristocratic perquisites; they were free to bend the law at will. Not only did they frequent the tenderloin, they profited from it. Through a system of legal fees, high rents, and grafting prison contracts they enriched themselves by skimming off of the high margins of criminal enterprises, margins of risk that they created with their vice policies. *Turn of the Balance* was an attack on the forces of morality that Ohio single-taxers were struggling with and an exposition of many of the particular criminal justice reforms that they were fighting for. On a deeper level, it articulated the Georgist position that America was becoming a caste society, in part because the legal system was manipulated to promote rent-seeking activity.

According to Whitlock, the book was received not as an isolated critique of police brutality, but rather as part of a comprehensive worldview that embraced economic and even literary preconceptions. True to his realist philosophy, Whitlock asserted that everything he wrote was based in his personal experience as a defense lawyer. Critics, especially those associated with the penal system, called it “dangerous,” “pessimistic,” even “anarchistic.” His most vocal critic was the local Preacher Cyrus Townsend Brady, who routinely attacked the mayor from his pulpit. Whitlock understood this animosity to be inspired by more than the moral consequences of vice enforcement. He suspected that his chief offence “to the Reverend Cyrus and those wealthy parishioners of his is that the streetcar company in which they are

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115 James D. Reid Warden Indiana State Prison to (*The Public?*), March 11 1907, box 12, Whitlock Papers.
interested directly or indirectly, cannot get the kind of franchise it wants so long as I am mayor.

Or it may be that his antagonism may arise naturally out of the fact that he is a romanticist in fiction and I am a realist, the first time in history, I think, that the two schools ever clashed in politics.”

Such criticism aside, the book won accolades from critics around the nation. Criminal law reformers like Ben Lindsey and Thomas Mott Osborne sent letters of support. On the literary side he was greeted by Upton Sinclair and Jack London, the latter of whom claimed it had been “a weary while” since a book “gripped me so strongly.”

Whitlock’s *On the Enforcement of Law in the Cities* (1910) became the definitive statement of the brand of left-wing libertarianism that predominated among the Ohio single-taxers. Originally written as an extended letter to the Federation of Churches, it was later republished as a pamphlet. Whitlock blamed the incidence of crime on “This social system, with privileges for the few, and proscriptions for the many…” He attributed the desperation and poor behavior of “women of ill-repute” to “the exorbitant rents that are charged for those squalid tenements in which they lead” their lives. Whitlock pointed to the tax reforms he was implementing, noting that “the board of assessors of real property the other day raised the valuation of reality in that portion of the city called the tenderloin,” he concluded “no action taken by the police or the criminal courts could have the influence for good that this blow struck at the root will have.”

Whitlock concluded with a stirring demand to first handle those who steal social property – as it was defined by George – before targeting the petty crimes of the poor. Crime would be eliminated, not by force, but by the ascent of a new mode of thought:

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In that philosophy, it is as great an offense to steal a railroad as it to steal a ride, as
great a crime to appropriate a coal mine as it to pick up coal along the tracks: in
that philosophy public property is as sacred as private property.\footnote{Whitlock, On the Enforcement of Law in the Cities, 93. Of course this is statement also has fairly clear philosophical roots in single tax philosophy. The delineation between a sacred private property and sacred public property, and the suggestion that owning a coal mine is “appropriation,” apparently because it properly belongs to the latter class, are all consistent with, arguably inextricable from, a Georgist philosophical framework.}

The Federation of Churches promised a reply, but never found their way to it. Twenty years later Albert Jay Nock, a close friend of Whitlock, who effectively served as the mayor’s personal assistant at the time, would cite On the Enforcement of Law in the Cities in his attacks on prohibition.\footnote{Whitlock, On the Enforcement of Law in the Cities, 39-41.} He would also popularize the term “libertarian” as a term of identification for liberals who opposed social legislation and the income tax.

No writer, however, was more important to the Johnson Administration that Lincoln Steffens. In 1902, the goateed Greenwich Village bohemian revolutionized American journalism with the publication of “Tweed Days in St. Louis,” an exposure of corruption in Missouri’s first city. It was a pivotal moment in the ascent of muckraking journalism. According to William Allen White, his contribution was like that of Alexis De Tocqueville; not content with a formal, legal understanding of government he had gone into “wards and precincts,” and found that “the thing we call capital has become a part of this government.”\footnote{“William Allen White on Mr. Steffen’s Book “The Shame of the Cities,” McClure’s Magazine, June 1904, 220-221.} The idea that there was something akin to an “invisible government” was not new; everyone knew that behind the scenes urban government was run by unelected machines. But Steffens argued that there was a deeper layer to the corruption – that behind the foreign surnames in smoke filled rooms stood the “better” people of the city, the very same wealthy Anglo-American elite that “good government” reformers would elect. Democracy had been the problem for Theodore Roosevelt. But, Steffens published books with titles like The Struggle for Self Government and claimed, effectively that America
was no more democratic than Czarist Russia. Just as Johnson claimed, the problem was not enough, rather than too much democracy. Steffens assailed government by professional regulatory regimes because: “just as government grants of privilege force good men into politics to protect their ‘business,’ so government prohibitions drive vicious business men into politics to save their business.”

In 1905, Steffens began to crack Republican dominance in the state of Ohio with the article “Ohio: A Tale of Cities.” Here, he alleged that Mark Hanna and other traction interests had been running the Republican Party through boss George Cox, a portly saloonkeeper who was too corrupt even to understand that he had ever done anything wrong. According to Steffens, Ohio politics was settled with bribery and brawls – revolvers were often a necessary accoutrement in the civic life of the buckeye state. But then Steffens traveled to Democratic Cleveland, where he met Johnson for the first time. There, for once in all his travels, he could find no corruption. He wrote the often quoted line: “It seems to me that Tom Johnson is the best Mayor of the best-governed city in the United States.” Johnson became the hero of all of Steffens’s stories, his philosophy – the single tax – the animating philosophy of his writings. Steffens counted him part of the linage of “great leaders,” that went “From Moses through Jesus to Henry George and Johnson.”

In 1905, Steffens helped shape a wave of anti-boss sentiment that elected Ohio’s first Democratic governor in fifteen years. With a foothold in state government, Johnson’s crowd was able to solidify the Democracy’s place in Ohio politics. Frederic C. Howe was elected to the State Senate. There a colleague informed him that there was reason to suspect the Republican

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125 Public, Oct. 1, 1909.
State Treasurer of serious improprieties. Howe’s colleague had been unable to attract any interest in the issue, but he knew Johnson’s protégé had a knack for publicity. As an elected official, Howe had the constitutional authority to inquire as to where the state’s money was held. So, he led a group of reporters to question the Treasurer, who replied “It’s none of your damn business, either as a senator or as a citizen where I keep the money or how I run my office.” The Senate instantly began a probe that found the Republican Treasurer and Auditor had both kept public money in the private banks of their associates, where they earned little if any interest. When the Auditor was asked why he often did not turn over state money on time he replied “Probably I didn’t want to.”

Ohio would not elect another Republican Governor until 1917.

Democratic control in Ohio meant that Johnson was able to enact most of his reforms in the following years. The Democratic Party platform remained virtually unchanged from the radical agenda Johnson had set in his 1903 gubernatorial campaign. This is in part because Johnson served on the Resolutions Committee, which drafted the state platform, in 1905, 1906, and 1908. To prevent the impression that their demands were particular to Cleveland, his supporters found sponsors from around the state to present their bills. On the state level, two cent per mile fare for steam railroads was realized. Also, though it would take longer, Johnson’s contention that utilities should be taxed on the basis of their stock value – inclusive of the value of their monopoly privileges – was realized. Steam railroads saw their taxes skyrocket 300%, electric companies 500%. Reforms in the direction of local home rule included bills that required franchises to be approved by referendum and that expanded the mayor’s power to initiate public works managed by the city. With the latter, Johnson was able to follow George’s policy of insourcing private contracts to the government. This had some spectacular effects on public

128 Warner, Progressivism in Ohio, 192-194.
finance. Under direct operation the price per vapor lamp declined from $28.95 per annum to $22.34 and the price of garbage collection fell from $3.24 per ton to $1.69. This reduction in price occurred in tandem with substantial gains for employees; wages for the trash men were increased anywhere from 10% to 20%, while hours were reduced from twelve to eight, and service was improved. With the acquisition of two small power plants the price for city lights dropped from $87.60 per year to $54.96, producing an estimated annual savings of $90,000.\(^{129}\)

Analysis of Johnson’s support by precinct does not reveal much about changes in political affiliation; by and large the native born continued to be Republicans, while immigrants continued to be Democrats. Johnson won more suburban voters than his Democratic predecessors, presumably because of their financial interest in lower streetcar fares. If there were no dramatic changes in party affiliation, Johnson at least established a more stable political coalition than had existed before. In the fifteen years before he took office, Republicans were elected to the office of mayor in Cleveland nine years; in the subsequent fifteen years they were elected to serve only two years. Johnson was the longest serving mayor the city ever had. The change was even more pronounced in Toledo. That city had consistently elected Republican mayors for eighteen years prior to Samuel Jones’ first term. After his first term, the city exclusively elected independent mayors for the following sixteen years and Whitlock was, in all but name only, a Democrat.\(^{130}\)

Attempts to explain voting behavior before the advent of public polling will inevitably be somewhat speculative, but since Johnson had a particularly close relationship to his constituents, it is probable that his rhetoric is fairly indicative of constituent concerns. Much of this was oriented toward the public works he produced with his more expansive tax regime. After

\(^{129}\) Transcript of Testimony by Tom Johnson, 1907, Box 7, Steffens Papers. Public, Oct. 22, 1909.

Johnson took offices, assessments on real estate increased by nearly 50% while assessments on personal property remained almost static. With this new revenue he began an impressive campaign of development.\(^{131}\) In the first sixty-five years of the city, preceding mayors had paved 185 miles of road; in eight years Johnson paved 210 miles. When Johnson entered office the sewer system was 311 miles long; he built an additional 250 miles. He built twenty bridges and three public bathhouses and acquired 282 acres of new parkland. Cleveland had 893 electric streetlights in 1901. In 1909 it had 1,900.\(^{132}\) Everywhere they looked, the citizens of Cleveland could see the fruits of a more progressive tax system.

Other cities entered into similar franchise and taxation struggles, but the higher grade of administrative talent in Cleveland made it the nation’s leading example of utility reform. The *Kansas City Star* claimed that “Cleveland shared Tom Johnson with all its sister municipalities. Not another city entered a franchise fight, or planned an extension of activity for the general well-being… that it did not receive help and inspiration from Cleveland’s public servant.”\(^{133}\) Prior to Johnson’s tenure in Cleveland, Hazen Pingree, himself something of a single-taxer, had waged the nation’s most prominent traction dispute in Detroit. Johnson was involved on the opposite end of this struggle, as one of the interests bidding for the franchise. Pingree had privately consulted Johnson with his suspicion that the offer was not in the public interest. Johnson was willing to admit in that it was, but unwilling to explain why. Steffens recounted the confusion that followed:

\(^{133}\) *Kansas City Star*, April 11, 1911, quoted in Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio*, 78. The notion that Johnson had served as the primary pioneer of municipal ownership plans was broadly repeated. “Tom Johnson was a pioneer in a movement which is gradually extending to all parts of the United States. It dominates the politics of the day and is becoming such an essential part of the public life that old-time leaders, who believed the public was created merely to be exploited, are disappearing at a rapid rate.” *Tennessean*, April 16, 1911.
When the hearing was held, Pingree couldn’t make his position very clear; he tried to, hesitated, and then he blurted out that he didn’t understand the ordinance, but he pointed at Johnson and he said: “But I can tell you this. Tom Johnson there told me that if he was in our places he’d see Tom Johnson in hell before he’d grant it.” Everybody looked at Johnson, who laughed heartily, “Yes I did say that,’ he admitted, ‘but it is a dirty trick to tell on me.”134

Pingree’s inability to comprehend the situation did not merely lend itself to some humorous incidents but also, according to the period’s leading utility expert Delos Wilcox, a very poorly constructed settlement.135

Johnson exercised a guiding influence on the second most successful traction dispute of the era, the Chicago negotiations under Mayor Edward P. Dunne. The Public had long promoted the career of Dunne, who before his election had spoken on public ownership to the Henry George Association in Chicago.136 When he was elected in 1905, Dunne turned to Johnson to design plans for public ownership; he appointed Clarence Darrow the Special Traction Counsel.137 Darrow, a single-taxer, worked closely with Johnson and Louis Post as he led negotiations over the franchise. Nor did Dunne look to Johnson exclusively for guidance in the traction struggle. Dunne constructed public bathhouses after seeing them in operation in Cleveland.138 The popular impression that Chicago was becoming a virtual satellite of Cleveland reached its pinnacle when Dunne appointed Louis Post, even then on Johnson’s payroll, to the school board, where he began a divisive battle with over an electric power contract.139 In 1905,

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135 The agreement was riddled with inconsistencies and, according to Wilcox, Pingree conceded too much for the sake of a fare reduction during prime commuting hours. This reform only increased congestion when it was already at its worst. Delos Wilcox, Municipal Franchises: Transportation Franchise, Taxation and Control of Public Utilities (New York: The Engineering News Publishing Company, 1911), 359-363.
139 Ibid., 38.
Dunne even contracted with Johnson’s tax expert, W. A. Somers, to institute in Chicago the brand of land value taxation that Johnson had been established in Cleveland before the state legislature took away his taxing powers.\footnote{140}

Chicago’s officials, however, were by no means unique in seeking the guidance of Johnson and Whitlock. They were consulted by officials from Nevada; Jacksonville, Florida; St. Joseph, Missouri; Des Moines, Iowa, and Los Angeles. These inquiries dealt with matters as disparate as plans for non-partisan government, the death penalty, and the propriety of leaving an elected post before the completion of one’s term.\footnote{141} Relations with single-taxers focused on more traditionally Georgist issues like franchises and legal reform. Francis Bode, from Springfield, Illinois, was in almost constant communication about that city’s traction issues.\footnote{142} St. Louis single-taxers, George Creel and Frank P. Walsh tried to formalize this exchange by creating “A Municipal University” that would publish informational material about urban reform, but the experiment was short-lived.\footnote{143} Together though, they fought for a variety of Ohio innovations like “community centers” – public schools opened after hours for political debate – or reformatory farms for prisoners.\footnote{144} Cleveland and Toledo served as the central nexus for the

\footnote{140}Good
\footnote{141}George Landers (Mayor of New Britain, Connecticut) to Brand Whitlock, June 13 1908, Carl Noble to Brand Whitlock, June 25, 1908. George W. Webb (Secretary of Republican City Central Committee St. Joseph MO.) to Brand Whitlock, June 8th 1908, box 15, Whitlock Papers.
\footnote{142}John MacVicar to Brand Whitlock, Jan. 29 1908, Albert Graf to Brand Whitlock, Feb. 24 1908, Francis bode to Brand Whitlock, April 1, 1908, all box 15. C. D. Willard (The Municipal League) to Brand Whitlock, Dec. 12 1908, box 16, Whitlock Papers.
\footnote{143}Charles Ferguson to Brand Whitlock, Dec. 5 1907, box 14, Whitlock Papers.
movement, connecting activists in cities across the country. When Creel moved to Denver, Ben Lindsey wrote Whitlock, suspicious that the newcomer was an agent of the “interests.” Whitlock, assured Lindsey that Creel was a “sincere radical.” Lindsey wrote back shortly thereafter “I have had a delightful chat with George Creel and am to take dinner with him sometime soon. He is all you said he was – a magnificent fellow. He certainly ‘sees the cat.’” Working together, Creel and Lindsey became perhaps the leading reformers in the state.

Johnson had such influence in part because, by April 1908, he seemed primed to create the closest thing to a municipal owned streetcar system that any major city had ever seen. Johnson’s three-cent Forest City Company was operational and absorbing the lines of Cleveland Electric as their franchise expired. Left in an untenable situation, Cleveland Electric agreed to sell the company. Johnson regarded the new company, the Municipal Traction Company as a “holding company,” reigned in systematically to act in the public interest until state prohibitions on public ownership were lifted. The franchise allowed for public recapture and capped interest at 6% to prevent the company from charging exorbitant rates. Johnson picked his associate the single-taxer, A. B. du Pont to serve as president of the company. To solicit investment, The Public advertised the sale of the corporation’s stocks. When Johnson brokered a deal consolidating the city’s traction interests into this semi-public business, Steffens called it the “greatest advance in municipal government in the history of the United States.” That estimate, however, was premature.

When he was fighting the system, Johnson had easily positioned himself as a friend of the people, but, once he was in charge, his commitment to the public interest – over and above any

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145 Ben Lindsey to Brand Whitlock, Sept. 13, 1909, Brand Whitlock to Ben Lindsey, Sept. 20, 1909, Ben Lindsey to Brand Whitlock, November 8th, 1909, all box 18, Whitlock Papers.

146 Cleveland Press, April 28, 1908.
downtrodden group – doomed his enterprise. In a bid to win support, the old Cleveland Electric Corporation had promised its workers a two-cent raise if its franchise was renewed. Johnson’s Municipal Traction paid one cent more per hour than its predecessor had, but was not willing to redeem the promises of the 5 cent line for an additional cent per hour. The workers from Cleveland Electric went on strike, using dynamite to blow up cars in a way reminiscent of the labor dispute that had brought Johnson to power. The Municipal Traction Company lost $55,000 in its first month and $22,289 in its second. Beset with service problems, Johnson also established more vigorous enforcement of fares. Some classes of riders, like police and firefighters, which had been allowed free rides, were now forced to pay. Because Johnson now saw his function as administering the line with maximum efficiency, he lost his sense for the politics of the situation. Whitlock reported that Johnson worked eighteen hours a day managing the business. He continued that:

One day he [Peter Witt] went into office and found the mayor using a long roller, trying to flatten the strips of tickets which had been found to be too thick to go readily into the fare boxes. In his way the situation got away from him, and I do not think he ever fully appreciated the extent of the dissatisfaction and opposition.

In the referendum, voters stuck down the franchise by a margin of 605 votes out of a total of 75,893. Likely any one of the groups that he had alienated to create a more efficient system – from striking streetcar workers, to police, firefighters, and fare-jumpers – would have been numerically sufficient to sway the election.

147 Public, Sept 4, 1908.
148 Edward Bemis, “The Cleveland Referendum on Street Railways,” Quarterly Journal of Economics (November 23, 1908): 179-183. “From December a year ago until the day of the referendum he was working eighteen hours a day, and he overworked dreadfully and so lost, in a measure, some of his best friends tell me, his power to envisage a situation. He lost himself partly in details.” Brand Whitlock to William Allen White, Jan. 16th 1909, box 17, Whitlock Papers.
With the failure of his principal reform, Johnson’s mayoralty was undermined and he lost his reelection campaign in 1909 to the Republican candidate, the German-American brewer Herman Baehler. For a movement that placed so much faith in democracy, Johnson’s defeat was tragic. Whitlock confessed to Steffens that his “faith ha(d) drifted just a little from the poll” until Johnson explained “The people did right in those two referendum elections; every time the people vote they reach a little higher level of intelligence, and even if they vote against me this fall, and defeat me, they will vote right.” Whitlock added, “and when he said ‘It doesn’t matter what becomes of us or whether we win or lose, the cause is won already and the world is ours. All I ask is to be allowed to go on fighting for that cause, in or out, it doesn’t matter where, until someday I stub my toe and fall into the grave’ – well, when he said that, I could have wept.”

Steffens had difficulty believing that the traction giant who had recently exhausted his fortune for his cause was as content as he seemed: “He puts up a very bold front, but I have the feeling that he has been hurt to his very heart.”

Johnson had shown the first signs of illness around the time of the failed franchise referendum. He was still a celebrity, able to proudly watch the progress of his cause from a privileged position. In April of 1910, Joseph Fels arranged a dinner in his honor in the British Parliament as it was then concluding the most dramatic campaign for land value taxation yet seen. But, plagued by an intractable stomach ailment, he passed away on April 10th, 1911. Two hundred thousand attended his funeral parade in Cleveland.

149 Finegold, Experts and Politicians, 95-96.
150 The election “suggest[ed] that we have an electorate in this Nation that is altogether unreliable.” Kiefer concluded “never in my life have I felt so discouraged.” Daniel Kiefer to Lincoln Steffens, Oct. 24, 1908, Steffens Papers. Brand Whitlock to Lincoln Steffens, Sept 23, 1909, Steffens Paper.
151 Lincoln Steffens to Francis Heney, Sept 26, 1909, Steffens Papers.
William Jennings Bryan, a pallbearer at the funeral, declared that “No man during the past generation has done more effective work for the people than Tom Johnson, and certainly no one has been called upon to pay a heavier price for that labor than he.”\textsuperscript{152} The Public released a seventy-page memorial issue, in which it republished remembrances of Johnson from newspapers throughout the nation – some abroad.\textsuperscript{153} The House of Representatives passed a measure, memorializing their former colleague, though certain Congressmen expressed reservations that there was no precedent for the maneuver. Immediately after his death Newton Baker led a drive to establish a monument to Johnson on the mall of the Cleveland Group Plan, the construction of which Johnson had overseen. With several stands reserved for public speaking, the statue depicts Johnson sitting, copy of \textit{Progress and Poverty} in hand, with an inscription that reads, “Beyond his party and beyond his class/this man forsook the few to serve the mass…And ever his eye set on the goal/the vision of city with a soul.”\textsuperscript{154}

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Johnson’s faith that he was winning the war, even when he lost his battles, proved correct. The same election that cost Johnson the mayorality established land value taxation in Cleveland. Johnson’s representatives in the state house secured Quadrennial Assessment Act in 1909, which returned the appraisal process to local officials. With home rule in taxation established, a slate of Johnson’s followers, led by Frederic C. Howe, were elected to the Quadrennial Assessment Board. They invited W. A. Somers, who had conducted Johnson’s initial land value assessments back to Cleveland. In his autobiography Howe entitled his chapter on this period, “Single-Taxing the City.” This was an exaggeration; the board could not, for

\textsuperscript{152} Public, April 7, 1911.  
\textsuperscript{153} Public, July 21, 1911.  
\textsuperscript{154} Public, June 28, 1912.
example, exempt personal property. But Howe had cause to be proud; the battle for home rule had culminated with the shifting of property taxes on to land values. As with so many other Cleveland innovations, the practice spread rapidly after beginning in Cleveland, making a moderate version of George’s tax a routine feature of American Municipal finance.

Despite the failure of the referendum, Johnson’s streetcar plans were ultimately redeemed. In 1910, the courts engineered an agreement wherein the lines would be operated with a maximum interest of 6% and sliding scale fare, a plan almost identical to Johnson’s “holding company.” From 1911 to 1914, the streetcars operated on three-cent fare, vindicating Johnson’s claims that the five-cent rate was unnecessarily high. Peter Witt, the soapbox orator who had once organized strikes against the system, administered it. He made several innovations to streetcar design that were packaged together and sold internationally as the “Peter Witt Streetcar.”

Because Ohio held constitutional conventions every twenty years, Johnson’s followers were able to successfully establish in the state something closer to the direct, localized democracy they idealized. When the constitutional convention convened in 1912, Herbert Bigelow was chosen to preside. Daniel Kiefer, shortly to be one of the most influential figures in the single-tax movement, had arranged for Tom Johnson, Brand Whitlock, and others in their group to fill Bigelow’s pulpit as he spearheaded a campaign to establish statewide referendums. Under his direction, the convention passed a litany of reforms. A supermajority on the bench was now necessary for the courts to strike down legislation. The death penalty was banned. Women’s suffrage was put to referendum and passed. The convention enacted a home rule amendment, designed by the Ohio Municipal League of which Newton Baker was president.

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155 Herbert Bigelow to Brand Whitlock, Oct. 18, 1906, box 11, Whitlock Papers.
Cities were allowed to design their own charters and were granted all powers not explicitly forbidden, including the right to own and operate utilities. The convention struck down the uniformity clause, giving the legislature the ability to tax as it wished.

Because conservatives recognized that the struggle to overturn the uniformity clause was in large part about opening up the possibility of land value taxation, they agreed to the reform only on the precondition that an explicit ban on land value taxation was placed in the constitution. Bigelow was willing to accept this concession because direct legislation was also established in the new constitution. He would later admit that his real interest in the referendum was that it provided for the amendment of the constitution with a simple majority vote. The constitutional restriction on the single tax could be overturned – and the single tax itself established—in a single referendum.\textsuperscript{156} This was the logic that would drive the next phase of the movement.

Perhaps the greatest vindication of Johnson, however, was the landslide election of his handpicked successor. In 1911, Newton Baker, Johnson’s City Solicitor, was elected mayor with 62% of the vote, the largest margin the city had ever granted a candidate. This result was generally understood to reflect grief over Johnson’s death and regret over the outcome of the 1909 election. Baker declared “This overwhelming victory is a vindication of the ideals and ideas of Tom L. Johnson taught us, and I shall do my best to carry out those ideas.”\textsuperscript{157} With the streetcar issue settled, Baker continued the campaign for public ownership with a war on the local electricity provider. He secured a two million dollar bond to expand the Municipal Electric Light and Power Plant that Johnson had established. Baker found that private suppliers wanted

\textsuperscript{156} Warner, Progressivism in Ohio, 323-324.
\textsuperscript{157} Public, Nov. 17, 1911.
nothing to do with such a prominent demonstration of municipal ownership. Morris Cooke, later a leading New Deal utility expert, recounted how Baker:

Announced that if there were no bids from the responsible manufacturers he would at once take up the matter with Congress by requesting that the tariff duty be thrown off foreign machinery for municipal enterprises. He got his machinery.\textsuperscript{158}

Baker was a master of the same forceful style of politics than Johnson had used to secure his victories and win over young, idealistic admirers like Cooke. Cleveland’s Municipal Electric Plant would be one of the nation’s most important precedents for public electricity.

While cities throughout the country were drifting toward public ownership, most understood the precedent Johnson had established to be the benchmark. In his landmark study of American utilities, Delos Wilcox wrote that the Cleveland and Chicago campaigns:

Occupy a field by themselves among American street railway grants. They represent the outcome of long-contested local transit situations whose importance and intelligence with which they were fought out, made them of nation-wide interest. These franchises represent the high-water mark thus far attained in municipal franchise granting in America.\textsuperscript{159}

With these two struggles as examples, Wilcox became an outstanding opponent of statewide regulation, favoring instead home rule, municipal ownership, and the single tax. As the chairman of the Committee on Franchises of the National Municipal League, he propagated these views among fellow professionals.\textsuperscript{160} He was employed to advise and conduct valuations for franchise disputes in Grand Rapids, Detroit, San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Newark, St. Louis, and Denver.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{158} Cooke, \textit{Our Cities Awake}, 248.
\textsuperscript{159} Delos Franklin Wilcox, \textit{Municipal Franchises: Transportation Franchises, Taxation, and Control of Public Utilities} (New York: The Engineering News Publishing Company), 141-142
\textsuperscript{160} Nord, “Experts versus Experts: Conflicting Philosophies of Municipal Utility Regulation in the Progressive Era,” 224
In 1915, the Conference of American Mayors met for a special session on utilities. Newton Baker presided over the day devoted to public ownership. This was a meaningful symbolic statement of Cleveland’s centrality to that cause, but it only scratches the surface of the human and intellectual capital Cleveland provided; Baker’s opening address was immediately followed by a presentation by Frederic C. Howe. Other Johnson associates, like Edward Bemis and Robert Crosser also spoke. The convention concluded with the formation of the Utilities Bureau, which under the leadership of Morris Cooke was designed to carry on the work of the Conference of American Mayors. A year later the bureau held a conference on valuation at which A. B. du Pont, Newton Baker, and Delos Wilcox spoke. W. A. Somers was not there, but his valuation of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company was covered in depth in a special session on the topic of land values in utility valuation.

Edward Bemis, perhaps the most frequent contributor to the discussion, explained the principal subject of the conference, reproduction cost valuation: “A few sky-scrappers go up between the Grand Central and the Pennsylvania stations, in New York, enhancing the site values at those depots. In consequence, the freight and passenger rates from New York to San Francisco must be raised.” Essentially Bemis, then a member of the Advisory Board of the Valuation Division of the Interstate Commerce Commission, was posing the valuation controversy as a continuation of the fight he began alongside Johnson in Ohio’s county assessment boards: whether or not utility land values belonged to the people.

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164 Ibid., 36.
Johnson’s legacy had at least as much to do with its writers and propagandists as its technocrats. Johnson, who traded in a tough, pragmatic style of politics that was common in his movement, often trampled on political norms to obtain his ends. There is some cause for remembering him in much the way that we do Huey Long, another extremely effective executive who mastered questionable political techniques. Yet, a poll of experts conducted in the 1990s ranked Johnson the second best American mayor of all time, next only to Fiorello La Guardia.\textsuperscript{165}

That Johnson is remembered so fondly can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that he had a solid contingent of literary supporters, highlighting his successes and drowning out the routine newspaper criticism he received. In 1907, Johnson wrote Whitlock that “between you, Fred Howe and Steffens you are immortalizing the memory of this great struggle.”\textsuperscript{166} Since Johnson’s objective was to build a “city upon a hill” that would be imitated by other municipalities, the writers of Johnson’s administration were arguably as important as the bureaucrats. Though, in fact, it is hardly a valid distinction; the majority of Johnson’s best lieutenants served in both capacities.

Recent histories of Progressive Era Cleveland have treated Johnson as an accessory to a more or less natural process of class conflict. In fact, the struggle had very little to do with the relationship between the streetcar company and its employees. The latter, in fact, ultimately undermined Johnson’s program of public ownership.\textsuperscript{167} The administration dealt with relations between workers and employers in only tangential ways; the guiding ideological force was rather the idea of a perfect marketplace—of eliminating what modern economists call “rent.” Johnson

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\textsuperscript{165} Melvin G. Holli, \textit{The American Mayor: The Best & the Worst Big-City Leaders} (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999).
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\textsuperscript{166} Tom Johnson to Whitlock, Feb 23\textsuperscript{rd} 1907, box 12, Whitlock Papers.
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fought against those who received disproportionate returns because of artificial scarcity: land owners, utilities; public contractors; corrupt agents of the law; and even, to a degree, unions. The school of economics identified with “rent-seeking” argues that these are particularly intractable phenomenon because, like an extra two cents in fare, rents are small, easily forgettable detriments to a large but disorganized group, while being a distinct and powerful advantage to a small, organized, and resourceful interest.168

There is little reason to believe there was a natural popular tendency toward policies like the insourcing of public contracts or, more especially, union busting. Because conflicts with streetcar franchises were common during the period, it is not beyond the realm of belief that some special arrangement of interests gave life to this particular dispute. But, there is not ample evidence of this in Cleveland. From its inception an intellectual debate society, the Franklin Club, to its stewardship under the single-taxer Peter Witt and later Tom Johnson, the movement toward public ownership had indisputably ideological roots.

Nor was the evolution of Cleveland explicable from the perspective of natural state development; from that angle it was highly improbable. Ohio’s constitution prohibited the practice of public ownership, the power of urban government was circumscribed by the state, and the legal system was an instrument of the traction interests to such an extent that Johnson’s reforms should have been impossible. A profound degree of political, administrative, technical, and legal talent was necessary to make the Johnson administration what it became. That this expertise would be mobilized by the public sphere was in no way self-evident. The better part of

it was lent by a former streetcar magnate, who, except for the influence of George, should never have been on that side of the issue.

Georgism was pivotal for rallying individuals at every level of the process. Albert Jay Nock explained Brand Whitlock’s decision to so long forestall his real interest of writing in favor of politics:

The toga did not drop upon him readymade from a celestial loom. It was woven and fitted laboriously by his own hands. He sought philosophical consistency and found it and established it in himself; but only as part of the difficult general discipline of an alien life.\(^{169}\)

The producerist utopianism of the single tax brought together and inspired professional resources ranging from skilled lawyers to traction magnates and yet was wide enough in its appeal to also unite these with working-class agitators like Peter Witt.\(^{170}\) The story of Cleveland was not that of social forces or political institutions arriving at their natural conclusion. Quite to the contrary, it was that of an idea realizing itself in spite of both state and society.

\(^{169}\) Whitlock, *Forty Years of It*, xi.

\(^{170}\) Finegold likewise argued that experts provided the means for Johnson’s success. He, however, sees a contrast between the “urban populism” of Johnson and his expert advisers. The real triumph of progressivism comes with the election of Baker, who is himself a professional. Essentially, he puts the single tax in direct opposition to expertise. The problems with this are that Johnson was himself an expert in politics, finance, organizational theory, and event to an extent law. It was his theory of organization that encouraged him to hire professionals and provide them with such leeway. Also though, the people in his administration were single-taxers, including Baker. Finegold, *Experts and Politicians*. 

[246]
Chapter VI

The Good Ship Earth
The International Progress of the Single Tax

It is a well-provisioned ship, this on which we sail through space. If the bread and beef below decks seem to grow scarce, we but open the hatch and there is a new supply, of which before we never dreamed. And very great command over the services of others comes to those who as the hatches are opened are permitted to say, “This is mine!”

Henry George, (1879).¹

The land question is in fact the dominant issue in European politics, and wherever the name of Henry George is known, the name of Tom L. Johnson is linked with it. In a humble two room tenement in Copenhagen, I saw the photograph of Cleveland’s Mayor pasted upon the wall, and heard the story of the Cleveland fight against privilege from a German orator at a land reform meeting in Berlin.

Frederic C. Howe, (1909).²

The spread of Henry George’s ideas across the globe is—to the extent that it is remembered—understood as a strange anecdote, an inexplicable fad. But land nationalization does not admit to an easy audience. Nor was it a flash in the pan; there is evidence of sustained international cooperation over a period of decades. Its spread requires explanation.

Importantly, the two factors that best account for the popularity of the single tax were decidedly international in their scope. Liberalism was a transnational ideology. The urge to incorporate into it a mechanism that would promote economic equality was often more distinct abroad, especially in emergent nations where reformers aspired to democracy and open markets without the hardships that had often been associated the establishment of those institutions in developed nations. Land, on the other hand, was an omnipresent factor in economic life and had

¹ George, Progress and Poverty, 242.
² Public, Nov. 12, 1909.
important historical and cultural resonance in most nations. Typically, as in England and
Germany, the impetus for reform came from urbanities concerned with tenancy and rent in the
world’s emerging cities. There were exceptions to this trend, particularly Denmark, but here too
substantive economic issues prevailed. That the impetus for land value taxation was not
everywhere identical, speaks to how diverse and contingent the coalitions it created were.

The international consciousness of the movement was also an important component of its
spread abroad. The cosmopolitanism of a movement that was rooted in urban centers facilitated
coordination across national boundaries—as did the financial resources of some of its leading
figures. American single-taxers were keenly aware of the development of their idea abroad. One
event in particular, The People’s Budget in the United Kingdom, seems to have invigorated the
movement around the world. In the years directly following The People’s Budget, land value
taxation spread rapidly. Even in America, the People’s Budget entered popular political
discourse.

That land value taxation was more fully implemented abroad suggests that it might have
had greater appeal internationally than in the United States. But, any such conclusion is difficult
to establish. Some political systems proved to be obstacles for the development of land value
taxation. It likely had the strongest basis of support in the United Kingdom, but land value
taxation was never realized there because of the political power of the landed nobility. In
Denmark, the progress of land value taxation was facilitated by a system of proportional
representation that created space for an explicitly Georgist political party. In America, the federal
system and constitutional restrictions on taxation—including state uniformity clauses and the
federal ban on direct taxes—constituted serious obstacles to the realization of the single tax. It is
perilous to draw conclusions about popular sentiment when these political institutions played
such a determinate role in whether these sentiments were realized in policy. What is conclusive when viewing the single tax movement from an international perspective is that the United States, often understood as exceptionally conservative, was, in reality, a net exporter of radicalism at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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In 1897, The British economist J. A. Hobson claimed that it was hard to assess the influence of George on his country because the American had “cooperated with the spirit of the age.” He asserted that land ownership in England was concentrated into a usually small class, making the English receptive to the single tax. But, if it were difficult to disentangle the influence of the man from that of his environment, it was undeniably evident that he had at least become the focal point for a tremendous popular sentiment. “Henry George,” Hobson concluded “may be considered to have exercised a more directly powerful and formative educative influence over British radicalism of the last fifteen years than any other man.” Unlike in America, where a tight coterie of followers maintained ideological conformity, in England, George was interpreted to favor a wide variety of land reforms:

The spirit of reform awakened by Henry George manifested itself, not in one, but in many movements directed to specific aspirations … with the land…. A vast reticulation of separate organizations has arisen to enforce existing laws and to secure further legislation curtailing the power of landowners; societies for the preservation of existing public rights over footpaths and commons; for the protection of tenant rights and the attainment of freedom of cultivation and security of property in improvements; for the registration of titles to land and mortgages; for the abolition of tithes, for the enfranchisement of the leasehold land, abolition of entail, and the removal of all other barriers which separate land from other forms of property…”3

That George’s idea obtained such diverse expression in Great Britain indicates that, as well as it traveled, it was always subject to the peculiarities of the local political culture.

Perhaps the clearest example of such an adaption of the single tax was the indelible mark George left on British socialism, particularly the school of thought known as Fabianism. The playwright George Bernard Shaw remembered that “when I was thus swept into the great Socialist revival of 1883, I found that five sixths of those who were swept in with me had been converted by Henry George.” These socialists often drew upon George’s concept of socially created value, even referring to exorbitant returns that belonged to society as “rents” – drawing a direct analogy to the unearned increment in land when discussing subjects as apparently unrelated as high wages for skilled labor. While Fabians protested that land values were not as unique as George believed, they still believed they were unearned, so that land value taxation was more or less axiomatic throughout the British left.

Although there was something of an ideological dissonance between the movements in American and England, its base was surprisingly consistent. It found its most committed supporters in urban, upwardly mobile skilled laborers. J. A. Hobson wrote that in every city that he lectured he encountered:

A certain little knot of men of the lower-middle or upper-working class, men of grit and character, largely self-educated, keen citizens, mostly nonconformists in religion, to whom Land Nationalization, taxation of unearned increment, or other radical reforms of land tenure, are doctrines resting upon a plain moral sanctions. These free-trading Radical dissenters regard common ownership of and equal access to the land as a ‘natural right,’ essential to individual freedom.

Dense with meaning, Hobson’s characterization depicts the single tax movement as a comprehensive identity. As with their American counterparts, single-taxers were typically self-educated, civically engaged, non-conformists in religion, liberal free traders, and adherents of natural law doctrine.

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4 George Bernard Shaw to Hamlin Garland, Dec 29th, 1904, Reel 14, Henry George Papers.
In 1909, land value taxation took the central stage in one of English history’s greatest political struggles; a constitutional crisis that resolved key disputes over taxation, democratic governance, and social welfare. As in America, the British single tax movement had focused its efforts on securing the right of municipalities to enact land value taxation. Glasgow City Council, London County Council, and 516 other municipal and rating authorities petitioned Parliament for the right to tax land values. The movement was strongest in Scotland; when George had spoken in Glasgow 1,940 members of the audience signed up to form the Scottish Land Restoration League, a mass organization born in an instant. In 1907 and 1908, the House of Commons passed The Land Values Taxation Bill, allowing for home rule in Scotland. But, on both occasions, the bill was vetoed by the House of Lords, composed of land owning aristocrats.

In 1909, David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer and future Prime Minister, decided to use the popular sentiment in favor of land value taxation to engineer a battle to overturn the Lords’ power and enact new taxes to establish funding for the recently established system of old age pensions. He introduced a budget that included higher income and luxury taxes, as well as three types of land value taxation, including a tax on “unearned increment” at the moment of property transfer, a tax on existing land values, and another on mineral extraction which Henry George Jr. praised as a reassertion of control over “national resources.” The revenue would not only buoy the pension system but also fund new programs, including unemployment and health insurance. The crucial feature of the proposal, however, was the inclusion of land value taxation; the House of Commons was granted the constitutional prerogative to exert unilateral control over the budget, but Lloyd George knew the House of Commons could not pass the bill without his consent.

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7 George Jr., *The Life of Henry George*, 434.
8 *Public*, July 23, 1909.
Lords would never allow land value taxation to pass. The House of Lords fell into Lloyd George’s trap, defying precedent and vetoing the budget by a majority of three-fourths.

With the question of democracy and economic equality in the balance, George’s budget became “The People’s Budget,” a global symbol of change. Samuel Gompers, who traveled to England to witness the popular confrontation, introduced a resolution whereby the American Federation of Labor endorsed the People’s Budget. The great American journalist, William Allen White, went to England where he reported that a quarter of a million “laboring men, merchants, and professional men” marched in “the greatest political meeting ever held in Hyde Park.” Marchers chanted “Why should we beg for work and let the landlords take the best? Make them pay their taxes for the land, we’ll risk the rest! The land was meant for the people.” This “Land Song” remained the Liberal Party’s anthem for decades after it lost its relevance; whether or not it spoke to vital economic issues, it would always mark that party’s zenith.

The battle for the People’s Budget reaffirms Hobson’s conclusion that George was an “educative influence.” That the battle for land value taxation in Great Britain was waged alongside the battle for the income tax suggests the difficulty of construing it as a product of the true single tax faithful. Even Mary Fels, whose husband provided much of the funding for the campaign, recognized David Lloyd George as an opportunist, using land value taxation to undermine the House of Lords. That having been said, George provided the arguments, logic, and even the methods that came to define the liberal case. As Frederic C. Howe observed, Lloyd George argued that land values were constituted by the community and thus belonged to the

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9 Public, Dec. 2 1910.
10 William Allen White, Emporia Gazette, August 26, 1909.
11 “Lloyd George, in 1910, saw in [Land Value Taxation] nothing other than an effective move for hitting the lords and getting himself into the limelight.” Mary Fels to Newton Baker, September 15, 1929, box 95, Baker Papers.

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community, a distinctly Georgist line of thought. The Public was ecstatic to report that Winston Churchill, influential even in this formative period of his career, made to a Scottish audience the Georgist case that monopoly was rooted in fee simple land ownership: “It is quite true that land monopoly is not the only monopoly which exists, but it is by far the greatest of monopolies. It is a perpetual monopoly, and it is the mother of all other forms of monopoly.”

While there was a pre-Georgist tradition of land value taxation in British liberalism, Lloyd George’s proposals were unequivocally not part of it. John Stuart Mill had argued that justice only permitted the taxation of the unearned increment, not including the price the owner had paid for the land, but the People’s Budget followed the more radical, Georgist policy of taxing the entire value of land. Also, whereas British Liberalism had thought of land rent in terms of agricultural ability, the People’s Budget specifically targeted resource and urban rents. Tory Prime Minister Arthur Balfour declared that “If this is not … the precise principles of Henry George I do not know the meaning of the English language.” The other side of the political spectrum came to the same conclusion. At the Hyde Park rally, William Allen White wondered at the English cabinet and a majority of the English parliament marching under a banner inscribed: “equal rights for all, special privileges to none.” White recognized that this old Jeffersonian motto had been appropriated by single-taxers in his own state and concluded that “it is a long jump from Jerry Simpson to Lloyd George, Lord Chancellor of the Exchequer, but progress seems to have made it in ‘two jumps.’"

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12 *Public*, May 21, 1909.
13 *Public*, August 6, 1909.
In the end, Lloyd George disappointed single-taxers, but when viewed through a wide-angle lens, it appears that he likely did more for the cause than anyone, excepting Henry George himself. The People’s Budget culminated in the Parliament Act of 1911, which reduced the power of the House of Lords. It also instituted new progressive taxes that established the foundation for England’s welfare state. Some land taxes were passed, but, before a national assessment could be produced, England was engulfed in World War I and Lloyd George suspended the process indefinitely to devote resources to the war. For an otherwise pivotal moment in British history, the conclusion of the land tax issue was profoundly anticlimactic. But, when we look at the global history of land value taxation, the years directly following the People’s Budget were a high mark in activity. Many reforms followed the model of the People’s Budget – taking a local agitation to a larger, more dramatic stage. The British government’s embrace of land value taxation legitimated it both as a political cause and public policy. As governments around the world expanded their use of land value taxation, a litany of positive precedents established it as a serious reform.

With this newfound legitimacy, land value taxation in Canada ceased to be a creeping reform promoted by radical labor unions and became an explosively dynamic platform for boosterish mayors. By the early teens, land value taxation had already made considerable progress in Western Canada. The development of profitable extractive industries in that untapped territory had fostered a radical labor movement. In the late nineteenth century, it had served as a stronghold for Georgists in the Knights of Labor. By the 1920s, the leading left-wing party, the Independent Labor Party, was led by Fred Dixon, an executive officer in the Single Tax League. Because such a large percentage of the region’s blue-collar workers were employed in extractive industry, the single tax appeared to be a viable avenue for the redistribution of capital. It would
tax the idle timberlands, encouraging owners to dump them onto the market. Workers would thus have the opportunity to purchase their own estates for a small sum and become independent producers.¹⁶ British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Alberta all enacted laws that dictated that municipalities tax land at a higher rate than improvements, reserving for cities the right to reallocate an even larger – thought not a smaller—percentage of the tax burden onto land, should they choose to. The small town of Edmondson had used this provision to shift all local taxation on land without garnering much press.¹⁷ But in the context of the British land tax struggle, the declaration of Vancouver Mayor Louis Taylor that his city would do the same attracted international attention. To great fanfare, Vancouver became in 1910 a single-tax city, with all local revenue collected on the value of land alone.

The advent of Vancouver as a single-tax city had roots in labor radicalism but was also indebted to two other factors that were prominent in the movement’s progress during the period: international momentum and concrete economic incentives. Mayor Taylor, who had initiated the reform, had not campaigned on the single tax and generally gave little indication that he was a devotee. Instead he was a transparently a local booster. He bragged that “the city awoke one morning and found itself famous,” transparently capitalizing on international interest in the reform. Additionally, the progress of land value taxation had occurred alongside the rapid development of the region, encouraging many to believe that, as its advocates predicted, it was

¹⁷ Max Hirsch, Land Values Taxation in Practice: A Record of the Progress in Legislation of the Principles of Land Values Taxation (Melbourne: Renwick, Pride, Nuttal, 1910), 112-114.
encouraging owners to relinquish or develop land. Taylor claimed that “under the Single Tax, as it is operated in Vancouver, a new sky line is being built up for the city.”

The belief that land value taxation was the only way for cities to remain competitive in a period of rapid migration was so prevalent that the proposal lost most of its political character. Even Victoria, reputed to be one of the most conservative cities in the country, voted by a margin of eight to one in favor of land value taxation. After Vancouver the single tax spread like wildfire throughout Western Canada. By 1914, approximately two-thirds of cities in British Columbia, all of Alberta, and one-fourth in Saskatchewan taxed land alone. Most of the remainder of the region taxed land at a higher rate than improvements.

Also in 1910, Australia followed England’s lead and instituted a national, graduated land value tax. This was the culmination of a long tradition shared by both that country and its neighbor, New Zealand. New Zealand, had, in fact, instituted a short lived land value tax in 1878, the year before Progress and Poverty was published. That law was overturned the following year, but, after George developed a base of support the cause picked up pace and New Zealand instituted a national graduated land tax in 1894. In 1896 the Rating Act was passed, allowing municipalities to shift the burden of local taxation from improvements onto land as well. Australia was more typical, however, in that land value taxation had been limited to the state level before the People’s Budget. In 1884 South Australia passed a statewide land tax. In 1887 Queensland allowed local governments to institute land value taxation, followed by New South Wales which instituted a statewide levy in 1895. Because the first land value tax in New

21 Frederic H. Fennis, Property Assessment in Canada (Toronto: Canadian Tax Foundation, 1970), 74.
22 Hirsh, Land Values Taxation in Practice, 48.
Zealand predated George, the movement in Australasia was clearly indebted to an earlier liberal tradition, particularly John Stuart Mill. But, when the movement gained traction, it was in urban areas, where Georgism was strong and more relevant than Mill’s more agrarian understanding of the land issue.23

There was a movement in Australasia that was both politically viable and intimately intertwined with the American movement. The leader of the Australian movement was Max Hirsch, a German-Jewish businessman émigré and member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly. He was also a contributing editor to *The Public*. Always eager to engage with the more esoteric questions in political economy, in *The Public* he debated with American economist John Commons the question of whether a land value tax should exempt the agricultural fertility of particular plots of land as a species of improvement, effectively valuing land exclusively on the basis of its access to the market. Hirsh believed it would remove the principle obstacle to the single tax – apparently even in Australia it was evident that farmers were the great barrier to success – but, Hirsh argued that agricultural fertility was generally the product of gifts of nature, not the labor of owners. As a hardline devotee, Hirsch could do not see his way through to allowing farmers to keep for themselves something that they had not made, even if it might significantly improve the prospects of his cause.24

Even outside the English-speaking world, a tendency toward national land value taxation manifested itself during the budget crisis. In 1910, Germany passed a national increment tax on the rising value of land.25 That year the Bund Der Bodenreform (Organization for Land Reform) claimed 640,000 members behind its Georgist platform, although the vast majority actually

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25 *Public*, July 7 1911.
belonged to industrial and municipal groups that had committed themselves to their program – as usual Georgists assembled a coalition of variegated interests, rather than creating a mass organization of its own. The group won its first major victory in the German colony of Kiauchau in China. The commanding admiral and Chinese commissary, Von Diedrichs and Dr. Shrameir, respectively, instituted a tax of 33.33% on the unearned increment of land. Land value taxation was credited with the progress of Kiauchau from the 37th to the 7th most important port in China. The example proved persuasive and, by 1908, 113 German cities and communes had enacted some form of land value taxation.26 Members of the Bund Der Bodenreform exploited antiquated laws restricting the sale of land to private individuals for the propagation of public ownership and leasing of urban property.27 As a consequence, the German movement tended toward public ownership, rather than merely taxation, of land.28

Despite some local idiosyncrasies, the movement in Germany was just as connected to the American single tax movement as its counterparts in England or Australia. In 1911, immediately after the People’s Budget, German economist Silvio Gessell criticized the single tax for being, if anything, too popular in his country: “The Press was allowed to advertise Henry George’s Utopia, and land-reformers were everywhere received in the best society. Every German ‘agrarian’ and speculator in corn-duties turned single-taxer.”29 The single tax movement in Germany had a particularly strong presence in the university system. Here the Zionist, intellectual Franz Oppenheimer, Chair of sociology at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, was

27 Public, Oct. 12, 1901.
influential. Oppenheimer is sometimes credited with laying out the blueprint for the Israeli kibbutzim. For Americans, his principle contribution was the book *Der Staat*. That book was heavily advertised in *The Public*, which published the English translation.30 A universal history of the state, the book’s thesis was that the state as a form of class oppression developed with fee simple land ownership. Contrary to the Marxist theory of the state, primitive herdsman societies did not develop states despite wide disparities in the ownership of capital. The state only formed after conquering peoples stole the land of other tribes, creating the need for an oppressive power to enforce their extraction of land rents. This thesis served as the guiding principle of American Albert Jay Nock’s seminal libertarian tract, *Our Enemy, The State.*31

In Denmark by contrast, Georgists only secured their first small victory in the wake of the People’s Budget, but their gains would be the most sustainable in Europe. In 1911, the government appropriated funds for the valuation of land in certain localities.32 In 1915, the first national valuation of land was authorized to ascertain what the effects of land value taxation would be. In 1919, Georgists left the Radical Party to form the RetsforBund (Justice Party). A year later, the first valuation intended to serve as the basis for the actual implementation of a land value taxation was authorized. Beginning with a rate of 1 ½ per thousand of the capital value of land in 1922, the tax was increased again in 1926, 1933, and 1937, until the rate was 2 ½ percent. According to The Chief of the Danish Land Valuation Department, the tables they used to

32 *Public*, Jan. 6, 1911.
ascertain these values were “very similar to that used in several American cities” – a reference to the Somers System that Tom Johnson pioneered.  

Proportional representation facilitated the prominent role land value taxation played in Danish politics. While the Georgist Justice Party was always a distinctly minor party, it was part of a coalition with the Liberal Party and the Socialist Party. In 1952, when Denmark hosted the Eighth International Conference for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, Liberal Prime Minster Erik Eleksen shared the stage with Agnes George De Mille, granddaughter of Henry George. Notably, even at this late date, the People’s Budget loomed large, discussed at great length during the conference.  

The single tax’s strength in Denmark was rooted in particular socio-economic and historical conditions. The movement had developed from the work of an articulate lawyer, Sophus Berthelesen, who, between 1902 and 1909, secured endorsements for land value taxation from country’s three major agricultural associations. Considering its history elsewhere, it is peculiar that land value taxation would obtain the mass support of farmers, but agriculture was different in Denmark. American farmers purchased more land than they could cultivate in the hopes of a speculative rise, whereas Danish farmers were compelled by the high ratio of population to land to farm intensively on small plots, producing 42 bushels of wheat per acre as compared to 14 ½ from the America farmer. Frederic Howe observed that because of the shortage of land and its high productive capacities, Danish farmers were more interested in

35 Public, June 9, 1911.
taxing large unproductive estates out of existence to put more land on the market than they were in ensuring that their own small plots would not be taxed.\[^{36}\] Farmers recognized that land value taxation could work in their interests because, beginning with the reign of Hannibal Schested in the 1660s, the country’s revenue system had relied upon a tax on potential agricultural yield, a sort of primitive land value taxation. Berthelesen after reading George, had initially approached the government about modernizing and increasing these taxes, but in 1903 they were revoked, causing a backlash among small farmers.\[^{37}\] Berthelesen capitalized on this tradition, appealing to the economic interests of the farmers, which were clearer because they had experience with the system of land value taxation in practice.

Outside of the Western world, the spread of the single tax was often closely tied to the progress of liberalism. The leader of the Chinese nationalist movement during the Manchu dynasty, Sun Yat-sen had cut off his braid; adorned Western attire; and traveled throughout Europe and America. On one of these trips he had met Henry George Jr., even though Sun was still judged by The New York Times to be an “outlawed Chinaman,” destined for the gallows.\[^{38}\] In his travels, Sun Yat-sen took a special interest in reading about the European nationalist revolutions of the nineteenth century. These were important precedents for overthrowing the archaic Chinese monarchy and establishing a liberal democracy. Sun Yat-sen, however, was also distinctly aware that liberal capitalism had not treated the common people of Europe and America kindly. Therefore, he wanted to go beyond the basic liberal reforms of open markets.


and establish a welfare state that would care for the Chinese people with funds collected by land value taxation.

But Sun Yat-sen was always keen to find a union between modern liberalism and traditional Chinese culture, something that land value taxation seemed to facilitate. China had traditionally collected taxes on the basis of the ownership of land. Sun Yat-sen argued that this system was flawed because it taxed land at only three rates, each of which reflected the agricultural fertility of the land. Sun Yat-sen criticized this system because: “taxes ought to be levied according the value, not the area of land. For land varies much more than in the ratio of these three degrees. I don’t know by how much the land in Nanking differs in value from land on the Bund in Shanghai, but if you rate it according to this old method of three degrees you cannot assess it justly.” 39 In short, George had shown that the old system of agricultural land taxes was defunct because the most expensive class of land was now urban land. However, in providing a model for understanding urban land values, George also offered hope of modernizing the traditional system of taxation in a way that was consistent with classical liberalism.

Ultimately Sun Yat-sen’s interest in land value taxation was realized. After he was inaugurated the first president of the Chinese Republic in 1912, he appointed the author of the Kiauchau land tax to assist in the drafting of Chinese land laws.40 The influence of Sun Yat-sen in China – and the importance that he laid upon land value taxation – was such that when the bearers of his legacy were forced to flee to Taiwan half a century later by the communists, land value taxation was written into that nation’s constitution. Probably grassroots support for land

value taxation in China was never as great as it was in the United States or Great Britain, but with fewer stable political institutions to obstruct its progress, it developed deeper roots.

Sun Yat-sen’s story is paralleled in Latin America by that of Jose Battle Y Ordónez of Uruguay. As was the case in China, urbanization and liberalization were an important part of the context of the single tax’s development in that country. With nearly a third of Uruguay’s population residing in the capital city of Montevideo, it was atypically urban for the region. Uruguay had been the site of a fifty-year civil war that dated back to the height of liberal nationalism in Europe. The great hero of Italian nationalism, Giuseppe Garibaldi, had participated in the Civil War, helping to position the opposition within a firmly liberal framework. In 1904, Jose Battle Y Ordónez led Uruguay’s Liberal Colorado Party to victory, only to leave from the country, relinquishing power in a gesture that was almost Washingtonian. When he returned and was reelected in 1911, he stood on a platform of expansive social welfare programs, funded in part by land value taxation. Uruguay became something of a model state, even attracting visits from progressive Americans interested in its social programs.41

American single-taxers were aware of and celebrated the progress of their idea in Latin America. By the teens, The Public was publishing very optimistic news about the region. Writers pointed to moderate land taxes instituted on the local level in Brazil. They wrote that the Mayor of Nictheroy in Brazil demanded outright that his municipality implement “the doctrine of the singletax of Henry George.” In Argentina they observed that members of the Liberal and Radical Parties in parliament fought successfully for a national investigation of land value taxation; in Costa Rica the President had announced that the proposal “excites our sincere enthusiasm.”42

Uruguay, *The Public* observed that a strong contingent of single-taxers had developed under the leadership of the writer Manuel Herrera Y Reissig. It also noted that “nowhere in the world is the cost of living so high as in Montevideo” and, in a surprisingly oblique way, concluded that their sympathetic president “Battle Y Ordonez is a very thorough-going man once he is convinced” and so “great things are looked for from the report of the Valuation Committee.”

As the movement took on international dimension, it also developed a global consciousness. In 1913, Herbert Quick, a novelist famous for his depictions of Iowa farmers, wrote a single-tax interpretation of world affairs. He presented evidence that global warming and the exhaustion of natural resources would force the migration of peoples. The result would be either an ever expanding series of international conflicts or a concerted decision by the people of the world to treat the earth as their communal property. He called for a “United States of the World” to manage resources and create accord among nations. While not free of racial stereotypes, Quick paraphrased George to the effect that all races were created equal and repudiated the concept of the “white man’s burden.” Quick, turning to a line of thought that resonated with contemporary battles over urban governance in America, critiqued even apparently benevolent imperial regimes because “Good government, to be worth anything, must be won through the evolution of popular government.”

Seven years later, Quick published *From War to Peace*. Now an official in the Wilson Administration serving on the Farm Labor Board, he made a case for the League of Nations and

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a land resettlement program that his single-tax compatriots in Congress and the Wilson Administration had put on the agenda.\textsuperscript{45} Much as socialism had tried to unite people across national boundaries around a universal economic relationship, so too did the single tax. The single tax did, in fact, obtain international dimensions. Just as importantly though, it imbued in a cadre of influential followers a sense of international mission that they would carry with them in all of their political engagements.

\textsuperscript{45} Herbert Quick, \textit{From War to Peace} (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1919).
Chapter VI

Justice not Charity
The Fels Fund and the Spread of Land Value Taxation

I do not believe in charities. They are agents of pauperization. Neither am I a philanthropist. I have in mind no plan to aid institutions of mercy….Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan and other captains of industry are robbers and their millions are ill-gotten gains… I admit that I, too, have robbed the public and I am still doing it, but I propose to spend the accrued money in wiping out the system by which I made it.

Joseph Fels, (1910). \(^1\)

The movement has progressed to a point where in several states its adoption is a possibility. This progress is the result of work quietly done by a few devoted individuals, in some cases without the knowledge of other workers in other localities. Let us help all these.

Press Announcement for the Founding of the Fels Fund, (1909). \(^2\)

In the 1910’s America appeared to have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the single-tax. It even obtained widespread practical implementation on the local level. Historians have understood this renaissance of activism as a result of Joseph Fels’s decision to donate his fortune to the single tax. The Fels Fund Commission was an important factor in propagating the ideas of Henry George and played a pivotal role in the implementation of reforms, particularly direct legislation, that were thought to facilitate the establishment of the single tax. However, it was also often tone-deaf and too extreme in ways that ultimately set back the actual implementation of the single tax. The implementation of land value taxation followed along a much different path, heavily influenced by pragmatic economic and bureaucratic concerns. Studying the spread of land value taxation alongside the work of the Fels Fund Commission, then, is a case study in what made the single tax. While ideology was important in mobilizing the resources of elite

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\(^1\) Chicago Tribune, March 10, 1910.
\(^2\) Public, May 4\(^{th}\), 1909.
actors like Joseph Fels, voters and political institutions responded more directly to practical concerns. As much as we might like to remember the single tax as an idealistic abstraction, possibly even the bizarre invention of a charismatic individual, it actually reflected substantive concerns about urban rent, regional competition for growth, and a failing tax system.

Of course, Georgism as an ideology and as a concrete economic reform are not two separate entities capable of being fully disentangled. Single-tax influence on local tax regimes was largely possible because of George’s intellectual impact on capable bureaucrats. Tax regimes are typically easier for small, committed interests to influence, because they are opaque and hard to understand. This is particularly true for the property tax system, in which assessors had unilateral control over setting rates with little in the way of scientific methodology to contradict their valuations. But even here the progress off the single tax was facilitated by structural concerns, particularly the glaring inadequacies of the tax system.

The Fels Fund Commission should not be entirely discounted; it did give the single tax a much larger public platform than it had in years—possibly ever. But this was not what made it successful policy. Two separate factors were important in encouraging its actual implementation. The first was the ascent of urban single-tax experts, often drawing on Johnson’s reforms in Cleveland. The second was the international progress of the movement, which gave it legitimacy.

In fact, we can consider the Fels Fund itself as the product of these parallel municipal and global developments. Fels had begun funding single tax work on a large scale as a donor to the fight for the People’s Budget in England. When he returned to America, he was coaxed to found the Fels Fund Commission by Daniel Kiefer, a fundraiser for Tom Johnson, after the defeat of

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Johnson’s traction referendum suggested that the movement needed a new direction.⁴ Appropriately, Warren Worth Bailey, Joseph Fels, and Lincoln Steffens first corresponded about using the Fels Fund Commission to support Tom Johnson as a presidential candidate in 1912. Bailey acknowledged that Johnson might not win the nomination. But, if he ran the papers would need to discuss “him and the forces behind him.” Bailey believed that there had been a conspiracy of silence around “the tremendous battle now on in Great Britain.” To have a single-taxer run for President while Great Britain was in the middle of the tremendous tumult of the People’s Budget, would put land value taxation at the center of public consciousness. Thus, as much as the Fels Fund Commission has come to dominate historical memory of the single tax movement during the period, at its inception it was overshadowed by the deeper currents of urban and transnational campaigns for land value taxation.⁵

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America was not immune to the heightened interest in land value taxation following the People’s Budget. In 1909, when the campaign hit its stride, The Public’s circulation nearly doubled, rising from 6,000 to 10,000. This was partially because The Fels Fund Commission paid for an advertising campaign orchestrated by an experienced newspaper man, Emil Shmied, but land value taxation also seems to have been entering into the American mainstream.⁶ The San Francisco Chronicle had always been one of the more vociferous opponents of the single tax, but

⁴ The Single Tax Conference: Held in New York City Nov. 19 and 20, 1910 (Cincinnati: Fels Fund Commission, 1911), 16. Daniel Kiefer to Lincoln Steffens, Nov. 5 1908, Steffens Papers. “I am trying to prevail upon U’Ren to give up his law practice and devote himself entirely to accomplishing the Single Tax in Oregon. If I thought you were interested, I would send you a copy of a six-page letter I received from him the other day on the subject. I expect to go east next week, and while there meet Joseph Fels of London.”
⁶ Public, Nov 12 1909.
it now published positive reports on the German Increment Tax.\textsuperscript{7} By 1911, the Fels Fund Commission had devoted no resources to promoting the movement in Boston, but its mayor, John F. Fitzgerald (the grandfather of John F. Kennedy) asked the city Finance Commission to investigate a tax on the “uneearned increment.”\textsuperscript{8} The commission refused, arguing that current revenues were sufficient and that more would create a tendency toward “state socialism;” still Henry George Jr. took a victory lap, giving a speech at Oxford Hall in which he applauded the mayor.\textsuperscript{9}

The first Irish Mayor of Boston, Fitzgerald was a pragmatic machine politician typically not affiliated with any more expansive political ideology than being Irish. But he had been in Ireland shortly before Lloyd George’s budget undermined the lords and renewed Ireland’s aspirations for independence.\textsuperscript{10} Fitzgerald would not have needed to leave home; the budget battle had been followed closely by the local press, which advertised it with headlines about “The Two Georges”—Lloyd and Henry.\textsuperscript{11} Undeterred by the radical association, in his second inaugural, Fitzgerald again called on the legislature to investigate the “single tax,” citing land value taxation in England and Germany as well as the progress of the Somers System in U.S. municipal government.\textsuperscript{12}

This zeal was translated into results in part because the institution single-taxers were trying to replace was moribund; according to the International Tax Association: “that the general property tax has broken down in administration may be regarded as an established fact.” From

\textsuperscript{7} San Francisco Chronicle, May 6, 1910 & Sept. 10, 1911.
\textsuperscript{8} Public, Feb 24, 1911.
\textsuperscript{12} Public, Feb. 16, 1912.
1910 to 1911, Albert Jay Nock published a series on the system in the muckraking periodical, *American Magazine*. As banal as the subject might seem, the tax system had grown so ridiculous that Nock was able to present the material in a satirical style:

Indiana begins by asking the citizen how much money he has on hand, and ends by asking how many female dogs he owns or harbors. Kentucky is interested to know how many dogs he has that are over four months old… California shows a really maternal solicitude in asking the citizen how many empty beer-barrels he has on his premises.

To the common practice of asking citizens to assess their own property, he concluded “This plan might work admirably in a community of just men made perfect, but in the United States it does not work at all.”13

Nock’s jabs at the property tax were comic relief in what was often a sad tale of manifest injustice. Nock told the story of retired farmers saddled with taxes higher than their actual earnings and contrasted their plight with that of the wealthy magnate August Belmont, who was able to evade $40,000 in taxes by deeding his property in a formal way to the Rothschild family while he, in fact, enjoyed it at his own convenience.14 The rich had a litany of legal devices at their disposal to avoid paying taxes; what they did pay, Nock argued, was a voluntary contribution to preserve the image of good citizenship. There were obvious inefficiencies in the system. By assessing property every time it exchanged hands in the processes of production, transportation, and distribution, commodities might be taxed eight or nine times, causing arbitrary expense and radically reducing the efficiency created by the division of labor. Although most state constitutions dictated that all classes of property were to be taxed equally, the difficulty of finding intangibles like stocks or bonds meant that violations of this principle were routine. Furthermore, because of the economic inefficiency of the system, governments that

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violated these provisions perversely prospered the most. What made this critique of the property
tax so viable, however, was that Nock was now able to point to an alternative with the force of
practical experience behind it. He followed several articles ridiculing the general property tax
with several others treating the success of land value taxation in Canada.  

The members of the Fels Fund Commission recognized that they was not stepping into a
vacuum; it was interjecting itself into efforts of individuals “quietly” working in “localities” with
little coordination. They were referring—at least in part—to the gradual and largely unnoticed
implementation of the Somers system of land valuation. W. A. Somers had first experimented
with and implemented his system as tax assessor of St. Paul in 1896. In 1901 he instituted the
system in Cleveland, only to have the Ohio Legislature take the assessment process out of
Johnson’s hands in retaliation. Somers joined the Manufacturers Appraisal Company which was
contracted by municipalities to conduct land value assessments. Business was initially slow,
though when Johnson’s ally Dunne came to power in Chicago, the windy city instituted Somers
system, with some minor variations. It finally boomed after the system was reestablished in
Cleveland in 1909. Frederic Howe and Newton Baker, now nationally prominent leaders in
municipal reform, advertised the success of the process in their own city. Baker claimed in an
oft-cited statistic that with more equitable assessments of valuable properties, the base rate of
taxation in the city was more than halved.  

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17 The Sun (Baltimore), July 3, 1913, & Dec. 12, 1913.
With the success of the Somers system in Cleveland, it began to spread rapidly. Somers was contracted in the next two years to assess Columbus; Denver; and three Illinois towns, Springfield, Joliet, and East St. Louis. During the same period, Philadelphia authorized an assessment that the courts halted due to legal technicalities, but not before a new valuation of the central business district was completed. Between 1910 and 1926, seventy cities contracted with The Manufacturers’ Appraisal Company for Somers’ assessments, including Milwaukee, Buffalo, Savannah, Baltimore, Phoenix and Newark. With more experience, the process became more sophisticated. The crux of the system was a series of mathematical computations that predicted the average variation in land values within an area according to proximity to roads and other improvements. This allowed assessors to rapidly ascertain value over large swaths of land with incomplete data. It incorporated a refined depth curve to determine values on lots removed from the road, developed methods for assessing irregularly shaped lots, and pioneered formulas for evaluating the contribution of avenues, light, and ventilation to land values.

With seventy cities assessed by the 1920s, many implementing the Somers system in part or in whole, land value taxation became an important reality in municipal governance. But there is little reason to believe that the extent of its spread was due principally to George’s ideological influence. While sometimes George’s followers invited Somers to town, often there

20 Because of the opacity of property tax regimes, it is hard to ascertain how fully it was implemented where Somers was contracted to do an assessment. In some places, like New York, the Somers assessment was clearly only used to provide separate land valuations designed to improve general property assessments. In others, like Cleveland, active parties acknowledged that they implemented a land value tax. In this instance, Howe only publicized the Somers system as a type of land value taxation well after that fact. The case of Pastoriza demonstrates why that would be the case. Courts rarely intervened in property tax assessments, but they did overturn his assessments because he publically admitted that he had not followed the constitutional provisions dictating uniformity in taxation. Thus there were serious incentives to keep the nature of these assessments unclear.
is no indication that the responsible officials understood that the reform had any connection to
the single tax. In Baltimore, the discourse centered on the fact that under the current system some
properties had not been reassessed for over thirty years, so that select owners were paying far
less than their fair share. Baltimore could not afford the army of assessors that would be
necessary to visit and evaluate every property in the city; Somers was able to produce results
with a painless review of sale records. Local newspapers rarely gave considerable attention to the
system; when they did, long articles might be composed exclusively of quotes from Somers,
suggesting that members of the press did not understand the system.21

After a tax assessor in Houston waged a very public campaign for the Somers system on
an explicitly Georgist platform, there was some public backlash that suggested a dawning
awareness of the system’s origins. In 1914, Pima County Supervisors in Arizona instituted the
system over fierce objections from the area’s “largest tax payers” and the overlapping
jurisdiction of the Tucson City Council.22 But this sort of politicization of the Somers system was
exceptional and in this case is probably attributable to the proximity of Tucson to Houston and
Pastoriza’s campaign there. In most other contexts, it was described by all parties as a scientific
instrument to better assess property values. The Manufacturers’ Appraisal Company was even
invited to present their methods to a group representing Chicago real estate interests.23

Even where they did not supplant the property tax with land value taxes, single-taxers
took positions as assessors and shifted the tax burden onto land. The country’s leading single tax
assessor—and one of the leading assessors more generally—was New Yorker Lawson Purdy.
Purdy was the Secretary of the New York Tax Reform Association, founded by Thomas

21 Chicago Daily Tribune, Jan. 27, 1907.
22 Los Angeles Times, Mar. 12, 1914.
23 Chicago Daily Tribune, June 12, 1910 & June, 15 1910. Atlanta Constitution, September 23, 1925. One headline
read “Scientific plan for arriving at a basis on city lots explained by expert.” Los Angeles Times Dec., 2, 1913.
Shearman as a means to bring businessmen together with Georgists to overturn the hated personal property tax. Purdy had been Treasurer of the New York Bank Note Company before he was converted to the single tax and gave up his top-tier finance job to become a soap-box orator around Madison Square. The picture of a genteel expert, he lectured on Gothic Architecture as a hobby, and was, in the estimation of *American Magazine* “distinguished by every charm of culture and urbanity.” Purdy served on the board of the Russell Sage Foundation concurrently with an appointment as President of the Georgist Robert Shalkenbach Foundation.²⁴ He became one of the period’s leading experts in assessment practice; “his advice is so much in demand” declared *American Magazine* “that he is really a national figure.”²⁵ According to Robert Murray Haig, the country’s leading expert on the income tax, Purdy was “the acknowledged authority” in property taxation.²⁶ He served as President of both the National Municipal League and National Tax Association, helping to mold the methods of experts around the nation.

One of the reasons for Purdy’s fame was the tremendous increase in revenue he collected for the city of New York. With the New York Tax Reform Association behind him, he was able to design an 1899 law which served as the test case for the inclusion of franchise values in property tax rolls.²⁷ With his business connections, Purdy also rallied support from the Chamber of Commerce for a local option bill. That measure failed, but shortly afterwards in 1903 he secured the passage of a bill dictating the assessment of land and improvements separately. In a single year the encouragement to include land in assessments increased tax revenue in New York City by 42%—$1,500,000,000 in raw numbers. The assessments of properties across from

Central Park increased by nearly 100%, whereas in Brooklyn they increased by only 27%. If we assume that the new valuations were correct—or at least more correct—property had been assessed without any regard for location, so that slum properties shouldered a disproportionate percentage of the tax burden.

In 1906 Purdy was appointed President of New York City’s Department of Taxes and Assessments, becoming the chief architect of the city’s property tax regime for over a decade. Maintaining that land values had not yet been fully equalized with improvements, he increased the tax rolls by $500,000,000 in 1908 and $900,000,000 in 1911. His critics claimed that, rather than introducing better methods, he was actually overvaluing land for ideological reasons. He openly admitted to counseling citizens out of paying the personal property tax and extralegally exempting personal property in one area of the city. But it was difficult at the time (and probably impossible today) to determine to what extent Purdy and the single-tax assessors who imitated him were introducing better assessments and to what extent they were using their largely arbitrary power to shift the burden of taxation onto land.

Purdy was only the most noticeable of a multitude of single-taxers placing a larger percentage of local taxation on the value of land. Purdy’s separate assessments on land were instituted by state law in Arkansas, California, Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. In some places, the results from New York were replicated. Tax assessors from Los Angeles wrote to The Public to recount how they had increased the tax on land by 40% while

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28 *Public*, Oct. 31 1903.
decreasing the tax on improvements by 10%. In Vermillion, South Dakota, assessor August Peterson doubled the rate on land while decreasing the rate on improvements and personal property. Even without split assessments, single-taxers won office as assessors and shifted tax burdens in ways that equalized—or perhaps even placed an undue burden on—land values. *The New York Times* published the accusation that a single-tax assessor in Bayonne, New Jersey unilaterally instituted the single tax when he raised assessments by as much as 100% in a year. The International Tin Company saw its tax bill skyrocket from $59,800 to $95,000.32 In Piedmont, California, Mayor Hugh Craig, who was both a single-taxed and President of San Francisco’s Chamber of Congress, more than tripled local taxes on land to $7,200,000 during his first year in office while holding the tax on improvements steady at $1,200,000.

There is some indication that these reforms were common enough to have a noticeable national impact, but their true scale is impossible to verify. Robert Murray Haig, who was not particularly friendly to the single tax, believed the undervaluation of improvements was a ubiquitous, though largely invisible phenomenon:

It is impossible to enumerate the municipalities which undervalue buildings as compared with land without the sanction of law. Such undervaluation is very common both in Canada and the United States. Usually it is accomplished merely by the informal action of the assessor and the fact not extensively advertised because of its illegality.33

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There is some quantitative evidence suggesting that assessors all over the country began to assert their discretionary power. In 1902, real estate and personal property were assessed at nearly the same rate relative to their actual value; 38% and 31% respectively. By 1922, assessors were valuing real property at nearly twice the rate of personal property. Real property was assessed at 46%, while personal property was assessed at 24%.\(^{34}\) During this period, there was also a moderate group of professionals that, led by economist R. A. Seligman, helped popularize opposition to the personal property tax. There is no indication though that these more or less non-ideological professionals would have violated the law in the same way that single-taxers did and so there is little reason to believe that they contributed to these changes in assessment practice.

The last financial instrument single-taxers used to increase land taxes was the special assessment. This was a practice—long used in municipal governance—that funded infrastructural development with special taxes on property directly benefited.\(^{35}\) The process became more systematic during the period as \textit{ad hoc} taxes were supplanted by permanent taxing bodies that would fund development consistently with levies on property, sometimes in the form of special taxes on land proportional to benefit. From 1902 to 1932, the percentage of bonded indebtedness of special districts relative to total municipal debt increased from .3% to 9%.\(^{36}\) Much of this was purely practical; debt limits made it difficult to fund large projects without special assessments. But, unlike the attack on the personal property tax, which emanated from a variety of corners, special assessments were, when justified, overwhelmingly praised as a way to


capture the unearned increment obtained by property when roads and other public services were installed nearby. Municipal experts like Delos Wilcox and Frederic C. Howe wrote about it as the closest approximation to land value taxation available under the constitutional limits of the American tax system.\textsuperscript{37}

Single-taxers would often rely on special assessments to fund infrastructure. In his first five years as mayor, Tom Johnson collected on average 46\% more revenue from special assessment than had been collected in the preceding five year span.\textsuperscript{38} Fred Kern, the single-tax mayor of the small, predominately German town of Belleville, Ill, followed a similar policy. In 1903, he added twenty miles of paved road and thirty miles of sewer to a city which had previously had little more than a mile of each. He increased municipal infrastructure twentyfold, relying exclusively upon special assessments.\textsuperscript{39}

Although practical opportunities to realize public ownership were less abundant, the principle of public ownership did become closely intertwined with that of special assessments. Debt limits made it impossible for cities to fund publically owned utilities out of their regular revenue. By necessity, such projects would need to be funded with special assessments. Thus pleas for municipal ownership inevitably went hand-in-hand with special assessments for pragmatic reasons.\textsuperscript{40} But, it was also the case that the Plumb Plan, the most prominent proposal for national ownership of railroads during World War I, included a provision for special assessments even though the federal government was subject to no such borrowing limits. Thus, while there were structural reasons the two were connected, there was also an ideological

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Public}, March 12, 1909.  
\textsuperscript{40} Edward White to Frank Walsh, March 15, 1929, box 16, Frank Walsh Papers, New York Public Library, New York City.
predisposition to connect them. The nation’s leading advocates of public ownership were also very much interested in taxing “the unearned increment” and public infrastructure projects were a particularly salient instance in which the community directed increased property values.

The expanded social services that these heftier property regimes provided urban voters garnered political capital for single-taxers. Perhaps the clearest and most historically significant example of this was George L. Record. Record was a charismatic, if perhaps slightly eccentric public figure. A one-time factory hand and stenographer, he worked his way through college and became a successful lawyer, though he always bore the mark of his early poverty in the form of two hands disfigured in a childhood industrial accident. According to Amos Pinchot, who worked for two of Record’s three Senate campaigns, he exceeded all other contemporary speakers – Woodrow Wilson, Robert La Follette, and Louis Brandeis included — in “forceful, clear exposition.”

Whether or not Record was as persuasive as reported is unclear, but it was not how he came to a position of influence in the Garden State. His career began in 1901 when he approached Jersey City mayor Mark Fagan with the ideas of Henry George and was appointed Jersey City’s Corporation Counsel. The administration organized a study of the local tax regime that found over a million dollars of untaxed corporate property. With this money in the city’s revenue stream, Fagan built an alliance of small property owners, who saw their taxes decline, and working class constituents, who now had access to once unimagined social services. Lincoln Steffen observed that with the new revenue Fagan was able to “buy a site for a new high school; begin one school, finish another, put up eleven temporary schools” and furthermore had “built a free bath; established free dispensaries, extended one park, bought another, improved two more,

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41 George L. Record, How to Abolish Poverty (Jersey City: George L. Record Memorial Association, 1936), 11-21.
and given free concerts in them.”

With his new political clout, Record was able to become the boss of a progressive contingent of “New Idea” Republicans. In 1911, when Woodrow Wilson established himself as a successful Governor of New Jersey, it would largely be because he was able to build an alliance with this break-away group of Republicans led by Record.

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Though voters might have concluded that a Record or a Purdy had improved their condition, their reforms were quiet and hard to understand. The individual during this period who most captured public attention for the single tax was Joseph Fels. Fels embodied the elite, urban cosmopolitanism of the movement. Born in Virginia during the 1850s, he was raised in Philadelphia. In 1893, he met the inventor of a new formula for laundry soap and promised to make his product profitable. Managing the marketing and organization of Fels-Naptha soap, he made a fortune and took up a second residence in England.

Fels first began funding the single-tax in the 1890s as a contributor to Philadelphia’s Vacant Land Cultivation Association, the model for a similar society he funded on the other side of the Atlantic, the Vacant Land Cultivation Society of Great Britain. These associations provided the unemployed with unused city lots that they could cultivate to support themselves, but, according to Steffens, Fels’ interest was not in “feeding empty stomachs; he was trying to fill the vacant heads of the poor and the overcrowded heads of the rich with the sight of what men could do for themselves if they could but get access to wasted land.” That his aim was, in

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movement parlance, justice, not charity, is evident in that he was equally happy to follow the opposite course. He held a large plot in central Philadelphia out of use and refused offers of municipal improvements. He had intentionally entered into the business of idle land speculation to demonstrate how much the value of land would increase without any effort on the part of the owner. In 1909, Fels made his fortune the centerpiece of an international movement, offering $25,000 a year to support the single tax movement in America and €5,000 a year to the faithful in England, Canada, Wales, New Zealand, Switzerland, and Denmark. In each case he promised to match contributions in excess of that sum.

With the Fels Fund, George’s appeal to diverse religious traditions had born fruit. Fels believed that the single tax was integral both to his Jewish faith and his Zionism. He donated generously to the Jewish Territorial Organization and worked with Israel Zangwill to found Jewish single-tax colonies. Zangwill, author of The Melting Pot, was less orthodox than Fels, causing some controversy when, for example, Zangwill praised the principle of ability to pay in taxation. In a spat with Zangwill, Fels retorted the single tax “was not revealed by Henry George, the new Moses, as you call him, but was revealed by Moses Moses, the old Moses, your Moses, my Moses, and the Jews’ Moses.” Fels was referring to George’s argument in “Moses” that the great Jewish prophet had established the Jubilee to prevent the accumulation of landed property. It proved to be a persuasive argument for many, as no doubt, did Fels’ promise to donate half of his fortune to any organization that built a Jewish single-tax colony.

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48 From some perspectives, Fels’ Zionism might be construed as antithetical to the typical single-tax antipathy for imperialism. But the Fels family was at least hypothetically opposed to anything that would dispossess the native Arab population, proposing cohabitation, and, in a rare exception to their single-minded devotion to the doctrine of George, the right of Arabs to take up land value taxation at their own pace. Public, Oct. 1 1909. Public, Sept. 27, 1919. Although Mary Fels had, between the two, been the most avid proponent of settlement in present day
The Fels Fund Commission was a peculiar institution, shaped by the individualism of the movement. It was never intended to be a mass organization; it held national conferences, but they seem to have been designed principally to justify to donors decisions that had been made in advance. Real power was vested in a select board of movement leaders, including Lincoln Steffens, Frederic Howe, Jackson Ralston, and George Briggs. Tom Johnson served as Treasurer and Daniel Kiefer as Chair. After Johnson’s death, A. B. du Pont took his place and the leading suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt joined the board. Steffens and Howe, as leading propagandists with periodical connections, were in charge of publicity.

But the activities of the Commission itself were relatively limited. Its principle responsibility was deciding how Fels’ donation would be distributed. As a policy, it only funded individuals, not groups, exaggerating the movement’s reliance on high-level political entrepreneurs. Typically these individuals were engaged in local campaigns for land value taxation or direct legislation. In effect, The Fels Fund Commission was a global organization, invested almost exclusively in local politics.

Most of the daily operations of the Commission fell to its chair, Daniel Kiefer, a portly, vegetarian, Jewish apparel merchant who had voted for William McKinley in 1896. He broke with McKinley and joined the single tax movement in reaction to the Spanish-American War—a testament to how closely anti-imperialism and the single tax were connected.49 When Tom

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49 Public, August 12, 1910.

49 Mary Fels to Beatrice Webb, Oct. 16, 1929, box 95, Baker Papers.

Israel, the concern that this would manifest itself in something like imperialism led her to reject the idea that Jewish state was a necessary corollary to settlement: “It may interest you to know that I do not belong to the Zionist organization. In fact, I am opposed to its methods and aspiration. To live in Palestine in simplicity, in search for prophetic unfoldment, the Jew does not need Balfour’s declaration. Indeed, he must not, and cannot build a structure which is to give light to the world, on a foundation of injustice to the Arabs. The Jew of all people should not embody the idea of a particular home. The Holy Land should indeed remain Holy—for everybody; and those who choose to live there must be happy to find there a home, without insisting on its being only their home.” Mary Fels to Beatrice Webb, Oct. 16, 1929, box 95, Baker Papers.
Johnson’s fortune had been exhausted, Kiefer picked up the slack in funding *The Public*. He distinguished himself as an organizer and fundraiser during Herbert Bigelow’s campaign for direct democracy in Ohio. Stridently ideological, Kiefer joked about using the guillotine to cure the conservatism of his hometown of Cincinnati and likely excelled at fundraising because he was able to convince others to see their convictions through as thoroughly as he did.

The Fels Fund Commission, following in the footsteps of the People’s Budget, tried to take the reform past the municipal level. Employing a typically incremental approach, its members dedicated the first year of their organization to state level campaigns for the initiative and referendum. They employed high-sounding rhetoric about the value of direct democracy, but at their first national conference in 1910 they posited a more pragmatic rationale. The referendum would allow single-taxers to bypass legislatures and state uniformity clauses to institute land value taxation in a single stroke, rather than through the onerous route of amending the constitution and then passing legislation. As a consequence, the referendum was at least as much about the lax mechanisms it established for amending the constitution, as it was about popular power. But, it was much easier to build an electoral coalition around democracy – which resonated with single-tax sympathies anyway – than it was to rewrite state constitutions to allow for the expropriation of landed property.

William U’Ren would be the face of the cause of direct legislation. The Fels Fund Commission donated $5,331 to the lecturer John Z. White to initiate campaigns for direct

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50 *Public*, January 6, 1911.
51 Daniel Kiefer to Brand Whitlock, Dec. 12 1908, Whitlock Papers. “I am looking for a good sized French Revolution to hoist some of this same number of the earth, and don’t know what would help with torch and guillotine to rid the earth of some of these very desirable ‘bizzy bizzyness’ men would hang you and me if they got the chance first.”
elections in New Mexico, Colorado, Arkansas, and Minnesota. This paled in comparison to the $19,089 given to U’Ren to lead the campaign in Oregon. The son of a blacksmith who emigrated from Wales, U’Ren had studied law at night while working as a miner in Colorado. But, U’Ren needed a cause to live. In 1889, he had traveled to Hawaii to take his life, only to encounter *Progress and Poverty* and rediscover a will to live. He then led the charge in Oregon for the Australian Ballot, direct legislation, and nonbinding Senatorial elections, the closest thing to popular elections that was then constitution. After the Fels Fund Commission was formed, U’Ren used its financial support so that he could work fulltime to promote Oregon as a national model and to use the instruments he had helped establish to transform it into the first single-tax state.

U’Ren was an unknown quantity to many at the first Fels Fund conference, but seems to have swayed his audience. In the Pacific Northwest, he had spent the majority of his career removed physically and to some small degree intellectually – U’Ren and many other Pacific Northwest single-taxers supported prohibition, for example – from the movement that reportedly saved his life. To many attendees, U’Ren was principally associated with electoral reform and the decision to invest the organization’s funds into something ostensibly tangential to land value taxation did not sit well with all of the donors present. U’Ren bluntly admitted that he had toned

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52 *The Single Tax Conference: Held in New York City Nov. 19 and 20, 1910* (Cincinnati: Fels Fund Commission, 1911), 6. “In most of the States where sentiment in favor of Land Value Taxation seemed strongest the State constitution must be amended. To amend a State constitution requires a popular vote, and to secure a popular vote a proposition must be submitted by the legislature, except in states that have the Initiative and Referendum. It is almost as difficult to get a measure through the average Legislature, submitting anything that is recognized as a Land Value Tax measure, as it is to get the same Legislature to adopt the measure outright. The chances for putting the Land Value system into effect are unquestionably best in States where the people have the Constitutional Initiative, so it has always seemed clear to the Commission that we could secure practical results soonest in those states, and hasten results in other States best by helping them also to secure the Initiative and Referendum”

down his radicalism to win electoral reform, but that he had only begun his campaign for electoral reform as a means to the single tax: “I quit talking Single Tax, not because I was any less in favor of it but because I saw that the first job was to get the Initiative and Referendum, so that the people, independently of the Legislature will let them have it.” Elsewhere he even more bluntly testified that “all the work we have done for Direct Legislation has been done with the Single Tax in view.\(^{54}\)

The Oregon campaign secured the first major statewide victory for the movement. In 1910, U’Ren put a referendum on the ballot that eliminated the poll tax and instituted local home rule in taxation. He built a coalition with the Oregon State Federation of Labor, which, in a region full of extractive industries, perceived land value taxation as a way to get more land on the market, creating higher rates of employment and easier access to capital.\(^{55}\) The Fels Fund Commission sent a pamphlet to every registered voter in the state, with a detailed breakdown of how the single tax would affect different classes of property owners. W. G. Eggleston was paid to travel from Berkeley and work on the 128 page document.\(^{56}\) The referendum passed with a

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\(^{54}\) Otis L. Graham Jr., *The Great Campaigns Reform and War in America 1900-1928* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1971), 158. *The Single Tax Conference: Held in New York City Nov. 19 and 20, 1910* (Cincinnati: Fels Fund Commission, 1911), 22. At the Conference U’Ren claimed: “I read ‘Progress and Poverty’ in 1882 and I went just as crazy over the Single Tax idea as anyone else ever did. I knew I wanted the Single Tax, and that was about all I did know. I thought I could get it by agitation, and was often disgusted with a world that refused to be agitated for what I wanted. In 1882 I learned what the Initiative and Referendum is, and then I saw the way to the Single Tax. So I quit talking Single Tax, not because I was any less in favor of it but because I saw that the first job was to get the Initiative and Referendum, so that the people, independently of the Legislature will let them have it.” William U’Ren to Daniel Kiefer, Sept. 5 1909, Lincoln Steffens Papers. To Steffens he asserted much the same thing: “I am not so well known as a single taxer in Oregon as I am for some other things. But I have been advertised somewhat in that way, and have never sought to avoid it. I think for the past seventeen years I have not publicly attempted to put that idea forward. I have been of opinion that other things had to be done first. But I think my friends on the Oregonian will see that I am publicly advertised all over Oregon as a single taxer as soon as they think it would do harm to any measure in which I may be interested, and certainly as soon as the single tax is the issue before the people of Oregon.”


plurality of 2,044. Multnomah County, which includes Portland, contributed a plurality of 2,000, setting a precedent wherein urban districts would provide the bulk of electoral support for the single tax.57

With the financial support to devote himself full-time to politics, U’Ren also took a leading role in the national campaign for direct legislation, laying the foundation for the modern conception of him as the father of the initiative and referendum. In addition to beginning a campaign for the nation’s first presidential primary bill, he promoted his state’s array of new democratic reforms with a pamphlet disseminated nationally with funding from the Fels Commission. The timing was propitious.58 The Governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson, though initially opposed to the idea, was considering the adoption of the referendum and initiative. George Record arranged a meeting between Wilson and U’Ren. U’Ren could not afford the trip, but once again the Fels Fund Commission provided for him.59 Wilson has been characterized as unduly obstinate, but U’Ren won him over, producing, according to Norman Hapgood, “the biggest change in [Wilson’s] thought made by anybody.”60 With this level of influence over a future president, U’Ren enshrined himself as the leading voice for direct legislation.

U’Ren and the Fels Fund Commission, now overconfident, saw the election of 1912 as the moment to consolidate their gains. During that election cycle, they promoted a ballot measure

57 Public, Jan. 11, 1911.
58 Public, Aug. 12, 1910.
59 U’Ren to Joseph Fels and Daniel Kiefer, Jan. 9 1913, James Barry Papers. “Governor Wilson is elected President. He is for the Initiative and Referendum, and for a good deal more than that, as you know from reading his recent speeches and present writings. You know what he says about my visit to him. I know that without Fels’ money, both to pay my living expenses and to pay for that trip east, I should not have seen Governor Wilson in November, 1910.”
that would exempt all personal property and improvements, while imposing a graduated tax on land values, rights of way, franchises, natural resources, and water power. A couple of factors appeared to make this the optimal time and place. There was a consistent basis of support in urban areas. U’Ren had engineered a strong alliance with labor unions in extractive industries. Most importantly though, the Pacific Northwest was subject to the same matrix of metropolitan competition for development that had helped spread land value taxation through British Columbia. In the year after all improvements were exempted in Vancouver, the number of immigrants from Washington State to Canada doubled. During the campaign, single-taxers made ample reference to the prosperity of British Columba and Vancouver under land value taxation. The success of single-tax campaigns would often be proportionate to their proximity to Canada; the single-tax had a strong showing in Seattle, and directly across the border from Canada in Everett, Washington the electorate voted two to one for the single-tax.

Instead of reaching the promised land, however, U’Ren and the Fels Fund Commission ran the Oregon movement into the ground. A graduated land tax would have unfairly put into a lower tax bracket families that divided their property between themselves or individuals with property that was spread across multiple taxing jurisdiction. The poor construction of the legislation therefore did a lot to discredit it, but so too did the tone deafness its supporters. Local papers railed against Fels, an out-of-state Jew influencing Oregon politics with his fortune. The proposal lost with only 27.8% of the vote and the home rule amendment was overturned in the backlash. In contrast, a pre-Fels Fund referendum for immediate application of the single tax in 1908 had secured 34.5% without a fraction of the resources available in the 1912 campaign.

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But as was often the case, the failure of the large, propagandistic Fels Fund campaign occurred in tandem with the success of quiet bureaucratic victories for land value taxation. During the same period, assessors in Portland began undervaluing improvements, which were assessed at 50% of value, as compared to land which was assessed at 75% of value.63

The Fels Fund Commission made an even bigger mistake by choosing Missouri, with its large class of property owning farmers, as the site for one of its other major campaigns in 1912. Rent in St. Louis was comparable to that in New York City, which accounts for that city’s strong single tax movement, including one of the most important single-tax publications in the nation, *Reedy’s Mirror*. When reform Governor Joseph W. Folk was presented with a list of St. Louis subscribers to *The Public* he exclaimed that the entire “moral force of the community” was represented. Several of his closest associates, including George Creel and Frank Walsh, were among the faithful.64 With this in mind, The Fels Fund Commission invested resources in a statewide referendum to immediately end the taxation of personal property and gradually decrease the taxation on improvements until 1920, when land would be the only type of property taxed.

Missouri was not a complete miscalculation; the referendum secured 42% of the vote in St. Louis. Outside of the state’s four largest cities however, it obtained only 5% of the vote. The reaction was so visceral that Frank Walsh had to appeal to his associates within the Democratic Party not to roll back direct legislation. Rocks were thrown at single tax orators. The single-tax appeals to their international accomplishments struck an altogether different note in rural

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Missouri. The British M.P. Francis Neilson narrowly escaped a lynching when he traveled to Missouri to campaign for the referendum. Neilson was a famous actor, playwright, and director who, as a Liberal Parliamentarian, had been active in the fight for the People’s Budget. Years later, he would collaborate with Albert Jay Nock to found the seminal libertarian journal, *The Freeman*. But in all likelihood, rural audiences only heard a Brit proposing to take away their land.  

Farmers distrusted the single tax because of their economic interest in land, but the near lynching of Nielsen, like the anti-Semitic attacks on Fels, speak to a parallel cultural divide that cut off urban, cosmopolitan single-taxers from rural America. In a speech on the floor of the Senate in 1917, Illinois Republican Lawrence Sherman denounced the work of the Fels Fund Commission, which he claimed was then influencing war preparedness programs, so that now reformers were proposing to “conquer Germany with the single tax.” But the real thrust of his derision was that the single tax was “a principle born of the miasma of a great city.” Its adherents were those who “never see daylight except, filtered, bleached-out rays in the great canyons of the office buildings.” These were people who “do not know what a corn pone tastes like… have so little leg and lung power they could not run half a mile” and ultimately “obtain a lopsided, unhealthy view of life.”

A year later, Sherman made a similar tirade against single-taxers which was similarly rooted in this timeless rural discourse in which urban knowledge is understood as artificial and ungrounded. This time though, he overlaid it with implications of foreignness. Now, he alleged that these cosmopolitan urbanites were “gentlemen who have no idea where a potato comes from—whether it grows on a tree or whether it is concocted by a French cook in

the kitchen of some high-class hotel.” The rural reaction to the Fels Fund campaigns suggests that in these diatribes, Sherman articulated views held by a powerful contingent of the electorate.

Although less severely so than in Missouri, The Fels Fund campaign in Colorado spoke—on multiple levels—to the relative efficacy of administrative tax reform as opposed to electioneering in instituting land value taxation. The fight for home rule in that state had begun at the early the 20th century under single-taxer James Bucklin. When home rule was finally established, land value taxation went up to vote in Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Denver. Only Pueblo voted in favor. But the local assessor simply refused to enforce the law, not the first time an assessor had unilaterally decided not to enforce single-tax legislation. Conversely in the same, year Denver voted down land value taxation with an astounding majority of 27,125 votes to 7,988. Ironically the Somers system was, shortly thereafter, established in Denver with little notice or controversy, so that land value taxation was implemented in Colorado where it was shot down by tremendous majorities, but not where it won at the polls.

Not only did the Colorado case indicate that power over the assessor’s office was the only meaningful avenue to the single tax, it indicated that citizens were evaluating the single tax principally through the prism of material self-interest. Denver single-taxers lost their election after a gigantic but stridently ideological campaign in which every voter in the city was sent a copy of George’s “The Crisis of Poverty” and “The Single Tax;” 30,000 copies of the single-tax periodical The Groundhog were distributed; and one hundred ninety-three door to door canvassers were employed. The Pueblo election, on the other hand, was won by sending circulars to every registered voter in the town that refrained from mentioning the single-tax.

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68 Chicago Daily Tribune, Apr. 28, 1894.
69 Public, April 13, 1917, 361.
Instead, voters were provided personalized estimates of citizen’s tax burdens under the new systems; convinced they would pay less, citizens voted for the single tax.\textsuperscript{70}

In Houston, J. J. Pastoriza blended the mass politics of the Fels Fund with the technocratic activism of Somers. As usual, the introduction of politics obstructed the practical progress of land value taxation. Pastoriza was a one-time iron molder, who made a small fortune first as a printer and then as the business manager of the city’s only daily newspaper. In 1911 he was elected tax commissioner by a large majority; he garnered ten times as many votes as the Socialist candidate despite his Hispanic heritage. During the campaign, he legitimated his beliefs by arguing that the mayor agreed with him and had already quietly undervalued improvements relative to land.\textsuperscript{71} Once elected, however, Pastoriza added $12,000,000 to the tax rolls, claiming that land had been undervalued.\textsuperscript{72}

Pastoriza was using the guise of equalization and fair valuation to institute his pet plan. In this respect he was not unique, but, Pastoriza did not stop where others assessors did. A year later, in 1912, he announced that he would exempt all personal property from taxation. He also acknowledged that his previous assessment had instituted the Somers system and that he planned to place a progressively larger burden on land.\textsuperscript{73} Courts only intervened in assessments when there was an extremely blatant violation of the law; publically announcing the unlawfulness of municipal assessments crossed that line. In 1915, Pastoriza’s assessments were struck down.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} “This is NOT to be a single tax paper. It is to be a statewide (sic) taxpayers paper that will rarely if ever mention ‘single tax’ by name. As I did in the 1913 Pueblo campaign, we shall copy the tax schedules of half a dozen cities’ work out the assessments on a single tax basis, and present to all who save money under the single tax a comparative statement showing their savings compared with what they pay now.” G. J. Knapp to Peabody, Jan. 8 1933, box 46, Peabody Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC. Young, 202-208.

\textsuperscript{71} Public, April 28, 1911.

\textsuperscript{72} Public, Aug. 11, 1911.


What Pastoriza accomplished, however, was to translate the bureaucratic accomplishments of the movement into popular support. Pastoriza claimed that in the two year period from 1912 to 1913 building permits in Houston increased by 55%, bank deposits grew by $7,000,000, rents fell, and the population increased by 25%. The veracity of these “magical” results were contested, but the voters of Houston sided with Pastoriza.\textsuperscript{75} Between 1911 and 1915 his vote increased from 3,587 to 5,659. In 1915, he secured 1,963 votes more than his closest opponent. Pastoriza was invited to Austin to present his ideas to the State Assembly.\textsuperscript{76}

Pastoriza decided to parlay his popularity into a campaign for mayor of Houston. The \textit{Public} solicited donations and the assistance of the Fels Fund Commission to send subscriptions to over four hundred editors throughout the state so that the single-tax message would permeate the local press.\textsuperscript{77} During the race, Pastoriza did not shy away from his beliefs; he told those who suggested he would be more likely to win if he did that “the Singletax was my religion, and that I would not go back on my religion for any office in the United States.”\textsuperscript{78} His closest opponent, C. W. Robinson, campaigned as much on Pastoriza’s Hispanic ancestry, as his radical ideology. The memory of the Alamo, however, was not quite as strong as Pastoriza’s record. He bested Robinson by over one thousand votes.\textsuperscript{79} The victory proved hollow; Pastoriza died from heart failure within months of his election.

\textsuperscript{75} Young, \textit{The Single Tax Movement in the United States}, 201-202.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Dallas Morning News}, Feb. 21, 1915.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{The Public}, May 9, 1906. Interestingly in 1900 Post split with the Chicago Single Tax Club when it proposed using the office of assessor to unilaterally institute the single tax. Post argued that it was undemocratic. That he now supported it probably represents experience with the assessment process and the failure of democratic reform. \textit{Public}, August 25, 1900.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Public}, July 13, 1917.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Public}, March 9, 1917.
But, after the collapse of Oregon, California was the real epicenter of the Commission’s referendum campaigns. In 1914 single-taxers in that state received $16,978 or nearly half the annual budget of the Fels Fund Commission.\(^8^0\) This was partially due to the size of the state, which required a large and expensive campaign, but also because it had a well-established basis of support. Its leading figures there were former associates of Henry George from his early days in San Francisco. These included James Maguire, one-time Gubernatorial Candidate and James Barry, editor of the San Francisco Star. In 1911 California activists received encouraging news in the establishment of direct legislation, a unanimous vote in favor of home rule by the California Municipal League, and the election of a single-tax Mayor, J. Stitt Wilson, in Berkeley.\(^8^1\) Although the candidate of the Socialist Party, Wilson believed that any system of social welfare had to rest on land value taxation.\(^8^2\)

The campaign to secure the single tax in California through direct legislation was making progress until the Fels Fund Commission again pushed too far. Supporters coalesced into the California League for Home Rule in Taxation and organized a referendum in the next election cycle. In 1912, they secured 40.9% of the vote; two years later they secured 41.6%. On both occasions they received large majorities in Los Angeles and San Francisco.\(^8^3\) As was typically the case, the issue was breaking down along an urban-rural divide. But, The Fels Fund Commission grew impatient and decided that victory would best be secured by increasing the stakes. The commission began funding activists in southern California, proposing the immediate, statewide confiscation of all land values to the exclusion of every other form of revenue. The

\(^8^0\) “Joseph Fels Fund of America” Receipts and Disbursement, Jan. 1 to Dec. 31 1914, box 6, Barry Papers.

\(^8^1\) Public, Sept. 18, 1914.

\(^8^2\) In a speech on the single tax he observed “no progressive policy for the socialization of our public utilities or the extension of any public service, is safe, or indeed possible, unless accompanied by a sound and scientific policy of municipal taxation.” Public, July 7, 1911.

\(^8^3\) Public, Nov. 15, 1912.
most direct single-tax proposal ever put forward in the U.S., it came to be known as “The Great Adventure Movement.”

The Great Adventure Movement marked the most significant schism the movement experienced between the intellectual descendants of the single-tax limited – interested exclusively in the immediate application of the single-tax – and George’s more pragmatic disciples, who believed that the single tax would come slowly as part of a larger program of reform. The Great Adventurers, like Luke North, were largely Southern Californians with no personal connections to George or his close associates. Decried by Post as “extreme individualists,” they were more anti-statist and protective of property rights than their peers.84 The more pragmatic advocates of home rule and an incremental application of the single tax had been close associates of George and were confident that they represented his legacy. One complained of the Great Adventurers: “If Henry George could come back and look at the pesky mob that claims to represent him I believe he would be filled with remorse and irresistible homicidal impulse.” They looked back to George’s exhortation in Protection or Free Trade to strike at the point of least resistance and argued that the Great Adventurers were following the “line of greatest resistance.” Reading their papers was “cruel and unusual punishment.”85

Perhaps the most egregious element of it was that the ascendancy of the Great Adventure movement was solely attributable to the impatience of the Fels Fund Commission. James Barry complained to Anna George De Mille that “paternalistic fiends in the East spoil[ed] our program.”86 This was a disruptive breach of the norms of a movement that had always been organized around autonomous local activists, whose gravitas was typically measured by their

84 Louis Post, “The Prophet of San Francisco” p. 280-282, Box Five, Post Papers.
86 Barry to De Mille, Aug. 24, 1922, box 3, Barry Papers.
proximity to George. In 1917, state single-taxers organized a conference to unite their forces. The Socialist mayor Berkeley J. Stitt Wilson presided, likely because he was, while sympathetic, not particularly identifiable with either group. Still, the Great Adventurers decided that they received insufficient representation, and simply walked out.\(^87\)

As was typically the case with campaigns engineered by the Fels Fund Commission, the Great Adventure attracted a lot of attention but probably hindered the implementation of land value taxation. The author Upton Sinclair paid to have ads in favor of the referendum printed in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Record*, and *The Pasadena News Star*.\(^88\) But it was opposed by progressives who believed it would exempt franchises from taxation and by conservationists who observed that without special exemptions for timber the referendum would encourage deforestation.\(^89\) In 1916, the Great Adventure obtained 32\% of the vote.

Not only did these returns constitute a significant drop from the 41\% secured in the home rule referendum two years prior, it meant a switch in momentum. Whereas home rule picked up votes with each election, the Great Adventure lost them. James Barry’s believed that “every defeat they so justly suffer is attributed to the unpopularity of Single Tax, which makes it still more unpopular.”\(^90\) The popular base for the movement remained in San Francisco and across the bay in Alameda County.\(^91\) Because the proposition continued to win in San Francisco, it was probable that, with home rule, that city would have established land value taxation. James Barry wrote Anna George De Mille that if home rule had stayed on the ballot “in this very City where your father ‘The Prophet’ wrote ‘Progress and Poverty’ of which I ‘set type’ – we would very

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87 *Public*, Jan 19, 1917.
89 *Public*, Jan 14, 1916.
90 James Barry to Stoughton Cooley, June 6, 1924, Box 3, Barry Papers.
soon, I think, have had Single Tax.”\textsuperscript{92} Clearly for Barry, this sentimental victory would have meant much more than the remote prospect of a statewide single tax.

The last of the great popular battles for land value taxation was in New York. That state did not have direct legislation, which proved an insuperable barrier, but the high rents of New York City gave the movement traction. In 1908, a group of social workers approached Benjamin C. Marsh to organize an Exhibit on the Congestion of Population. Over 70,000 people visited the exhibit when it was displayed at the American Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. It depicted conditions in New York and compared them unfavorably to the benign conditions produced by land value taxation in Europe. The centerpiece of the show was an exhibit of two cubes, one barely over half an inch across, the other four and a half feet. One was a scaled representation of the value of land in Manhattan in 1624, the other the value in 1907; the display asked the audience “Who created it? Who gets it?”\textsuperscript{93}

Marsh’s work attracted enough public notice that Mayor William Gaynor was directed by the City Aldermen to appoint a committee to investigate the cost of rent. Gaynor was not inclined to object. Gaynor’s career had been heavily promoted by The Public since his early days as a judge. Gaynor is still somewhat known for his idiosyncrasies; nowadays The New York Times remembers him as an unusually philosophic and literary mayor, with a libertarian antipathy for restrictive legislation that earned him the respect of H. L. Mencken.\textsuperscript{94} Less unusual than he initially seems, Whitlock’s literary and libertarian qualities were similar to those of Brand Whitlock. Like his Ohio colleague, he took batons away from police and instructed them

\textsuperscript{92} Barry to De Mille, Aug. 24, 1922, box 3, Barry Papers.
\textsuperscript{94} New York Times, Jan. 1, 2013.
to refrain from arresting minor offenders. Immediately upon taking office he wrote the single-tax assessor Lawson Purdy a public letter inquiring about the exemption of personal property from taxation.  

The City Commission on Congestion of Population, appointed by the mayor in reaction to Marsh’s exhibit, served as the launching point for a vigorous popular campaign for land value taxation. Marsh was appointed its Secretary and Fredric C. Howe testified. The committee released a report calling for the rate of taxation on improvements to be halved over a period of five years so that the burden would fall principally on land. In 1911, this proposal was introduced into the State Legislature by T. D. Sullivan and Assemblyman Shortt. The Sullivan-Shortt Bill was endorsed by the three largest labor unions of the city: the Central Federated Union, the Central Labor Union of Brooklyn, and the United Hebrew Trades. The Unions were joined by the Municipal League of Savings and Loan Associations and the Tenants Union. The Tenants Union pointed to the example of Vancouver to argue that land value taxation would reduce rents.  

The People’s Institute hosted speakers, – all of them in favor of the reform – including Walter Laidlaw, Executive Secretary of the Federation of Churches; John Flynn, of the Central Labor Union of Brooklyn; and J. Aspinwall Hodge, representing the People’s Institute itself.  

One “mass meeting for lower rents,” featured Henry Moskowitz; John J. Murphy, Tenement House Commissioner; several Yiddish language speakers; and the great progressive rabbi Stephen Wise.  

As opposed to the Pacific Northwest, where single-tax propagandists often focused on how land value taxation would open up land for resource extraction, in New York they concentrated on how it would encourage building and reduce rents.

95 Public, Nov. 2, 1901.  
96 New York Tribune, Jan, 3, 1912.  
98 The Sun, Oct. 27, 1911.
Most important was the endorsement of Mayor Gaynor. From the perspective of history, it was a tremendous vindication of George; he had lost the race for mayor in the short term, but won in the long term, without any of the exposure to risk that personal office would have entailed. At a speech for the Lower Rents Exhibit, organized by Georgist Robert Ingersoll and the Congestion Committee, he admitted that “the chapter in Mr. George’s book that proposed to do it right off the reel on the grounds that all injustice should be remedied forthwith did not commend itself to me.” But, he acknowledged that “the taking of ground rent by taxation may be the perfect system of taxation, as philosophers and economists admit the world over.” Finally, he endorsed the plan of the Sullivan-Shortt Bill because it would implement George’s plan “so gradually and slyly that we neither feel it nor know it.” He concluded that “Any system of taxation which stimulates the building of building, which multiples the number of buildings, automatically and necessarily lowers rents,” emphasizing the important role that tenancy had in promoting the idea in New York.\(^99\) It was a nuanced endorsement, but it essentially argued that all the moderate forms of land value taxation gaining traction were stepping stones to the gradual implementation of the single tax.

Despite considerable popular uproar, the Sullivan-Shortt Bill never made much progress. It was blocked in committee. The Long Island Real Estate Exchange claimed credit for its defeat.\(^100\) The bill was put forward several more times under different names but was never submitted to a vote. Benjamin Marsh, who, in 1914, received over $3,000 from Fels Fund for his work with the Congestion Committee, wrote State Senator Franklin D. Roosevelt to propose a State Commission on the Distribution of Population, similar to the municipal one that had begun

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the agitation for the Sullivan-Shortt Bill. Roosevelt agreed to submit the bill, but the commission never materialized.\textsuperscript{101}

In 1914, the incoming mayor, John Purroy Mitchel, appointed a Committee on Taxation, which proved less favorable than Gaynor’s. Ostensibly about taxation generally, the committee’s report released in 1916 included a long study of the land value taxation in Western Canada conducted by the Columbia Professor R. H. Haig. A minority report, signed by Frederic C. Leubuscher, Delos Wilcox, Lawson Purdy, Frederic Howe, and Frederic Shipley, with a concurring opinion from Robert Binkerd, called for the “untaxing of buildings.” The majority report, on the other hand, concluded against the reform. It acknowledged that though the system seemed to lower rents elsewhere, there were also other factors that could explain the development of housing in these locations and that it was unclear what the effect would be in a more settled city like New York.

Most fundamentally, the report illustrated the political difficulty of rent reduction; it benefited a great number of people in a small way but would injure a small number of people in a severe way. The majority concluded firmly in favor of the morality of favoring special interests in favor of a diffuse public interest. “Losses and gains,” they observed “must be weighed against each other.” The report concluded, “It would ... be neither fair nor wise to cause the owners of real estate... especially the owners of the modest parcels of real estate, to suffer diminution in the amount of their invested capital because of vague and uncertain benefits to other classes that might ultimately be expected.” \textsuperscript{102} This was fundamentally antithetical to a classical republican philosophy that prioritized the public interest, in such a way as to all but entirely foreclose the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{101} “Joseph Fels Fund of America” Receipts and Disbursements, Jan 1 to December 31 1914, box 6, Barry Papers. Benjamin Marsh the New York Congestion Committee to Franklin Roosevelt, March 1\textsuperscript{st} 1913, Franklin Roosevelt to Benjamin Marsh March 8 1913, Cont 10, Papers as State Senator, Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

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possibility of finding common ground. Franklin Tomlin wrote a minority report in which he concluded bitterly that “practically all the argument against an increased tax on land is based on the claim that it will injure the business of land speculation.”

In a sense, Henry George’s New York City was closer to Dublin than Poughkeepsie and this fact had not changed very much. The cosmopolitanism of New York meant that some of the more interesting outgrowths of the agitation were still international. As a boy, the Rabbi Stephen Wise had seen George speak in the 1886 race; it was one of his “very precious memories.” His interest in the movement, however, clearly piqued with the rent crisis in New York; he became a Vice-President of the Georgist group, The Society to Lower Rents and Reduce Taxes on Buildings. He carried this enthusiasm over to his other great preoccupation, Zionism. Speaking as the president of the American Zionist Organization in 1918, he urged his coreligionists to follow the principles of George’s speech “Moses:” “What a great thing it would be… if the ideal which goes back to the Mosaic commonwealth, which was revived by a man of prophetic genius, Henry George, and again by that man and real Jew, Joseph Fels, should at last find fulfillment in the Jewish Land.” The American Zionist Organization followed his advice and issued a statement in favor of the common ownership of land at their annual conference in Pittsburgh. Louis Post was commissioned to write a pamphlet about the application of Henry George’s ideas to the Holy Land. With this endorsement Bernard A. Rosenblatt, President of the American Zion Commonwealth, went to the London Inter-Allied Zionist Conference a year later in 1919 and successfully convinced the international organization to endorse the use of land

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105 *Public*, Jan. 4, 1918.
value taxation in Israel. *The New York Times* published a strong endorsement from Lawson Purdy, the former city tax assessor, bringing the agitation full-circle, back to the municipal level.\(^{107}\)

When Israel was established in 1948, common ownership of the land became the Second of the Basic Laws. A tax of as much as 50% of the appreciation of land is still in effect. Any contribution of American, Jewish Georgists to this state of things needs to be weighed against other factors. Israeli scholars have long argued that state ownership of land was a practical instrument for colonization. Even the author of the single-tax proposal passed at the London Inter-Allied Zionist Conference, Bernard Rosenblatt, wrote that a major leader at the conference had indicated that he entirely disagreed with Rosenblatt’s philosophy but voted for land value taxation as “an economic expedient for the restoration of Palestine as the Jewish Homeland.”\(^{108}\)

Scholars who have argued for an ideological origin to Israeli land nationalization – or at least a mixed origin – have observed the influence of George, though, fascinatingly not of American Georgists. Instead the focus has been on Franz Oppenheimer, who was associated with the German Bund Der Bodenreform and was the author of the Georgist interpretation of the state that powerfully influenced Americans like Albert Jay Nock. Oppenheimer was also a leading figure in German Zionism and one of the principle architects of the Kibbutzim—collectively-owned agricultural colonies. He helped propagate George’s ideas among leading figures in the European movement, including Theodore Herzl.

Questions of causation are not of moment here; what is relevant is the profound connectedness of urban and international currents. Agitation in American urban centers


\(^{108}\) *Public*, May 24, 1919. Probably this is because, if Palestinians owned the majority of the land, it was assumed that they would reap most of the economic benefits when Jews migrated and established cities.
combined with single-tax sentiment in Germany to influence the trajectory of a nation not yet born. It is a framework for political interaction that is simultaneously smaller and larger than the national narratives that have dominated history.  

When Joseph Fels died in 1914 all of his American campaigns had failed, but there was some evidence that the interest he had raised in his cause was paying dividends where it was not under the spotlight of controversy that his organization invariably shined on its principle battlegrounds. Shortly before Fels’ death, in May of 1913, single-taxers secured an unanticipated win for the Sullivan-Shortt principle of gradually exempting buildings. It was won, not in New York, where the fight had begun with Fels’ support, but in two Pennsylvania cities, Pittsburgh and Scranton. The similarities were not accidental; although the Fels Fund Commission was largely inactive in the state, the idea first came to the attention of Pittsburgh proponents when Benjamin Marsh of the New York Congestion Committee presented his work at the Carnegie Institute. Concerns over the high price of living in Pittsburgh prompted the city to commission a study that determined the average value of an acre of land in the First and Second Wards of Pittsburgh was $285,500 as compared to Manhattan where an acre was $205,500. Residents of Pittsburgh were paying more for less because an unusually large portion of real property was constituted by the value of land. In Pittsburgh, the ratio of the value of land to improvements was

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80 to 20; in New York, it was 61 to 39. Single-taxers attributed Pittsburgh’s aberrantly high rents to a tax system that was very much the obverse of land value taxation: improved properties were taxed at as much as twice the rate of unimproved properties, disincentivizing the construction of housing. The obvious solution was to shift course, but the change was kept quiet enough that fears about the expropriation of property never manifested. The bill sailed through Pennsylvania’s legislature without the Scranton’s city officials ever bothering to register an opinion on the bill.110

As World War I brought workers to urban areas rents rose rapidly and, under the pressure of economic conditions, the agitation for the untaxing of improvements in New York was finally realized in a moderate way. In 1920, the state allowed cites to exempt from taxation new constructions built in a two year time frame. Because land and improvements were valued separately, increases in land value were still taxed, shifting a larger percentage of the tax burden on to land. The measure came out of Mayor John Hylan’s Housing Committee, the chair of which, Tenement House Commissioner, Frank Mann, had been an active participant in the fights for the Sullivan-Shortt and subsequent exemption bills. The bill’s progress was facilitated by the support of Governor Al Smith of New York City.111

Once passed, the bill rapidly lost support over concerns that it did not conform to the principles of ability to pay or progressivity in taxation. Mayor Hylan, who had been instrumental in its creation, and President of the Board of Aldermen, Fiorello La Guardia, criticized it for exempting luxury apartments as much as it did working-class accommodations.112 This was not

actually true; there was a maximum exemption of $1,000 for apartments. That supporters converted so rapidly is demonstrative of the movement’s rapid change in fortune at the dawn of twenties. As rent ceased to be such a vexing issue, progressives became more concerned with who paid taxes than their broader economic impact.\footnote{New York Tribune, April, 2 1920.}

Pennsylvania and New York, however, were only some of the more prominent victories that were won on the margins of Fels Fund activities. In 1911, Idaho passed a bill exempting improvements of up to $200 in value. It was a moderate measure that did not alienate farmers because there was nothing in it that explicitly shifted taxation onto land. Its author Dow Dunning, however, was known for reading \textit{Progress and Poverty} on the floor of the state assembly.\footnote{Public, March 3, 1911.}

Jackson Ralston’s efforts had made Hyattsville, Maryland the first American city to enact the single tax only to have the courts strike it down. In 1916, Maryland instituted home rule in taxation, allowing the issue to be decided by elected officials.\footnote{The Bulletin: Organ of the National Single Tax League, May, 1917.} In May of 1917, the City Council voted for land value taxation a second time, only to have it blocked by the mayor. It flourished, however, in neighboring cities. Garrett Park instituted a system that taxed land at almost three times the rate of improvements, whereas Perryville and Capitol Heights removed all taxes on buildings and personality. In Easton, The Manufacturers Appraisal Company was contracted to implement the Somers System.\footnote{The Bulletin: Organ of the National Single Tax League, June, 1918.}

The Fels Fund Commission had dedicated tremendous resources to establishing the single tax on the state level with loud, ideological campaigns. But, when land value taxation ultimately was realized in state legislation, it was from an unlikely corner, with a smaller investment of
resources, but a more direct appeal to the financial interests of voters. In 1919, the Nonpartisan
League of North Dakota pushed one of its principle demands through the legislature: a tax
exemption for farm improvements. The New York Times observed that “They are going to bring
Henry George to North Dakota.” 117

The League’s periodical The Leader pointed to the success of land value taxation in
Western Canada, suggesting that, as with Evert, economic competition with neighboring Canada
was an important factor in its success. Considering how roughly the proposition had been treated
in other agricultural areas, its victory is surprising. But this bill was crafted to give a false sense
of favoring farmers. Exempt “farm improvements” were defined to include all structures on
agricultural land, urban residences up to $1,000 in value, personal property up to $300,
workingmen’s tools up to $300, and farm implements of up to $1000. Land, railroads,
commercial-use property, and stocks were the only items not exempted. 118 The language of
“farm improvements” suggested that farmers were the beneficiaries, but it was essentially a
general exemption of property that shifted a larger burden of taxation onto land. The National
Single Tax League observed sardonically that as much as the movement had been accused of
injuring farmers, now “we see that the Singletax is designed to give the farmer an unfair
advantage.” 119

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The Fels Fund Commission was a failure because it copied strategies that, while
successful in Britain, were ill-adapted to American society. Low rates of land ownership in
England reduced popular opposition to land value taxation. In American urban centers, where

117 New York Times, Jan. 4, 1917. Quoted in Robert Morlan, The Political Prairie Fire (Minneapolis: University of
tenancy and rents were high, the reform had some appeal, but bringing the issue to the state level meant antagonizing property-owning farmers. Single-taxers were always more popular than the single tax. Single-tax politicians were judged on the basis of their broader ideology and sense of sympathy with the common people. The single tax was judged on the basis of its concrete personal effect on voters. In general, the profound negative impact it would have on property owners was more politically salient than the often diffuse and hard to ascertain effect it would have on renters. This is consistent with the model of behavior predicted by economists of the rent-seeking school, who argue that in a zero-sum game between a small interest group and a larger public interest, the latter will typically prevail.

It is unclear to what extent the average voters understood the growth of professional land valuation assessments during the Progressive Era. But the support voters gave to figures like George Record or Tom Johnson suggests that they appreciated the new social services these taxes funded. Working-class constituents that typically voted for Republicans to protect their jobs with high tariffs now turned to Democratic single-taxers, who promised to cut tariffs and replace them with progressive taxes similar to those now funding local social services. When single-taxers entered into national politics they would do so on platforms nearly identical to those developed in their municipal struggles.

That these urban tax reforms were bubbling up to the national level became apparent in the wake of the 1912 presidential election. Theodore Roosevelt wrote an article for *Century Magazine* in which he described the platform the Progressive Party should advance after his defeat that year. He observed of his party:

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120 One direct demonstration of this principle is the 1912 Seattle election. George F. Cotterill, who made no effort to hide his adherence to the single-tax, was elected mayor even as the voters rejected a single tax referendum. *Public*, March 15, 1912.

121 Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*.
We believe that municipalities should have complete self-government as regards all the affairs that are exclusively their own, including the important matter of taxation, and that the burden of municipal taxation should be shifted as to put the weight of land taxation upon the unearned rise in the value of the land itself rather than the improvements, the effort being to reduce the undue rise in rent.\textsuperscript{122}

There is every reason to believe that Roosevelt’s newfound interest in home rule was the result of a realistic analysis of the recent presidential election. During the election, Roosevelt had spoken to the Ohio Constitutional Convention, where the issue of home rule was hotly contested, yet he had refrained from mentioning it.\textsuperscript{123} The actual Progressive Party platform had not mentioned it; in fact, it had condemned the Democratic Party for its localism and argued that, in modern mass society, power needed to be centralized in national government.\textsuperscript{124} This was quite the opposite of municipal home rule.

We cannot know with any certainty why Roosevelt became interested in land value taxation so suddenly after the 1912 election. But, it is worth observing that, members of Roosevelt’s third party, believed it had a path to victory through America’s cities. Senator Joseph Dixon, Chairman of the National Progressive Committee, expected Roosevelt to win with a plurality of nearly half a million votes. Roosevelt was traditionally strong in urban areas; on the other hand, his opponent Woodrow Wilson had, early in his career, made defamatory remarks about immigrants and labor unions that Dixon believed would make him even less persuasive to urban audiences than Bryan had been.\textsuperscript{125} When this proved not to be true, it would have been natural for Roosevelt to coopt the democratic advance by co-opting whatever issues appeared to

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\textsuperscript{122} Century Magazine 86, October 1913, 834.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{A Contract with the People: Platform of the Progressive Party adopted at its First National Convention, Chicago August 7th, 1912} (New York: Progressive National Committee, 1912), box 1071, Gifford Pinchot Papers.
\textsuperscript{125} “Pre-Election statement issued at National Progressive Headquarters” by Senator Dixon, Chairman, National Progressive Committee, Oct. 27\textsuperscript{th}. 1912, box 1071, Gifford Pinchot Papers.
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appeal to urban constituents. A judicious review of the electoral map ought to have revealed the importance of California—it would decide the next presidential race by a less than 4,000 votes. The same plan for home rule in taxation that Roosevelt now endorsed had gone up to vote during the 1912 election cycle and had won in San Francisco with a majority of 57%.
Chapter VIII

The Point of Least Resistance
Land Nationalization in the Wilson Administration

That Cleveland group which sat at Tom L. Johnson’s feet, which learned from him, worked with him, saw his vision, knew his aspirations for Cleveland, and his reasons and motives and methods,— upon them at any rate a mantle has fallen, his mantle, which they must not but worthily wear. No truer memorial of him could they offer the people of the city, of all cities, of the whole country, than to take up his program of public service where Death command he laid it down.

Louis Post, (1911).

A coterie of single-tax pegs have been crowded into Democratic holes. It is a painful fit, but even a single-taxer can stifle his lifetime conviction of yesterday to get on the Government pay roll.

Senator Lawrence Sherman (R-II), (1917).

Some historians have expressed an awareness that a plethora of single-taxers held political appointments in the Wilson Administration. No one, however, has ventured an explanation for why. This chapter argues that the progressive tax regimes and social services single-taxers established in urban areas gave them a basis of support in traditionally Republican urban districts. Wilson believed that these Democratic politicians elected to otherwise hostile districts could expand his base and help him secure reelection in 1916. Whether or not single-taxers actually impacted his reelection could be subject to debate. What is clear, however, is that Wilson’s perception that single-taxers could influence the election was the key to their political ascent.

The other side of obtaining power is exercising it. On this, the single-tax record is less clear. In various small ways they certainly influenced the Wilson Administration in directions consistent with George’s economic program. They obviously failed to establish the single tax,

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1 *Public*, April 21 1911.
2 *Cong. Rec.*, 64<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. (January 31, 1917): 2347.

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but brought it closer to reality than most would appreciate. In some cases their policies likely made the single tax less likely in the long term. On the subjects of hydroelectricity and agricultural resettlement, they established precedents that laid the foundation for a movement toward government ownership of land that would both draw on and controvert their own cause. Their accommodations to political institutions and other causes, particularly conservationism, brought them far closer to the platform of land nationalization through direct government ownership than they had been in the past. Thus as they were exerting their greatest pressure on government, government was also exerting its greatest pressure back. The shift toward government ownership would probably be the largest ideological shift the movement would ever experience, though even this was not without some precedent in George’s thought.

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By the end of his tenure, Woodrow Wilson would be a leading patriarch to most single-taxers. This was not an improbable outcome—single-taxers had gravitated toward the Democratic Party for years. But it was not inevitable; many had grown impatient with William Jennings Bryan, because he was unwilling to take a stand for free trade or the single tax.3 Neither

3 George Peabody protested against The Public’s position on Bryan as rooted in an unfounded optimism about his political position: “good radicals are induced to remain in the Democratic Party, on what I believe to be the utterly false assumption that Mr. Bryan is a radical.” George Peabody to Daniel Kiefer, Nov. 21st, 1908, box 69, Peabody Papers. Likewise from William Worth Bailey: “... Mr. Bryan, much as I love him, is unequal to the task. He has not yet seen the star. He is still looking backwards.” William Worth Bailey to Lincoln Steffen, Aug. 31, 1909, box 1, Steffens Papers. Daniel Kiefer to Lincoln Steffens, Oct 24, 1908, box 7, Steffens Papers. The most interesting of these statements foreshadows the great rupture that would occur between Clarence Darrow and Bryan during the Scopes Trial: “We had Dr. Crapsey, the heretical preacher who was fired form the Episcopal Church, in Bigelow’s pulpit last night. After it was over he, Clarence Darrow, Bigelow and a few more of us stopped for a bite, and I imagine you would have enjoyed hearing the comments of Darrow and Crapsey – neither of whom had heard the other express himself to me – but whose comments of Bryan were exactly alike. Their words were almost identical – both declaring him well fitted to be pastor in the strictest Methodist church – rather than President of the U.S., and while I am with you all in my impatience with him at times, I am more willing than the rest of you to credit him with what he is deserving of.” This speaks to a much more subtle division between the groups, Bigelow, though a preacher, was a single-taxer who joined his Ohio peers in the struggle against prohibition. Darrow, Kiefer, and Steffens were all single-taxers, urban liberals, with a very different world view than the rural evangelist, Bryan. Daniel Kiefer to Lincoln Steffens, Nov. 5, 1908, box 7, Steffens papers.
was Wilson. Yet George Peabody, who flirted with the Socialist Party out of discontent with Bryan’s inadequacies, paid to have Wilson’s speeches collected, edited, and distributed in the campaign book *The New Freedom*.

As editor of *Land and Freedom*, Joseph Dana Miller had been the leader of the obstinate strand of single-taxers that repudiated political cooperation, even objecting to the investing resources in establishing the referendum as a direct path to the single tax. But Wilson was different: “Single Taxers have knelt before many idols whose feet have been clay. We have trusted many of them only to waken from what was more or less a dream of a fool’s paradise. But this man, unless we are again to be disappointed, is of a different type – the Emersonian type, creating idealities out of our common life, marrying an amazing shrewdness of outlook on men and things with something of a seer’s vision….”

In one issue, the publication juxtaposed Wilson quotes next to those of Henry George to demonstrate their philosophical similarity.

While so many progressives argued for regulating monopoly, Wilson, like a single-taxer, believed that it could not be regulated, that it would have to be abolished by changing the fundamental incentives government created. Wilson believed this would be accomplished principally through tariff reduction and banking reform, but single-taxers were convinced that they could insert land nationalization into his agenda.

But political factors were also at play. Georgists rallied to Wilson is in part because they took seriously their prophet’s injunction that “the political art… consists in massing the greatest force against the point of least resistance.” This ethos of expediency translated into an eagerness to support a powerful politician who seemed receptive to their influence. After William U’Ren

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4 *Land and Freedom*, Nov-Dec 1916, 350
5 *Land and Freedom*, May-June 1918, 75.
traveled to New Jersey, he told his comrades that he had been able to persuade Wilson of the value of the “Initiative and Referendum, and ... a good deal more than that.” Immediately after The Public began promoting his candidacy for President, still well in advance of reality. Once nominated, single-taxers recreated the political stunt that had earned such notoriety during Grover Cleveland’s election. Henry George Jr., now a Congressman, read his father’s Protection or Free Trade into The Congressional Record. Using congressional mailing privileges The Fels Fund then began distributing it *en masse* to support Wilson’s tariff policy. The New York Times reported that 100,000 copies of the book had been distributed by April, but that the Fels Fund Commission was intent on reproducing the scale of the original enterprise with one million copies going out before the close of the election cycle. At the Democratic Party convention, Newton Baker fought successfully to overturn the unit rule, according to which state delegates were forced to vote for the same candidate, so that he and other Ohio delegates could vote for Wilson, helping to secure his nomination.

Wilson’s also had political motivations, having independently stumbled upon the same conclusions regarding their political import that Altgeld had articulated a decade prior. Elected Governor of New Jersey in 1910, he was the first Democrat to hold that office since Bryan captured the party in 1896. Here Wilson first encountered single-taxers as an important swing constituency. Several factors provided a favorable context for Wilson’s gubernatorial victory; Republican railroad regulation in New Jersey had been a disappointment and President Taft had soiled the national brand. It was also, however, easier to peel away Republican support,

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7 U’Ren to Joseph Fels and Daniel Kiefer, Jan. 9 1913, James Barry Papers.
8 *Public*, Jan. 11, 1911.
because single-taxers in the state had broken segments of it into a cohort of “New Idea” Republicans. George Record, who in trying to implement the single-tax in Jersey City had hiked property taxes and expanded municipal social services, garnered the political capital to become the boss of this contingent.

In 1910 Record provided the defining moment of Wilson’s gubernatorial campaign. The future President had inaugurated his campaign with characteristically vague progressive platitudes. Record demanded specifics and challenged the Democratic contender to answer nineteen pointed questions about economic policy. Wilson agreed to an epistolary exchange published in newspapers through the state. He demonstrated his independence by admitting that his party was covertly manipulated by corrupt political bosses and even named names.

Once elected, Wilson worked closely with Record to win Republican support for his legislative agenda. At the beginning of his term, Wilson organized a bipartisan meeting of state progressives at which Record drafted the new Governor’s election and corrupt practices bills, assisting with several others. Record worked assiduously to remake the political philosophy of the naturally conservative Wilson, organizing, for example, his meeting with U’Ren. Wilson appointed Record to the State Board of Assessors, a position that would, of course, be particularly desirable for a single-taxer. But, importantly, Record and his sway in urban New Jersey did not cease to be relevant after Wilson became President. Despite public controversy over his support for someone as radical as Record, the President would try to appoint him to the Federal Trade Commission.\(^\text{11}\)

When Wilson entered the White House, these urban single-tax machines naturally constituted a smaller percentage of his political base than as Governor of New Jersey, but they were holding on to particularly precarious parts of the coalition. Wilson had secured his election to the presidency because of the schism Roosevelt precipitated in the Republican Party. No Democrat had won the Presidency in a two party race for two decades. Historian Thomas Knock has demonstrated that in his struggle to win urban voters for his reelection Wilson tried to establish coalition with Socialists. But no Socialist had a modicum of the political force that Johnson’s protégés held, nor was Wilson so consistently engaged with them as with the single-taxers who formed an important piece of his coalition dating back to his first gubernatorial campaign.

The Democratic wave that brought Wilson into the White House also carried a group of single-taxers into Congress, which reinforced the importance of George’s followers in holding together the outer edges of the party. In 1912, Warren Worth Bailey was elected from a district in Johnston PA, an iron town that was home to strong protectionist sentiment. As a candidate in the party of low tariffs, Bailey became the first Democratic Congressman ever elected from his district. Henry George Jr. became the third Democrat since the Civil War elected from a Brooklyn district that in 1908 had favored the Republican with a 7,000 vote majority. The Cleveland district that had booted Tom Johnson after his free trade campaign elected another free-trade single-taxes, Robert Crosser. Crosser, who had come up through the Johnson political machine, was the first Democrat from that district since Johnson lost office in 1896.

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13 *Public*, Nov. 15, 1912. The others include David Lewis, Robert Bremmer, Edward Keating, and R. E. Dowdell.
While many new Democrats were elected in 1910 and 1912, because the Republican Party was falling apart under Taft’s leadership, single-taxers held onto tough districts even after these favorable circumstances evaporated. Henry George Jr. was reelected despite being redistricted. Warren Worth Bailey, secured reelection even as the first democrat in his district. Crosser held onto his seat through the New Deal with one brief interruption in the 1920s. In Maryland, David Lewis won a seat that had been Republican for sixteen years and managed to hold on to it for six. Frank Buchanan’s district in Chicago installed him in office for three terms after a period of Republican dominance stretching back to the Civil War.\textsuperscript{14}

Single-taxers seem to have believed that they had been given a mandate to carry their municipal policies to the national level. To review the first years of their legislative careers, would suggest that they had not realized that they were now part of the federal government. Crosser, for example, continued Johnson’s traction reforms by fighting for the public ownership of Washington D.C.’s street car system. George Jr.’s major achievement was an investigation into the professionalization and equalization of property taxation in Washington D.C. Celebrities like former labor leader Terence Powderly and conservationist Gifford Pinchot testified on behalf of property tax reform in the district. The biggest draw, however, was Samuel Gompers, who as President of the American Federation of Labor, spoke as the representative of a million workers in favor of George’s reform.

Gompers’ testimony to the committee was a symbolic juncture that illustrated many of the reasons why the single tax was advancing politically. After George’s defeat in the 1886 election, Gompers had declared that the single tax “does not promise present reform, nor an

\footnote{Public, October 4, 1912.}
ultimate solution.” In most historical narratives, this reads as a permanent severance of relations with the labor movement, the sudden obsolesce of an antiquated movement around land reform. But in 1912, Gompers, under questioning from Henry George Jr., testified that he had seen land value taxation in practice in Vancouver and found that it—in direct opposition to his prior statement—made “as much general satisfaction among the people as we shall have for a long time to come.” He had come to believe that the current system discriminated against small homeowners and placed an undue tax burden on the workers that he represented. The international progress of the movement had given it legitimacy and positive models to point to. Meanwhile, a long period of local agitation against the general property tax had both animated popular opinion for reform and helped elect figures like Henry George Jr. who could carry that message to the national level.

The bulk of Wilson’s legislative agenda actually offered very little to single-taxers. While Wilson talked favorably about abolishing rather than regulating monopoly, in practice he focused on building new regulatory regimes. Of his signal anti-monopoly legislation, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, The Public wrote that it was “originally a fair sample of nonsensical legislation.” New language intended to prevent the courts from ending strikes by injunction had made it worthwhile, but its stipulations regulating trusts were still “nonsensical.” The Public’s response to Wilson tariff reductions and the creation of the Federal Reserve were generally positive, but muted. Reviewing the whole of his legislative agenda up until 1914, the paper concluded that they were all “palliatives,” not “fundamental.” The Public debated the merits of the Farm Labor

17 Public, June 12, 1914.
18 Public, Oct. 30, 1914, 1034.
Board and largely tended toward a negative conclusion. By providing government loans to agriculture farmers were able to circumvent the high interest rates of private banks, but from the perspective of income distribution the results were at best moot because the increased flow of money to agriculture would merely prop up the price of land.

But it was not Wilson’s legislative agenda that justified single-taxers’ faith in him; it was the access to executive power that he provided. While single-taxers did not care for the Farm Labor Board in principle, they were content that Wilson appointed one of their own, Herbert Quick, to the board. *The Public* concluded that despite its shortcoming “it is none the less an advantage that it should have at least one member who realizes that the difficulty exists, and knows what must be done to overcome it.” The article continued, Quick’s appointment “extend(ed) the long list of creditable selections which President Wilson has made.”

Among those Presidential appointments was the editor of *The Public*, Louis Post. Post was picked to be the country’s first Assistant Secretary of Labor after a letter writing campaign organized by Warren Worth Bailey, with some lobbying by William Jennings Bryan and Secretary of Labor, William B. Wilson. *The Public* opined that “A remedy exists, and it is seen and appreciated by high government officials now occupying strategic positions from which they could procure its application.” In private, they were more direct; Warren Bailey beamed about the administration “These chaps are all land value taxers.” Even someone with such close personal ties to George as Louis Post recognized that federal power meant that he had to tone

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19 *Public*, April 14, 1916.
21 *Public*, June 8, 1917.
down his radicalism, but this was seen as a worthwhile sacrifice. Campaigns for single-tax appointments were organized for positions as apparently innocuous as county postmaster.

Lawrence Sherman, the Republican Senator from Ohio, suggested that single-taxers were giving up their faith to get on the government payroll. While they were moderating their rhetoric, they remained activists, even with bureaucratic appointments, wielding the full extent of their legal authority—and possibly more—to build networks of power to affect their ideas. Even in the smallest fiefdoms of executive power, single-taxers crafted policy based on the ideas of George and Johnson.

In 1914, Frederic Howe was appointed Commission of Immigration at Ellis Island. His biographer concluded that the administration hoped to strengthen connections with reformers in New York City, by appointing Howe to a job in which he could still be active in local politics. It was an opportune political job because it required very little work, freeing Howe to spend more time speaking and writing. Howe, however, also recognized an opportunity to transform this major artery of European immigration into something like the cradle of democracy that he had always hoped the city could be. Like his former boss, Johnson, Howe ended the ban on walking on the island’s grass. With the lawn freed for use, it was turned into a space for cultural uplift, with free concerts and movies.

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23 Frank Butler to James Barry, December 23, 1919, box 2, Barry Papers, Bancroft Library.
24 “Mr. William W. Munro, of Saratoga Springs, whom Lawson Purdy, John J. Murphy, John J. Hooper and a lot of our Single Tax men in New York City have endorsed as a man of our faith, writes me to say that he is a candidate for appointment as Postmaster of Saratoga Springs.... I write to ask whether this matter would interest you and if so whether you could write Munro a letter of recommendation and direct him to get similar letters from Democrats in that neighborhood of your style of thinking.” Henry George Jr. to George Peabody, Jan. 13, 1914, box 69, Peabody Papers.
26 Miller, From Progressive to New Dealer, 214
Howe tried, less successfully, to imitate Johnson’s policy of eliminating private contractors in government. He targeted the food service company that fed the Island and won the support of President Wilson, who put a plan to insource this service into the Congressional Budget. It was quietly taken out of the bill by William Bennet, a New York Congressman who was employed as legal counsel for the contractor. As was so often the case, it proved to be a dead end from the perspective of policy, but a political victory. Howe used the incident to fuel a campaign that unseated Representative Bennet by informing voters that he had used his power in government to assist a business in which he held a personal stake.\textsuperscript{27} If Wilson had picked Howe for political reasons, the decision paid dividends.

The most relevant position for single-taxers was Secretary of the Interior, under whose auspices national land policy fell. The post was first offered to Newton Baker, who refrained from taking it so as not to terminate his tenure as mayor of Cleveland prematurely.\textsuperscript{28} Instead it fell to the Californian reformer, Franklin K. Lane, a former friend of George who counted the prophet one of the “three greatest forces in the last thirty years.”\textsuperscript{29} For reasons that are obscure, Daniel Kiefer of the Fels Fund did not “believe much in Lane as a single-taxer,” a concern that would grow overtime. Whether or not he was sufficiently orthodox for everyone, he was close enough to the movement for his status to be a subject of question.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27} Miller, \textit{From Progressive to New Dealer}, 222. Frederic Howe, \textit{Confessions of a Reformer} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 263-265.
\textsuperscript{28} To be more precise Baker was considered for Attorney General, offered the Department of the Interior, and finally took over the War Department. Whitlock served as Minister to Belgium, but was also offered the Ambassadorship to Russia and England. Brand Whitlock to Marshall Shephey, January 17, 1916, Brand Whitlock Papers, Library of Congress.
\textsuperscript{29} Keith W. Olson, \textit{Biography of a Progressive: Franklin K. Lane 1864-1921} (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 18. Paul Conkin wrongly attributed the initial impetus for the plan to Secretary Wilson, Paul K. Conkin, “The Vision of Elwood Mead,” \textit{Agricultural History} 34 no. 2 (April 1960), 91. Anne Lane and Louis Wall, ed., \textit{The Letters of Franklin K. Lane} (Boston: Hougton Mifflin Company), 375.
\textsuperscript{30} In a letter from what appear to be either Eggleston or Barry to Kiefer we have the statement, “You don’t believe much in Lane as a singletaxer, but see what Kent can do with him.” Of course, Kiefer was particularly doctrinaire,
Since Alaska was still under federal control, the Secretary of the Interior had considerable power in that territory and Lane led the charge for a series of reforms there. Among these was an Alaskan Railroad System built, owned, and operated by the federal government. Most importantly for the long-term trajectory of the movement, Lane reversed the tradition of free homesteading, dictating that Alaskan Coal Land would remain in government hands. The government would lease the land and charge a royalty on all natural resources extracted.\(^{31}\)

The policy of public leasing of land reflected a compromise effected between the two largest progressive land reform movements—the single-tax and conservationism—that brought both closer to the ideal of land nationalization. In 1914, the National Conservation Congress issued a statement condemning the single-tax, arguing that it would exacerbate deforestation by encouraging owners to raze all their resources in order to lower their tax burden. At the same time it issued a statement indicating that “It is wholly unlikely that the public would seriously consider exempting all speculatively owned forests from taxation.” Concerned about the political ramifications of such a split, the Fels Fund Commission organized a committee of three including the brother of the President of the National Conservation Association, Amos Pinchot, to write a new position on extractive industries. According to the Fels Fund Commission, the state should own extractive resource land and lease it to keep land values in public possession, while the value of the resources that were on the land should be assessed after extraction, disincentivizing the rapid exploitation of limited resources.\(^{32}\)

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Conservationists, who had themselves indicated that the speculative value of land needed to be taxed, were willing to coalesce around the principle of state leasing because single-taxers also had political goods to offer. In correspondence with Charles Ingersoll, Harry Slattery, Secretary of the National Conservation Association, solicited a list of single-taxers in Congress who would be willing to cooperate in passing legislation for publically-owned hydroelectric power. Ingersoll convinced Slattery—in a claim that may or may not have been true but was at least persuasive—that there were approximately thirty devout Congressmen, organized into a cohesive enough block that the Reader of the House had a list available, apparently precisely for the sort of organized legislative campaign Slattery envisioned.33

Although the Alaska Leasing Bill was the only one that came to fruition, the idea of federal leasing caught fire during the Wilson Administration and served as important rallying point for progressives of all stripes. Under the supervision of the National Conservation Association, single-tax Congressman William Kent fought for a bill that would lease the open plain to cattle grazing; Franklin Lane advocated a General Leasing Bill that would include all oil, coal, and potash lands on the public domain; and one of the biggest legislative battles of the Wilson Administration was for public ownership of hydroelectric sites.34

At the very heart of all of these campaigns was the Georgist idea that the value of these finite resources grew with the progress of the community and thus belonged to the community.

33 “Your information with regard to the thirty single tax members in Congress is most important and I assure that I will get in touch with Mr. Williams at the earliest possible date. There is every evidence here that we are going to have a fight before long on the National Water Power question, and we shall need the help every force possible if we win.” Charles Ingersoll to Harry Slattery Feb. 2, 1914, Harry Slattery to Charles Ingersoll, Feb 6, 1914, box 477, Gifford Pinchot Papers.

Slattery, as Secretary of the National Conservation Association wrote of hydroelectric power—which is superficially least relevant to the question of land values—that

We should not forget that land value or monopoly profit is the heart of the water power question. All human experience teaches that this value will increase enormously as population grows. Any legislation which prevents the public from retaining, so far as practicable this unearned increment is wrong in principle.\(^35\)

But, if George provided a philosophical rationale to normalize this departure from the tradition of fee simple ownership, the practical motivations for government ownership were diverse and complex. Supporters pointed to increased government revenue; lower consumer prices after natural resources were opened up; greater government supervision over labor and environmental practices; and the opportunity to distribute capital more equally so as to foster more small producers.\(^36\) While not every proponent of land nationalization was a single-taxer, the single tax stood philosophically and politically near the center of this important progressive coalition.

If leasing passed in Alaska but failed in Iowa, it was because the power of the sort of administrative posts single-taxers had earned was most distinct on the fringe of public consciousness. This applied also to Mexico, which from the beginning of the Wilson Administration was engaged in a multi-faction Civil War, largely concerned with the distribution of land.

Single-taxers, recognizing this, concluded that Wilson could be used as “the big lever” in a campaign to turn Mexican land reform toward the single tax.\(^37\) The Fels Fund Commission adopted a sophisticated and multipronged lobbying campaign. In 1914, Daniel Kiefer wrote one

\(^{35}\) Harry Slattery to W. H. Cowles April 28, 1914, box 476, Gifford Pinchot Papers.
\(^{37}\) Unnamed to Kiefer, June 29\(^{10}\), 1914, Box 6, Barry Papers.
of the California single-taxers, apparently Eggleston, asking him to travel to Mexico to lobby revolutionary leader Pancho Villa. Eggleston replied that his health was not robust enough for the trip and that Villa was not the person to lobby. He recommended that the best target would be representatives of the Constitutionalist revolutionaries who were spearheading propaganda missions in the United States. They might, he claimed, be able to appreciate Jackson Ralston’s command of international law or the fact that single-tax Congressman William Kent had made a well-publicized plea on behalf of them in Congress. Additionally, he proposed a concerted campaign to lobby Wilson to lend support to the Constitutionals and push them in the direction of the single tax. According to this plan, single-tax Congressmen, Keating, Bailey, and Kent would talk to the President directly. Kent would also lobby Secretary of Interior Franklin Lane, and Post would lobby Secretary of Labor, William B. Wilson, to advocate on their behalf.38

38 Unnamed to Kiefer, June 29th, 1914, Box 6, Barry Papers. … “I think it would be very unwise for you or any of us to write a letter to Villa, or to any other Revolutionist leader in Mexico. Villa is ignorant. He knows it, and says so. Naturally, he is suspicious; suspicious of advice given by those he doesn’t know. He knows nothing of you, of the Fels Fund, of single tax. You can tell him who you are, and what the Fels Fund is. But you can’t explain single tax to him in a letter. Don’t try. And don’t give out anything to the press in regard to what we wish to do. Bring out the brass band after the whole thing is done.”

“There are several representatives of the Constitutionals in the East. They would not be in Washington and other places in the East unless they had the confidence of Villa and other Mexican leaders. They are the targets now. They are easily reached, and have time to consider our proposition. As a rule, they probably know something of the men named in my night letter of this date. They doubtless know how Kent spoke for Villa in the House. They may know that Ralston is an authority on international law, and he can tell them of the danger to Mexico of a policy of confiscation of lands owned by foreigners. I could tell that to Villa, but I would probably merely enrage him.”

“Moreover, it may be possible that Kent or some other man could get the President interested in our programme for Mexico. Of course, Wilson can see the danger to Mexico of a confiscatory policy, and the trouble such a policy would probably bring upon this country; and he can see that a purely tax policy would prevent that trouble for Mexico and for America. While Post might not be willing to go, of his own motion, to see the President on that matter, Kent is close enough to Wilson to request him to have a talk with Post and Ralston, who can show him where the New Zealand system is defective, and where the confiscatory policy is dangerous; also, how the single tax will accomplish the desired result. I happen to know that Wilson has ‘paid some attention to the single tax.’”

“You will see, of course, that Washington influence will have great effect in Mexico at this time. Constitutionalist representatives are important, but in my opinion Wilson is the big lever. Kent may influence Lane and Post may influence Secretary Wilson to talk to the President. You don’t believe much in Lane as a singletaxer, but see what Kent can do with him. I’ll ask Barry to write to Kent. But don’t start singletaxers to writing to President Wilson or to others. It may be possible to get Bryan interested, though he has never been able to see the cat before.
This was a major political operation that pulled on a network of radicals in Congress and the Executive Branch to simultaneously lobby the President of the United States and Mexican revolutionaries, in America and abroad. Whether or not it was effective, it speaks to a startling level of cohesion, coordination, and power. There was very little in the way of organization; though The Fels Fund Commission initiated the campaign, the size of the campaign was far outside of the capabilities of that organization’s small permanent staff. Instead it was built around a coherent ideology and system of personal networks established in America’s urban centers. When Steffens visited Secretary of War Newton Baker to discuss the situation in Mexico, he concluded that Baker was “interested, convinced, but obviously amazed at my story of Carranza. He could understand it all, being a Tom Johnson man.” Implicit in Steffens’ statement was that Mexico could only be understood by someone with a comprehension of the land question; that as the protégé of the one-time Mayor of Cleveland Baker would grasp the situation; and that, because of their shared perspectives and past, Baker would support him. Mexico would not be the last time single-taxers worked to exert collective power in the administration through these informal networks.

The Fels Fund Commission also pursued, with some success, their more ambitious plan of directly lobbying Mexican revolutionary leaders. Lincoln Steffens, still a director of the Fels Fund Commission, traveled to Mexico for this purpose. In his first trip he aimlessly wandered around Mexico, talking to anyone who would pay him mind, which was no one worth mentioning. On his second trip, however, President Wilson secured him a place as part of an official envoy. He was not given a title, but this only made him more interesting to revolutionary 

Congressman Keating may have some influence with the President—enough to get the President to listen to him. Also Bailey. I don’t know how Secretary Redfield stands.”


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leaders who assumed he must have a special relationship with Wilson. He became intimate with and vigorously argued his position to future president Carranza and members of his inner circle. D. W. Slaughter, a contributing editor to The Public, was introduced to Carranza by Steffens and reported that “a land tax is proposed which would be graduated so as to bear lightly on the small holder” but “the leaders of the revolution have not yet seen the great desirability of a uniform rate which will collect from the landholders according to the value of the land.” Steffens believed that Carranza “and his successors accepted and enacted as much as they understood of the [single-tax] theory.”

Wilson shared this faith that the Mexican Revolution was about land. In May of 1914, Wilson struck a radical tone when discussing the revolution in an interview with the Saturday Evening Post; it “was a fight for the land – just that and nothing more.” In the past land barons had confiscated peasant property, so “doing away with the land monopoly and dispersing it among the proletariat” would be a “restoration” of the land.

Because of his perception of the causes of the Civil War, Wilson was content to view single-taxers as something like experts on the issue. Wilson doubted reports from the State Department, which sided with American oil companies concerned about revolutionary expropriation. Instead he turned for advice to Lincoln Steffens who he called the “second best informed man in the U.S. on Mexico” next to himself. In the crowded field of Mexican revolutionaries—known as Constitutionalists—Steffens encouraged Wilson to back Carranza,

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42 Mark Benbow, Leading them to the Promised Land: Woodrow Wilson, Covenant Theology, and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1915 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010), 58.
43 Benbow, Leading them to the Promised Land, 88. Wilson made this statement to Baker in a private conversation. Eds. Ella Winter and Granville Hicks, The Letters of Lincoln Steffens, 1:377
who he considered an authentic radical, and to support his right to enacted land reform during a pre-constitutional dictatorship.\textsuperscript{44} Wilson’s support for Carranza helped him secure the Presidency.\textsuperscript{45}

Steffens had in fact gained direct knowledge of the Mexican situation, but sometimes being a single-taxer was the only necessary qualification for Wilson. He recommended to Secretary of State Robert Lansing the appointment of Frederic C. Howe to the Joint High Commission on Mexico, because he was one of the “the closest and most comprehending students of such questions as those which undoubtedly lie at the bottom of the whole Mexican domestic settlement.”\textsuperscript{46} Of course, Howe knew nothing about Mexico, only “questions… which undoubtedly lie at the bottom” of the civil war.

Considering that Carranza had already sent emissaries to the United States to reach out to U.S. radicals and Woodrow Wilson, single-taxers were obviously a desirable resource, well received by Mexican revolutionaries.\textsuperscript{47} Modesto C. Rolland, a close adviser to Carranza and one of his chief representatives in the United States, wrote to the \textit{Forum} to explain the objectives of the Mexican revolution to an American voters. He claimed that “The policy of the Revolutionary leaders is the first step toward the doctrine of the single tax.”\textsuperscript{48} The Mexican Bureau of Information, founded by Rolland in New York, pointed to land reforms in the Yucatan, wherein it was claimed that “the Henry George theory is being applied with remarkable effect.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 356-359.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{46} Kenneth E. Miller, \textit{From Progressive to New Dealer: Frederic C. Howe and American Liberalism}, 250.
\textsuperscript{49} Mexican Bureau of Information. \textit{Red Papers of Mexico} (New York: Mexican Bureau of Information, 1914), 8.
The campaign to simultaneously exert influence on Mexican representatives and members of the Wilson Administration had a syncretic effect. In its propaganda, The Mexican Bureau of Information quoted Secretary of Interior Lane to the effect that Mexico’s principle object should be a proper system of land taxation. Thus, revolutionary leaders were looking to the radical positions single-taxers propagated in the Wilson Administration as evidence that their neighbor to the north would be content with a radical land policy, even as the Mexican Revolution was reinforcing single-tax influence in the administration. When the new Mexican constitution was established its most revolutionary feature was Article 27, which vested all rights to land and natural resources in the state. Lincoln Steffens believed himself to have influenced its development and was sometimes credited with drafting it, though his actual involvement is unclear.50

At the same time, conditions at home were proving congenial to a stronger alliance between single-taxers and labor. On April 20th, 1914, the Colorado National Guard fired on a colony of striking coal workers in Ludlow, killing dozens, including women and children. Because the strike occurred on state land, the tragedy provided a rationale the nationalization of extractive industries. In response to the “Ludlow Massacre,” George Creel rushed back from New York to support the workers. Within three weeks, Creel pulled together a protest of ten thousand at the state capital. On the platform, he argued for “a constitutional amendment … that will permit the state to develop its own natural resources, dig its own coal, harness its own streams, water its own deserts, to the end that workers may be protected and parasites destroyed.”51

The Ludlow Massacre provided fodder for a group that helped establish unity between organized labor and the single tax: the United States Commission on Industrial Relations (USCIR). Approved at the end of the Taft Administration, its came under the influence of Frank P. Walsh, a labor lawyer and Irish Nationalist, who had been a close associate of Creel’s in Missouri’s Democratic Party. When the Missouri single-tax referendum was hitting such a low point that a mob nearly lynched a British official, Walsh returned to to speak for a Democratic Party event and informed the crowd that “the great regret I have … is that I have not been here in this campaign in order that I might lift up my voice in every County in Missouri in behalf of the Single Tax Amendment, because the single tax is the only thing that has in it the final solution of these industrial problems…” Shortly afterward Wilson appointed Walsh to chair the USCIR.

Walsh demonstrated no more regard for bureaucratic procedure than Steffens had when he became an informal ambassador to Mexico; he took a statistical fact finding mission and turned it into a propaganda machine. As Chair of the USCIR, he refused to submit to “experts and the like, ‘of thorough scientific training.’” Walsh feared that if he acquiesced to the techniques of the academics on the board “fundamentals” would “remain practically untouched.” Walsh worked assiduously to scare off the professors, including economist John Commons, who was too temperate because he “ asserts that he is a single taxer, and he has the fundamental knowledge of the land question, but I am afraid he would put the soft pedal on that, as he seems to do on everything else really, I believe, without knowing it, and all the time declaring his radicalism, at least, to me.” Instead Walsh invited Creel to join him as an assistant and subpoenaed John D. Rockefeller, who owned the coal mines at Ludlow that Creel had so recently threatened to nationalize.

52 Untitled to Samuel Danzinger, June 29, 1913, box 33, Walsh Papers.
53 Frank Walsh to William Marion Reedy, April 17th, 1915, Box 33, Walsh Papers.
Never before had an industrial giant been so viciously handled by representatives of the federal government as John D. Rockefeller was by Frank Walsh. The final report paired Rockefeller’s statements with those of the old world autocrat Louis XVI. His contribution to charity through the Rockefeller Foundation was treated as a paternalistic enterprise to justify a new caste system, much as the occasional display of noble largess had once disguised the injustices of feudalism.\textsuperscript{54} The journalist Walter Lippmann called it ‘an atmosphere of no quarter’ and the press eagerly followed the sensational proceedings.\textsuperscript{55}

With all the publicity, Walsh used the final report of the USCIR to accomplish two important objectives. The first was to give the movement legitimacy by, for the first time ever, lending the authority of an official endorsement from the federal government. The report of the USCIR called for nationalization of “natural monopolies,” including the telegraphs and the phone service.\textsuperscript{56} It endorsed the restoration of public land, water, and mineral rights. Most importantly, it endorsed land value taxation at several points and for a variety of reasons. Lending support to the idea that it was, if not a panacea, at least a broad, foundational reform, it was discussed as a way to alleviate farm tenancy, housing shortages, and unemployment.\textsuperscript{57}

Perhaps even more importantly, the USCIR popularized a platform for labor unionism that was consistent with single-tax ideals: Industrial Democracy. When the Knights of Labor dissolved and Samuel Gompers took the lead of the labor movement, the relationship between the single tax movement and organized labor was strained. Whereas George had supported the Knights because they rejected conflict between laborer and employer and saw themselves as a

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 105-108.
\textsuperscript{57} More precisely it called for “The revision of the taxation system so as to exempt from taxation all improvements and tax unused land at its full rental value.” Final Report of the Commission on Industrial Relations, 132.
way to affect the political will of the common people, the AFL was hesitant to engage in politics and centered its efforts on fighting employers for higher wages. For classical republicans, concerned with a transcendent public interest, these unions were at best a palliative that protected labors from the brutality of monopoly capitalism, at worst another selfish interest group. But industrial democracy was more like the traditional labor republicanism that George had evolved out of. It pointed in a general, though imprecise, way toward the idea of organizing workers to obtain democratic power in the workplace and the polity as a whole. The Public declared that if labor accepted this platform it would be “the great democratic movement of our times, great out of proportion to and in spite of it inadequate immediate professed aims.”

58 As Lincoln Steffens demonstrates, these two ideas were not necessarily mutually exclusive: “Labor unions, even industrial labor organizations, are monopolies, privileged evil interests, developed out of the need to fight capitalistic monopolies; weapons in the class war of class interests, and as unscientific as a machine gun or a trust. Of course. Labor is capitalistic in its objective, its methods and its ethics. I do not think it is necessary to set up a Socialist state in order to knock it down and leave us a free community. But I do think that is the way we shall proceed. And there you have a good example of how we must think straight and act crooked; see one way and go another. Our job is to point out the interests that corrupt, suggest their removal and understand why men will prefer to smash the whole thing and build anew.” Lincoln Steffens to Ella Winter, Dec. 16, 1919, box 15, Steffens Papers. In the marginalia for The American Federation of Labor, Baker also argues that the problem with labor was that it emphasized class conflict over the broader interest of the Republic “The confusion and conflicts within the Federation have grown out of its extra-legal character and that, in turn, is due to the unwillingness of unionism to recognize a ‘public interest’ of any kind in its plans and processes....The Marxian idea of a class struggle was thoroughly European and had no real foundation in American life where people moved freely from the employee to the employer class and visa versa. The adoption of this idea into the American Labor movement has always given it a certain lack of veracity and its obvious untruth in America has made candid people distrust the sincerity of the movement even when sympathetic with its practical aims” Willis Thornton, Newton D Baker and His Books (Cleveland The Press of Western Reserve University, 1954), 55-56.

59 “Most of the indifference felt toward the labor movement among middle class and intellectual radicals is predicted on the assumption that higher wages, shorter hours and similar concession furnish the unions with their primary reason for being. If this were true, the labor movement could rightly be condemned as short-sighted and futile, as far as the attainment of fundamental reforms is concerned. But in spite of what leaders in the trade union movement may say to the contrary, higher wages and shorter hours are not the primary objects of union organization. The primary impulse and the primary need generating unionism is that of reducing the arbitrary power of the employer over his employee’s lives. It’s the impulse to self-expression, the need of fostering self-respect by winning a voice in determining the conditions of labor. In other words, unionism is the beginning of industrial democracy, and there is in the labor movement the same irresistible life-impulse that has given us freedom of thought and action in the religious and political fields. And because this is so, the labor movement is today the great democratic movement of our times, great out of proportion to and in spite of it inadequate immediate professed aims.” George West, “Labor and Fundamental Reform,” Public, March 23, 1917.
With a stronger intellectual common ground, labor and single-taxers cooperated more frequently. In 1913 Gompers spoke to the San Francisco League for Home Rule, where he recounted his work for George in the 1886 campaign and announced that he believed in the single tax. On a more systematic level, the second decade of the 20th century witnessed a rash of union endorsements for the single tax, including those of the Missouri and Oregon Federations of Labor, the United Mine Workers, and, in 1919, the Reconstruction Committee of the American Federation of Labor.

Georgists’ opportunistic zeal to exploit bureaucratic influence beyond the prescribed boundaries of their offices became particularly evident in the twilight of the USCIR. Anathema to conservatives, the USCIR’s mandate was not renewed after the release of its report in 1915. Instead it reconstituted itself as a private entity, occupying its former offices and title, a device transparently designed to give it an official veneer. Conservative members were replaced with sympathetic voices like Frederic Howe and Amos Pinchot, as the USCIR became something like an off-shoot of the Fels Fund Commission. For funding, the USCIR turned to Daniel Kiefer, who solicited donations from single-taxers with the exhortation to “note the letter head,” a reference to the interlocking directorate the USCIR shared with the Fels Fund Commission.

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60 Joseph Fels Fund Bulletin, Jan 1914, 3.
61 Public, Sep. 29, 1916. United Mine Works on April 14 1917, endorsed land value taxation for war purposes: “Resolved, that we urge Congress to initiate a constitutional amendment giving Congress the power to levy a direct tax on land so increased in value, in order that at least part of the increased value be taken for the benefit of the community, in order also that the price of said lands may be kept within the reach of men and boys who may be conscripted or enlisted, and of all others able and willing to cultivate said lands, and in order also that absentee land owners be discouraged from holding said lands as speculations and be forced to dispose of said lands to those able and willing to cultivate…” Public, April 27, 1917. Public, Mar. 1, 1919. Joseph Fels Fund Bulletin, Jan 1914, 3. Speech delivered December 1st 1913 to the San Francisco League for Home Rule.
62 “The present Committee on Industrial Relations was formed as the letter states – to follow up the work of the committee chosen by Wilson. Did you note the letter head! Frank Walsh. You and I no (sic) better Single Taxers than he. I can’t think of any Single Taxer living long enough to do as big a job as his at the head of that committee. Fred Howe – you know of him. One of our Fels Fund Commission. Bishop Williams of our advisory Committee, and Amos Pinchot, not a howling dervish Single Taxer, but a good enough one for me. If you haven’t read his address in
Kiefer’s goal was to distribute en masse the pieces of the USCIR report that favored land value taxation. With dissenting voices expelled from the USCIR, this message could become more explicit. When Dante Barton wrote Walsh suggesting a “bulletin very soon on the tax proposition—not necessarily a blunt single tax piece but an article dealing with special privilege, freeing of natural resources, etc., through a just system of taxation,” Walsh vetoed it in favor a “blunt single tax piece.”63 By the time a single-tax proposal had reached the point of serious consideration in Congress, Walsh, ostensibly acting under the auspices of the federal government, was able to cite his committee’s favorable report on the subject. With evidence assembled by the USCIR, he now argued that “we would go far toward the solution of our industrial problems,” if the words of Joseph Fels were “printed in letters of gold and hung in the halls of Congress and in every legislative hall of our American republic.”64

The single tax legislation Walsh was testifying to was the Crosser Bill, brought to the floor by Cleveland Democrat Robert Crosser in 1916. The constitutional prohibition on direct taxes unapportioned by states made a federal land tax impossible. Instead the Crosser Bill offered settlers free access to land from the public domain to create agricultural colonies. The federal government, however, would retain title to the land and lease it at a rate equivalent to its full site value. Before any of the revenue went to the federal government, it would first be

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63 Dante Barton to Frank Walsh, Jan. 29, 1916 and Frank Walsh to Dante Barton, Feb. 1, 1916. Single-taxers in the group were also working to promote public ownership: “A bunch of us here (including mostly single taxers) at Fred Howe’s call, had a meeting the other night to talk over ways and means to get a public ownership propaganda before the committee. Ben Marsh has been doing most of the secretarial work in that move.” Dante Burton to Frank Walsh, Dec. 3, 1916, box 34, Walsh Papers.

64 Public, March 17, 1916.
distributed to the cities, counties, and other local taxing authorities in which the land was situated. In short, the public domain would be leased out at the same rate that the single tax would have taxed it at and the revenues would be used to fund government at every level of the federal system. Crafted to look like a patriotic effort to revive the homesteading tradition, it would have effectively established the single-tax system in large swaths of the country.

The Crosser Bill attracted some attention as a labor proposal, but not nearly so much as the George Report on municipal taxation. The latter spoke to immediate concerns about the tax burden that had evolved out of successful municipal campaigns, whereas the principles of the Crosser Bill were abstract and untried. It was argued that the access to land would increase the bargaining power of labor and therefore its wages. David Lewis (D-MD), Chair of the Labor Committee, organized hearings at which prominent single-taxers like Louis Post, Frederic Howe, and Benjamin Marsh spoke. Labor was represented by one-time UMW Treasurer, turned Secretary of Labor, William B. Wilson. Arthur Holder of the International Association of Machinists spoke to the bill as a measure that would resurrect the republican, free-holder system of small producers:

> It would enable the independent, self-reliant, resourceful workingmen of the United States to work for themselves and not have to hunt around to find a boss to work for. The workers would then be able to get the full value of the product of their labor… it would reestablish liberty; it would make this Nation that which our forefather dreamed of when they wrote the Declaration of Mecklenburg and the Declaration of Independence.65

Holder, however, gave the proceedings nothing of the legitimacy that Gompers had given the George Report, and the Crosser Bill died without much notice. The comparison speaks to the fact that even abstract ideologies like the single tax fare better when bolstered by practical economic

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conditions; though the Crosser Bill would be revived at a time when high ideals have the most currency—war.

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In June of 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated, precipitating World War I. With international trade halted, tariff revenues declined to one-third of their prewar norm. This shortfall was all the more egregious since preparedness for the possibility of American entrance into the war was a hot political issue. For a group interested in tariff reduction and progressive taxation, this was an important juncture.

In 1913, Congress had passed an anemic income tax that did little to establish it as a reliable source of revenue. Under pressure from Republicans, Wilson pushed through the Emergency Revenue Act—only begrudgingly supported by many in his own party—which hiked excise taxes and the sugar tariff. These new levies were massively unpopular and ineffective, requiring large enforcement regimes the expense of which offset most of the new revenue. By 1916, Wilson was committed to making the income tax the major source of revenue for military preparedness. His plan was to lower exemptions so that the bulk of Americans, rather than just the extremely wealthy, would be forced to pay it.

Georgists played a leading role in the fight to compel Wilson to instead raise revenue with an income tax that would target only the very wealthy. Charles O’Connor Hennessey, Charles Leubuscher, George Record, John Dewey, Amos Pinchot, and Charles Ingersoll founded the Association for the Equitable Federal Income Tax to lobby for a steeply progressive income tax. Land value taxation, its pamphlets argued, was the optimal mode of taxation, but it was “not feasible for many years because of provisions in State constitutions, and in the Federal
Constitution, which it would require years to amend.”

In the exigencies of war, an income tax that exclusively targeted the very wealthy was the next best thing because “Every great fortune in the country was secured through some privilege: tariff, freight rebates, patent rights, control of credit—or the fundamental privilege—monopoly of land, and natural resources.” Benjamin Marsh, who had led the New York fight for the land value taxation was Executive Director of the organization. In that capacity he spoke to crowds in major metropolitan areas across the country, presented his case to Congress, and was even invited to the White House to talk about taxes with Wilson.

The income tax was not an easy issue for single-taxers to coalesce around, but there were a number of highly contingent and pragmatic—even Machiavellian—reasons why they did so. As their literature suggested, they knew that a national land value tax was constitutionally impossible and believed that great fortunes were inevitably rooted in some type of monopoly. Thus, an income tax that rested exclusively on the very wealthy—as opposed to Wilson’s broad-based income tax—would be the option most like the single tax.

In private though, the rationale was more political. Benjamin Marsh, as Secretary of the group, sent out a letter to single-taxers through the organization he had once founded to reduce taxes on buildings in New York City. The letter began with the salutation “Dr. Single-Taxer” and the injunction “NOT TO BE GIVEN TO THE PRESS.” Co-signed by Daniel Kiefer and

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67 Ibid. The association was opposed to state income taxes, arguing that they were a plot by real estate magnates to shift taxes. Instead, citing endorsements of the CIR, it argued for land value taxation on the state level “to prevent speculative increases in land values, which are placing annually a dead weight burden upon industry and workers of billions of dollars.”

Frederic Howe, it included many of the arguments as to why single-taxers should support a progressive income tax that had been stated publically. It also, however, noted that there was a movement to introduce the income tax on the state level that could reduce reliance on the property tax and the movement’s potential to use it as an avenue to introduce land value taxation. Not only would a federal income tax forestall this effort, it would be more burdensome and objectionable than indirect taxes, the costs of which could be hard to discern. Therefore, the income tax would be easier to repeal and replace.

Amazingly, this argument—that the income tax should be enacted so as to be repealed—had been made by Tom Johnson in the debates for the Wilson-Gorman Tariff in 1894. Here was an incredibly consistent and coherent network established in the process of urban tax reform—the mailing list came from a local tax reform group—advocating a policy that only made sense according to a complex, ideological rationale. These motivations had little to do with those articulated in public rhetoric; single-taxers were effectively trying to establish the income tax as the predominant source of federal revenue, only in order to destroy it.\textsuperscript{69} The income tax then, is an abject lesson in why an emphasis on political rhetoric can obscure the deeper ideological motivations of single-taxers.

Ironically then, it was on the question of the income tax that single-taxers most unequivocally succeeded in crafting federal policy. Warren Worth Bailey, the leading single-taxer in Congress after George Jr. died in 1916, corralled a group of twenty-one representatives

\textsuperscript{69} “Opponents of the single tax and even of heavier taxation of land values are trying to get an income tax for state and local purposes. By having a heavy income tax for the Federal Government we can prevent their scheme, and get heavier taxation of land values for state and local purposes more quickly... The reduction or abolition of indirect or consumption taxes, and the imposition of a direct income tax, which will be felt by many more people than feel indirect taxes, will arouse them to the injustice of our present system and the reasons for taxing land values more.” The Society to Lower Rents and Reduce Taxes on Homes to “Dear Fellow Single-taxer,” Dec. 23, 1915. \textit{Cong. Rec.}, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 3\textsuperscript{rd} sess. (Jan. 30, 1894), 1652.
and convinced them to write letters to the President, vowing to block any legislation that did not shift the burden of tax revenues onto America’s elite. These Congressmen were necessary to form a majority, so Wilson was forced to abandon his campaign for a broad-based income tax. The new tax system proved to be robust and popular, much to the benefit of Wilson’s reelection campaign and, ironically, in the long term, to the detriment of the single tax.\(^{70}\)

Single-taxers contributed to Wilson’s reelection in 1916 in more direct ways; as propagandists and officials with popular credibility to lend.\(^{71}\) George Creel authored the best-selling campaign book *Wilson and the Issues*.\(^{72}\) A propagandist of great ability, Creel also posed a series of direct questions to the Republican candidate Charles Hughes designed to highlight ruptures in his base. Hughes refrained from responding, even when the questions were yelled to him at campaign events, fostering the impression that Hughes was unwilling to grapple with the hard issues of the campaign. Other times, Wilson personally reached out to single-taxers. Wilson appointed Newton Baker Secretary of War. A diminutive lawyer, whose only experience with the military was being ruled unsuitable for service in the Spanish American War, he was offered the post because, in Wilson’s words, “it would greatly strengthen my hand.”\(^{73}\) Wilson did not elaborate on the rationale for his bluntly political declaration. But likely he believed the

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\(^{70}\) W. Elliot Brownlee, “Wilson and the Financing of the Modern State: The Revenue Act of 1916,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 129, no. 2 (June 1985): 173-210. This is probably true, at least when compared to the alternative of retaining the extremely unpopular Revenue Act of 1914. How a broadened income tax would have played with voters is of course a matter of conjecture, though the crux of Brownlee’s argument was that those like Bailey fighting for this new legislation, were also part of the broadened Democratic base that Wilson needed politically.


nomination of a peace-loving gardener as Secretary of War would confirm his declaration that he intended to stay out of the war and solidify his support in urban Ohio. ⁷⁴

The effect of these endorsements was particularly distinct because they crossed party lines, creating the impression that progressives of all stripes were coalescing around Woodrow Wilson. William Kent, who had been elected to Congress as a Republican, served as Chair of the Woodrow Wilson Independent League. As a prominent politician in California, Kent helped to sway votes in the most important swing state of the election. ⁷⁵ Amos Pinchot a life-long Republican once closely associated with Theodore Roosevelt, served as Chairman of Wilson Volunteers in New York State and campaigned around the state with Frederic C. Howe. ⁷⁶ The Colorado Republican, progressive Judge Ben Lindsey, famous for his role in creating Juvenile Courts, also came out in favor of Wilson. ⁷⁷

While the question of entrance into World War I certainly impacted everyone’s Presidential pick in 1916, the departure of the few remaining Republican single-taxers to Wilson’s camp had been determined years before by more fundamental philosophical considerations. In 1914, Amos Pinchot, one of the founders of the Progressive Party, circulated a letter to all the leading figures in the organization calling for the removal of George Perkins from its Chairmanship. Perkins was a close friend of Theodore Roosevelt, but also a partner at J. P. Morgan. He was one of the leading voices in the country for the notion that big business was good—as long as it was regulated by an equally large and powerful government. As a single-taxer, Pinchot dissented, arguing that these large conglomerations were built off of special

⁷⁷ *Public*, August 18th, 1916
privileges and that the goal should be not regulation, but fair competition through the socialization of monopolistic factors of production:

I believe in large units of production, but realize quite fully and I think you must also, that, when company has crushed competition not through efficiency but by monopolizing railroads, pipe lines, and natural resources, etc. or by unfair means of competition, and has thus gained the power to fix the price in the whole industry, a very great disaster to the public has occurred.  

A parade of hate mail followed, from which Pinchot discerned definitively that members of the Progressive Party believed “that competition is played out, and that we must have trusts and government regulation.” Lyman Abbott, the editor of Roosevelt’s Survey, even informed Pinchot that his ideas were those of Woodrow Wilson, almost beckoning him to leave. It became clear that even the segments of the Republican Party that had broken away from the conservatives to form the Progressive Party, embraced a philosophy fundamentally antithetical to the single tax.

The public controversy around Pinchot’s letter served as a rallying point for disaffected Republican single-taxers as they turned to Wilson. The few positive responses Pinchot received were almost invariably from single-taxers. In 1912, George Record had been a member of the Progressive Party’s educational arm and the director of its Popular Government Branch. But, in the wake of the Pinchot controversy, the only hope he could see in Roosevelt was that in his victories he would demonstrate the ineffectualness of regulation, whereas Wilson appeared to be coming along to their position already:

All that we radicals can do is sit quiet and let Roosevelt make an effort to carry through the program that is already laid down in four or five states, and if our

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78 Amos Pinchot to Stanley Isaacs June 9 1914, box 69, Amos Pinchot Papers.
79 Amos Pinchot to Henry Rickey, June 4, 1916, box 69, Amos Pinchot Papers.
view is right his attempt will result in dismal failure, and then perhaps they will be ready to talk with us about a radical program. In the meantime, an article in this week’s *Saturday Post* indicates that Wilson is beginning to understand the land question, as he insists that the distribution of land among the rank and file of the people in Mexico is to be the foundation of his policy in that country.  

Ben Lindsey expressed his assent and informed Pinchot that at the grassroots level, his ideas had taken root: “I wish I could have told you about our trip and the perfectly thrilling response everywhere to the suggestion that no title in the natural resources of this country be longer permitted to exist in any private interests or corporation.”  

The single-taxer Edmund Osbourne informed Pinchot of rumors that Perkins was circulating a variety of accusations against Pinchot, but that he was unable to get his hands on the letters because he was himself “under suspicion.”  

Single-taxers were so out of place in the Progressive Party that they were all but forced into Wilson’s camp.  

The best evidence that single-taxers helped sway urban constituents to join the Democratic Party in 1916 came from Ohio. Wilson had bluntly indicated that he needed Cleveland Mayor Newton Baker as Secretary of War for political reasons. But this was only the tip of the iceberg as Wilson reached out to the important swing state. Newton Baker and Brand Whitlock alone were considered for positions as diverse as Attorney General, Secretary of the Interior, Secretary of War, Minister to Belgium, Ambassador to England, Ambassador to Russia, and Vice President.  

Their associates, Frederic Howe and John Clarke received jobs as Immigration Commissioner and Supreme Court Justice, respectively. Newton Baker understood

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82 George Record to Amos Pinchot, May 23, 1914, box 69, Amos Pinchot Papers.  
83 Ben Lindsey to Amos Pinchot, June 5, 1915, box 69, Amos Pinchot Papers.  
84 Edmund Osbourne to Amos Pinchot, June 10, 1914, box 69, Amos Pinchot Papers.  
85 To be more precise Baker was considered for Attorney General, offered the Department of the Interior, and finally took over the War Department. Whitlock served as Minister to Belgium, but was also offered the Ambassadorship to Russia and England. Brand Whitlock to Marshall Sheppey, January 17, 1916, Brand Whitlock Papers, Library of Congress.

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the calculus behind his appointment and offered his resignation—which Wilson refused—less than two weeks after the President’s reelection, with a letter that assured him “you now have the sanction of a majority of our people,” adding that “the fine vote in Ohio was your vote and not mine, and the people of the state will not misunderstand.”

Baker was characteristically generous to Wilson; in a note to Whitlock he observed that “the pivot in the last election was Ohio, and there Tom’s work, and that of Jones and yours showed wonderfully.” Of the three counties in Ohio that with the most new democratic voters, two were in Cleveland and one was in Toledo, the state’s single-tax strongholds. Whereas the Democratic Party picked up an additional 5% of the electorate in the rest of the state, these three counties witnessed an increase from 16-19%. Had the nearly 60,000 new Democratic voters in these three counties stayed with the Republican Party, Charles Hughes would have been the 29th President of the United States.

We cannot actually know why voters made the choices they do, but political power is about the perception of influence, and this the single-taxers had on their side. The *St. Louis Republic* asked and answered “Who put Ohio into the Democratic column? The influence of a man, who being dead, yet speaketh—Tom Johnson.” The *Springfield Republican* observed that “In 1904 Col. Roosevelt carried the city of Cleveland by 20,000; this year Mr. Wilson carried Cleveland by 18,000. During the intervening years the late ‘Tom’ Johnson and the younger leaders like Newton D. Baker had re-educated the Ohio democracy to a new vision of public

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86 Fredric, Newton D. Baker, 1:81.
88 Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Presidential Vote* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934), 292-299. Statistics are based off a comparison between the 1908 and the 1916 election because Roosevelt’s third party run in 1912 threw party loyalties into question making it a bad point of comparison. The decline of the socialist vote in Ohio has also been credited with Wilson’s victory there. Actually from 1908 to 1912 the entire third party vote only declined slightly from 46,519 to 46,177. In 1912, the fact that a progressive victory was clear emboldened voters to side with Debs, inflating his numbers in a way that is unrepresentative. But if all the third party voters in 1908 had shifted to the Democratic Party in 1916 it would not have changed the result.
89 *St. Louis Republic*, Nov. 9, 1916.
service.” The paper, still one of the preeminent publications in the nation, observed that no such progress had been made in Indianapolis or Chicago, where corrupt Democratic machines dominated.\textsuperscript{90} This spoke to a subtle, long-term understanding of their role. By implementing Democratic policies successfully on the local level while exposing Republican corruption, they had built up the democratic brand to make it competitive in a state that had once given the country Mark Hanna and William McKinley. Some, however, imagined a more direct link. Congressman Simeon Fess (R-OH) claimed the state would correct its misplaced faith in the Democratic Parry as soon as the single tax and socialism faded away.\textsuperscript{91}

Wilson’s campaign pledges notwithstanding, his reelection did not keep the United States out of the war. When Congress did declare war on Germany, single-taxers were at the front lines of Wilsonian internationalism. Of the four major figures in the defense council, two were unequivocally single-taxers, Secretary of War Newton Baker and lead propagandist, George Creel. A third, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, suggested that he saw the force of George’s argument about land, but differed as to the viability of taxation as a remedy.\textsuperscript{92} The Public became a persistent champion of Wilsonian internationalism. When Wilson asked for America to follow him into the European conflict, J. W. Slaughter, fresh off his meetings with

\textsuperscript{90} It followed: “The movement had its practical beginning in municipal affairs when Johnson undertook his tempestuous struggle in Cleveland. Somewhat later Brand Whitlock, who has made such a conspicuous name for himself as minister to Belgium, was doing a similar work in Toledo, where he followed ‘Golden Rule’ Jones. The conception of public service by which they men are governed is founded on a broad and sane humanitarianism. Alive to the quicker impulses of the hour, to the new demands for social welfare the Ohio democracy was born. He lessons of the Democrats and for all parties is contained in the contrast between the democratic victory in Ohio and the defeat in Illinois, where Roger C. Sullivan has held sway, and in Indiana, where Tom Taggart has been boss.” \textit{Springfield Republican} (Mass), Nov. 30, 1916.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Cong. Rec.} 64\textsuperscript{th} Cong. 2nd sess. (January 31, 1917): 2347.

\textsuperscript{92}“One of the vitalizing and outstanding men of his generation, Henry George will live because he knew more about the cause of poverty than any other man who ever lived. Whether his remedy was right or not, he powerfully stimulated the study of great questions which have borne fruit. He was a sort of lighthouse man, who gave light to all who wished to give a better chance to their fellow man.” “Extracts from the Henry George We Knew,” Box 1, Barry Papers.
the Mexican President Carranza interpreted the President’s speech as “the extension of the Monroe Doctrine to all the world.”


On the other hand, supporters in the administration gave strong signals that they had an almost formal relationship with *The Public*. Secretary of War, Newton Baker’s Private Secretary, Ralph Hayes, contributed articles about the War Department’s economic program, emphasizing the mechanisms put in place to hold down the monopoly profits of military contractors. In the same issue as one of these contributions, the sitting Secretary of War Baker endorsed reprints of Henry George’s work, distributed by the journal’s publishing department. *The Public* organized a funding drive so that the War Department could distribute copies of their paper to every U.S. military camp—at home and abroad. After this fund raising goal was easily met with the help of George Peabody, they began sending books by Brand Whitlock, John Altgeld, Frederic Howe, and, of course, Henry George. It was likely this sense of interconnectedness with the administration that explains why future South Korean President Syngman Rhee choose to make a case in *The Public* for Korean independence during the peace negotiations at Versailles.

That George’s followers so quickly rallied to the war effort is surprising; pacifism, especially Tolstoyan non-resistance, had been a major current within the movement. But, for a movement that was so keen on obtaining pragmatic political power, the perception that they had

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95 In reference to the “Law of Human Progress,” an excerpt of *Progress and Poverty* reprinted as a stand-alone piece, “The works of Henry George have now become a part of the classics of economic literature, in which his simple style, his unfaltering courage and his tremendous earnestness make them stimulating reading, even to those who have not acquired a special interest in economic philosophy. ‘The Law of Human Progress’ finely printed and handsomely bound will be a gift to the mind of each recipient, as well as evidence of a thoughtful giver.” *Public*, Nov. 30, 1917.
96 *Public*, Oct. 12, 1917.
an opportunity to steer the ship of state was a persuasive factor. After the war, Albert Jay Nock was outspokenly critical of the conflict. But, at the time he regarded it as “Anglo-American Imperialism,” but was at least able to “see the force of the idea that it might be better for a few chaps like you [Whitlock] and Baker and Howe to be helping run this thing than for it to be altogether in the hands of the professional-criminal class.”

His major public criticism at the time was that Wilson only intended to spread “political” democracy, without striking at the economic basis of autocracy, land, tariffs, and franchises.

Clarence Darrow was one of the most vocal proponents of Toltoyan non-resistance, having built a career on undermining the idea of incarceration. During the war though, he pleaded with audiences to give the administration leave in wartime detentions. His relation to the official in charge was a deciding factor: “I have known [Baker] for fifteen years, and know [Baker] to be an intelligent, high-minded, humane man, one of the best I ever knew.”

Frank Walsh had likewise considered himself a pacifist and indicted proposals for war preparedness as a conspiracy by “class of special interest.” Once war began he concluded with Basil Manly, who worked with Walsh on the USCIR, that they should “do as we have always done” and use the opportunity “either to agitate or to put over some of our basic ‘constructive proposals.’”

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97 Albert Nock to Brand Whitlock May 27, 1917, Whitlock Papers.
98 “But this is not the Continental conception of democracy. Continental writers use the term to describe the essential nature of society which has abolished the possibility of legislating wealth. Democracy is less a matter of diffused political self-expression than of diffused and impartial ownership. Law-made property as distinguished from labor-made property, is inadmissible; law-made property being specifically that accruing from legal privileges, from tariffs, franchises, delegated rights in land natural resources, and other forms of property which by hypothesis are public.” Albert Jay Nock, “Democracy Here and Abroad” The New York Post, Jan 30, 1918.
99 “War Prisoners” by Clarence Darrow at the Garrick Theater, Chicago, Nov. 9, 1919, Box 14, Darrow Papers.
100 McCartin, Labor’s Great War, 67.
Before America entered the War, Ambassador to Belgium Brand Whitlock wrote Secretary of War, about the effect of the war in Europe:

Radicals everywhere have been sobbing over it and yet it has accomplished more in three years for the very cause they have been supporting than they could have done in three hundred. Every single contention that we have ever made as to the precedence of public right over private right, of public property over private property, has been conceded by the very ones who used to oppose them.\footnote{Brand Whitlock to Newton Baker April 27th 1917, Baker Papers. As the disciple of Sam Jones, Whitlock had been particularly associated with Tolstoy’s doctrines. In the course of a series of letters in which he worked to persuade Baker as to the propriety of the war, he discussed his mentor’s ideas. “What strange fate is it that has made me the object of the appeals of so many in trouble. I often think of what Sam Jones said to me once at the close of a long hard day” ‘I could wash my hands in women’s tears any day.’”}

To the question of public property, Whitlock was likely referring, in part, to England, where the British government granted Joseph Fels’ London Vacant Land Cultivation Society access to all the vacant land in London for the cultivation of war gardens.\footnote{Public, March 9, 1917.}

But, single-taxers also had a principled interest in liberal nationalism and anti-colonialism that resonated with Wilson’s stated cause for entering the war. The single tax movement had first gained traction as part of the platform of Irish Nationalism and George’s followers had similarly opposed American annexation of the Philippines.\footnote{Post’s position, in fact, had been to support the war when the stated goal was Cuban Independence but to oppose annexation. Despite its pacifist tendencies, it argued that “the one just cause for war is the continual denial of liberty,” This is consistent with the decision to support World War I as an avenue to independence. Public, April 30, 1898. Post had also opposed imperialism in India. Public April 30, 1899. That single-taxers had embraced independence regardless of race is indicated by the fact that Louis Post and Lincoln Steffens were leading members of the League of Small and Subject Nationalizations, which included parties calling for independence for regions as disparate as Scotland and Assyria. “Quit Convention for Small Nations” New York Times, Oct 29 1917. Breaking with contemporary orthodoxy, Frederic Howe asserted that “the world will never be at peace so long as it is governed on the assumption that only the white man is fit for government.” Frederic C. Howe, The Only Possible Peace (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1919), 231.}

\footnote{Referencing his political mentor again, he wrote the Secretary of War: “Jones used to say to me once in awhile when I questioned his attitude toward certain persons, ‘I know the Golden Rule always works but the trouble is I don’t know how to work it on that fellow.’” Brand Whitlock to Newton Baker, August 7, 1917, Baker Papers. The important take away here is probably not that Whitlock was parting ways with Jones’ doctrine, but that he had ever tried to apply a doctrine associated with municipal law enforcement to his career as an ambassador to one of the most important conflict sites in the war.}

In 1903, The Public first introduced its readers to the theory of the British Economist J. A. Hobson that imperialism was the result of
land monopoly in conquering nations. Private ownership of land redistributed wealth such that the poor were unable to afford goods and the wealthy were forced to seek consumers elsewhere. This demand insufficiency thesis was the basis for Lenin’s theory of imperialism.  

Hobson continued to appear in *The Public*, as it rallied behind Wilsonian internationalism. For others, like Frederic C. Howe, who published *The Only Possible Peace* as an explanation of the war’s root causes, imperialism was about access to natural resources and rights of way—different forms of site value.

While imperialism was a facet of land monopoly, nationalism was about building a democratic polity and had a romantic connection to the long tradition of liberal radicalism in which single-taxers saw themselves. In 1916, *The Public* reprinted a speech by Newton Baker where he claimed that

> The hope of mankind, so often frustrated, apparently is now to be accomplished. It could not be done in Napoleon’s time, in spite of the French Revolution, and its philosophy, and its promise, because of what Danton called the ‘Allied Kings of Europe.’ It could not be done in 1849 because of the Meternichs and the Bismarcks. It could not be done in 1870 because they were still triumphant, but out of the West, one of the youngest and latest and most hopeful of the nations of earth; out of this young giant, fashioned out of all the people, who originate in a new philosophy, little rivulets of it have gone over to other peoples in other parts of the world.

If one looks past the patriotic idealism expected of a Secretary of War, Baker’s statement is fascinating. America’s philosophy—and its mission during World War I—was unexceptional and rather part of a global ideology that began not with the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence, but with the bloody Civil War to forge France into a democratic nation.

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106 Frederic C. Howe, *The Only Possible Peace*.  
107 *Public*, Dec. 21, 1917.
For single-taxers nationalism was not about ethnic pride, but building democratic polities wherein the people would establish sound economic policies, especially their own. *The Public*, for example warned that efforts to divide the Balkans into separate ethno-national states would result in a situation “comparable to a bag full of cats.” Instead it argued for a “Balkan Melting Pot.” “After all,” it argued “nationality is an exceedingly fluid and relative affair.” It claimed that nationalism was born out of one group’s attempt to dominate another through the ownership of their land. “Oppression,” the article continued “is a land problem soluble by a sufficient degree of local autonomy to break the tyranny of the feudal estates.”

The purpose of independence then, was to form polities small and democratic enough that the people would have the power to claim their land.

Strangely, the logic underlying single-tax support for self-determination was similar to that which had inspired their campaigns for municipal home rule. In fact, when Tom Johnson had begun his struggle to win for Cleveland the power to tax land, he was speaking at a Fourth of July Celebration in which he compared home rule to America’s fight against England. That this localism was in part opportunistic is evidenced by the fact that not much later, with too much confidence in their sway, *The Public* argued that former colonies should be placed under Mandates controlled by the League of Nations. They were willing to assent to the principle as long as “the fiscal policy of these colonies should be based on the principle that natural resources belong to the people in common, and that land values—which are created by society—should be taken in the form of a tax to defray the cost of government.” They were optimistic about the establishment of the single-tax in colonies, because the less developed economic systems of these nations were not as likely to be disrupted by the nationalization of land. Stoughton Cooley, 108

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108 *Public*, July 6, 1917.
who replaced Post as the editor of *The Public* after his appointment to the administration, was likely thinking about a recent conversation he had with George Peabody about how the single tax would make the mortgage system unsustainable.  

This faith in militant nationalism was in part fostered by the direct connections Georgists had established with supporters in the developing world. In Denver, the idea of non-resistance butted heads directly with Sun Yat-sen’s struggle for Chinese independence. George Creel wrote that he went to see Sun Yat-sen speak when the Chinese leader visited that city. At the same time the Golden Rule philosophy of Sam Jones and Tolstoy was gaining traction locally. Creel asked Sun Yat-sen “how it was that his people had put by the doctrine of nonresistance.” Sun Yat-sen replied that “They came to see the truth that evil had to be fought.” The response effectively blunted the progress of Tolstoyan non-resistance in Denver. Similarly in 1916, Sun Yat-sen’s son, Son Fo, spoke to the California Home Rule in Taxation League. Even as it was counseling Americans stay out of World War I, *The Public* republished Son Fo’s speech calling for a “struggle between democracy and autocracy.” Frederic C. Howe lobbied Wilson on behalf of Mexico and China, ultimately encouraging him to include a plank in the 1916 Democratic Party platform establishing “the democratic doctrine that all peoples have a right to establish their own

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109 *Public*, Feb. 8, 1919. “It would be desirable to talk over the matter of mortgages and tax on land values. If you will talk with any man who has the money to lend on buildings with reference to his accepting a building as to security when the building depreciates so rapidly in value and changes of land value make a building so often unsuited to their location, you will, I think soon discover that if, as Trustee, you had control of a million in cash you would be very slow to loan it on the security of the building. You would have to come back to the early principal of lending it on the character of the borrower. If we can dissipate land value so that the builder of a house has to invest principle only in the building, and none in the land, and that he can secure from the state a long time lease, then we might develop a class of loans upon buildings who would study the character of the improvements, and with the character and financial ability of the owner of the building we could then work out a system.” George Peabody to Stoughton Cooley, May 19, 1919, box 75, Peabody Papers.

110 George Creel, *Rebel at Large: Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years*, 99.

111 *Public*, Jan, 14, 1916.
form of government and control their internal affairs.”\textsuperscript{112} After war was declared Steffens wrote Carranza, President of Mexico, regarding the principles of the Fourteen Points. He reassured him “that the small nation paragraphs for Belgium and Finland and Poland must mean Porto Rico and Mexico.” Steffens asked him “to believe … that the President intends that this construction shall be put upon them.”\textsuperscript{113} Whether or not Wilson actually meant that has of been hotly disputed, but Steffens was certainly more invested in its application to Mexico than to Poland.

It is not clear that single-taxers actively engaged in the war effort performed their duties differently than anyone with anti-colonial sympathies would have. But, the mere fact that a coherent group of radicals with an economic interpretation of imperialism and close ties to foreign nationalist movements helped organize the war effort, speaks ill of the popular notion that America is an inherently conservative nation. Furthermore, it testifies to the sympathies of the President, who because his own statements were designed to accommodate his political context, has often been judged by the company he kept. Thus Historians of foreign policy have looked to the conservative State Department to understand the President’s international policy. But Wilson was notoriously disdainful of Secretary of State Robert Lansing, while single-taxers Creel and Baker were among the President’s closest confidants. At various points Wilson would send both Creel and Steffens to negotiate with Mexico, circumventing the State Department to the great offense of that department. After he left the administration, Lansing himself wrote that Wilson’s close relationship with Creel made him question the extent to which the President shared his “socialist tendencies.”\textsuperscript{114} While we ought not join Lansing’s red-baiting by proxy, his

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{The Letters of Lincoln Steffens}, 1:422.
evident alienation from the President suggests *The Public* is, if nothing else, a better source for Wilson’s intellectual milieu than State Department memos.

Single-tax leadership during the war also, however, meant considerable sway over domestic policy during a period when the public was open to radical innovations. Here Georgeists had an opportunity to affect reforms that grew naturally out of their ideology and practice in urban governance. Secretary of War Newton Baker was principally concerned with the economic component of the war. He never bothered with the details of combat; he only authorized two troop movements, one sending General Pershing to Europe, the other bringing him back. Baker’s job was to mobilize an army that did not yet exist. He envisioned this task broadly as constructing “such an organization of the industrial, commercial, financial, and social resources of the nation as will enable them to be mobilized, both to support the military arm and to continue the life of the nation during struggle.”\(^{115}\) At a conference of publishers, Baker declaimed that war is “a conflict of smokestacks now, it is the combat of the driving-wheel and of the engine.”\(^{116}\) When George Peabody suggested that Baker take over the Treasury because of his “trained economic mind” Baker responded that his job was already economic and that “our saving of money is complementary to the Treasury’s obligation to raise money.”\(^{117}\)

To the question of saving money, Baker turned quite directly to the policies of his mentor, Tom Johnson. Johnson had learned from George that contracting public functions to private companies was uncompetitive and that contractors would use their monopoly profits to corrupt government. On the municipal level this had meant putting the city in charge of garbage. But Baker

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\(^{117}\) Newton D Baker to George Peabody, November 29, 1918, Baker Papers.
would be tasked with preventing “the possibility of war profits, thus eliminating the danger of war profiteering.”

Johnson’s preferred method for dealing with private contractors was to insource them into direct government work, which would in this case have meant nationalizing the military-industrial complex. In *The Public*, fellow Johnson protégé, Frederic Howe, argued to this effect, that “munitions should be manufactured by the army in government plants as a means of ending the munitions lobby.” Baker argued for this policy and even Wilson was swayed to this position, in private conversation suggested that the League of Nations could institute a global ban on the private manufacture of munitions. The National Defense Act of 1916, drafted by Baker and Josephus Daniels, empowered Baker to appoint a board to research government construction of munitions. Because of the short duration of the war, some of these experiments, including a plant in Toledo, were never finished and were subsequently abandoned. After a series of unsatisfactory negotiations with the DuPont Chemical Company, Baker was, however, able to institute the public production of gunpowder, affecting significant savings. DuPont had demand 70 cents per pound of gunpowder; public factories produced it for 30-40 cents per pound.

Johnson’s secondary recourse was to systematically limit the rate of profit from natural monopolies, so that returns would match the normal rate of interest. He did this with his

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119 He continued “They have already demonstrated their arrogance by the exorbitant bids presented to the Navy Department as well as the monopoly charges for war munitions.” *Public*, March 9, 1917.
120 Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, 35.
123 *Cong. Rec.*, 65th Congress, 2nd sess. (Jan 31, 1918).
Municipal Traction Company, by capping profits at 6% of capital value. This was a more realistic approach for Baker to pursue during the exigencies of war.

On May 28th, Baker wrote Wilson with his plan for the War Industries Board. The board would serve as the central purchasing agency of the federal government and set prices under the “unwholesome and unsafe high level” prescribed by current conditions. He added that: “there is no other alternative, so far as I can think it out, except to seize the mines and control the raw material supply directly through the Government. This I think neither Congress nor the public are ready to sanction.” While he acknowledged that there was public opposition to government ownership, if price controls failed, it would “be obviously necessary as the only other recourse.” These proved to be complementary approaches; The War Industries Board used the threat of nationalization to enforce price decisions. Wilson gave teeth to Baker’s plan by threatening to nationalize steel mills that failed to provide a “just price” for their goods. The government lacked the constitutional authority to implement either plan, but as one intransigent contractor was told: “The Army can occupy your premises. You can bring action, but I think the courts will not settle until the War is over.”

Baker also worked closely on another economic issue he had inherited from Johnson, public hydroelectricity. He had signed a pledge to support publically-owned electricity in the early days of the Johnson machine and then positioned himself as Johnson’s successor by campaigning for mayor on a platform of 3-cent electricity. This was based on the philosophy that these were natural monopolies, garnering unnatural rents. Throughout the teens a series of bills had been discussed that would allow for private construction of hydroelectric power, with the

126 Frederick, Newton D. Baker, 1:131.
right of government purchase after fifty years. The primary point of contention was how much of
the speculative value accruing to hydroelectric sites could be charged by the private company
upon public recapture. Gifford Pinchot opposed one of the early iterations of this plan, the
Shields Bill because it would not only allow hydroelectric properties to condemn property, but
also to retain “the unearned increment” of land that it had confiscated. 127

That land valuation was so important to such a prominent political actor, at best on the
fringe of the movement, is evidence of an emerging consensus around Johnson’s contention,
propagated in his early valuation fights, that the monopoly value of utilities was a function of
their access to limited space and rights of way. Working closely with the National Conservation
Association, Congressman William Kent lobbied Wilson to delegate the bill to Baker and wrote
Baker to encourage him to support a bill that would not allow power producers to keep the
“unearned increment.” 128 Wilson assented to Kent and Baker helped draft the Water Power Act
of 1920 along with Franklin Lane and Josephus Daniels. 129 The Water Power Act allowed the
federal government to confiscate “excess profits” from private hydroelectric projects and to
purchase dams for the price of land and capital at their initial value, rather than their speculative
value.

The Water Power Act of 1920 was a major piece of legislation that provided the legal
foundation for the development of hydroelectric power in America, but Baker’s contribution to
water power here was arguably less significant here than in certain ostensibly minor provisions

128 “I have not the privilege of personal acquaintance with Mr. Baker, but from what I can hear about him I believe
he stands with us on the great question of public rights, as found in policies that represent control and use of our
natural resources in the public interest.” Harry Slattery to William Kent, July 28, 1916, box 485, Gifford Pinchot
of The National Defense Act of 1916. That act allowed the War Department to purchase land and facilities for the production of nitrates used to create explosives and fertilizer.\textsuperscript{130} Under these provisions, Baker found a site in the Muscle Shoals region of the southeast to construct hydroelectric dams. Property owners agreed to allow access to the land for a proprietary stake in the project. They miscalculated his priorities; Baker refused to develop the land under anything other than the strictest policy of public ownership.\textsuperscript{131} Baker won and the first plant was completed on January 11, 1919; the second, which he named Wilson Dam, would not be completed until 1924. Neither would be operational for many years, but the existence of two federally owned hydroelectric plants sparked a decade long controversy that ultimately culminated in the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Public hydroelectricity was one side of a larger campaign for the nationalization of natural monopolies. In May of 1917, \textit{The Public} dedicated an issue to the public ownership of railroads and telegraphs. George was quoted repeatedly on the subject. The special issue was designed to promote the formation of the Public Ownership of League of America with a platform that proposed “to restore the public utilities, the land and natural resources to the people.” Louis Post, Herbert Bigelow, Daniel Kiefer and other single-taxers comprised a plurality of the organization’s executive officials. Among the Vice Presidents for the organization, however, there were also Hull House founder, Jane Addams, Socialist mayor and congressman, Victor Berger, and leading conservationist, Gifford Pinchot.\textsuperscript{132} The Public

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{National Defense Act}, 45.
\textsuperscript{131} Newton Baker to Woodrow Wilson, November 3, 1917, Baker Papers.
\textsuperscript{132} Also involved were Frank Walsh, Ben Lindsey, Frederic Howe, Charles Ingersoll, William Worth Bailey. \textit{Public}, May 4, 1917.
Ownership League of America would take the lead in solidifying these gains, from the war on, with one hundred and thirty one municipalities on its membership list by the late twenties.\textsuperscript{133}

Wilson hoped to fund the war without resorting to considerable deficit spending, providing an opportunity for innovations in taxation. Single-taxers, however, were divided as to which approaches the constitution would allow. At the onset of the war in 1917, Congressman Bailey proposed a national land value tax. Surprisingly few of George’s supporters, however, rallied to it. The Constitution forbid internal taxes unless they were apportioned by state; Bailey, aware of this fact, provided for apportionment in the bill. Because land values varied so greatly from one state to another, \textit{The Public} expressed the fear that it would be so “inequitable as to discredit the project and weaken the position of those who favor Federal action.”

\textit{The Public} reported that “a Washington Group” comprised of “many of the strongest men and women in the movement,” considered the proposal for an apportioned land value tax and decided against it. The group, including Louis Post, Herbert Quick and half a dozen others who remained unnamed, instead proposed a congressional investigation into whether unspecified court rulings had created precedents for an unapportioned federal site value tax. Though it is unclear, likely they were optimistic that the Sixteenth Amendment, allowing for the income tax, would be construed broadly enough to allow for a tax on property. The Supreme Court still had not provided a comprehensive definition of “income” that would clarify what new taxes the Sixteenth Amendment would allow for. However, even Robert Murray Haig, the tax expert who led the charge for a broad definition, understood it to mean “the net accretion to one’s economic power between two points of time.” That definition did not include the preexisting value of

\textsuperscript{133} Carl Thompson to Frank Walsh, Nov. 5, 1928, box 16, Walsh Papers.
property and thus would make a land tax unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{134} Still, the idea of a Congressional investigation was immediately endorsed by Secretary of Interior Franklin Lane and Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, Carl Vrooman, but an internal administration investigation had actually already begun\textsuperscript{135}

Ultimately, evidence shows that the President was willing to consider a national land value tax, but as the movement approached its national apex, it became evident that questions of constitutionality would force the movement to pursue nationalization rather than taxation. In May of 1917 Wilson wrote Secretary of the Treasury McAdoo about a national land tax. He forwarded with it a letter from his single-tax New Jersey associate, George Record. He gave Record an ambivalent but meaningful recommendation “Here is a letter from a man of somewhat erratic temper but of very clear grasp of some fundamental things, whom I knew and had a good many dealings with in New Jersey, and I think it is interesting enough to lay before you for your consideration when dealing with the Ways and Means Committee in the House.”\textsuperscript{136}

Wilson apparently did not realize that Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo had already written Attorney General Thomas Gregory requesting a study of the constitutionality of land value taxation by the Justice Department. The Attorney General determined that although a national land tax would be constitutional, it would need to be apportioned by state.\textsuperscript{137} Even this did not entirely eliminate interest in the idea; afterward McAdoo asked his Assistant Secretary Leffingworth to prepare a report on the Civil War land tax. What he got was not quite pertinent,

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Public}, May 25, 1917.
but in the note Leffingworth suggested McAdoo turn it over to “those who are studying the tax problems.”

Suggesting that the Justice Department had initiated the investigation in response to inquiries from others in the administration.

It seems probable that McAdoo was not personally interested in the question so much as he was following up on constitutional questions from single-taxers. The President was at least willing to put the question before the people, however, it proved of little moment because the constitution served as a stumbling block to further progress. This was the closest the movement came to a national triumph, afterward it would need to consider other routes to appropriate rent.

Instead single-taxers acted as an important contingent of support for a much broader, method to cap monopoly profits, the excess profits tax. This tax, which became the lynchpin of the World War I revenue regime, raised more in its first year of operation than the corporate and individual income taxes combined and provided the framework for America to execute the war with unprecedentedly low deficit spending. It could be concluded that the plan originated as an imitation of similarly named taxes established by other belligerent nations, but that is not the case. Internal Treasury Department memos observe that the international norm was to tax profits in excess of those made previous to the war, but the American plan was to tax profits above an interest rate of 8%,—profits Georgists would typically attribute to monopoly.

The excess profits tax was severely criticized by those within the Treasury Department who advocated the principle, popular in academic circles, that “ability to pay” should dictate rates. They observed that interest, the ratio of profits to invested capital, had no strict correlation with the total quantity of income. Georgists, though, did not believe in penalizing those who

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138 Leffingworth to McAdoo, March 18, 1918, box 199, McAdoo Papers.
140 “Excess Profits Tax,” McAdoo Papers, box 561.
earned large incomes, only those who earned disproportionate income due to monopolistic conditions. Oscar Crosby, a single-taxer, and Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Department, was among those who advocated for the excess profits tax.\textsuperscript{141} Newton Baker had also ventured the idea in the letter during which he proposed the WIB to Wilson. Baker contended that while price controls on contracts would reduce egregious wartime profits, local variations in the cost of production made it impossible for the WIB to set rates so low as to prevent extraordinary profits where cost of production was low without also ending production in less opportune locales. The only way to ensure that contractors would not earn monopoly profits was to institute a broad national tax that would obliterate all such profits.

Outside of the administration agitation for the excess profits tax was often associated with the single tax. At a round table of the American Economic Association one participant suggested that it take the place of all other taxes, “except the tax on land.”\textsuperscript{142} This idea was echoed by the Farmers’ National Committee, which lobbied the administration for an excess profits tax along alongside a tax “upon the unearned increment of land values.”\textsuperscript{143} This excess profits tax was designed to fill the void of public ownership; to, in a single stroke, socialize all the monopoly profits industry earned from patents, tariffs, and natural resource extraction. Though successful from a revenue standpoint, it was criticized for being invasive and after Crosby left even the Treasury Department moved to replace it with something closer to the international norm.

\textsuperscript{141}\textsuperscript{141} Brownlee, “Wilson’s Reform of Economic Structure: Progressive Liberalism and the Corporation,” 82.
\textsuperscript{142}\textsuperscript{141} “Excess Profits Tax – Discussion,” American Economic Review 10 no. 1 (March, 1920), 22.
The excess profits tax was a major victory, but there was no clear means of obtaining a direct land value tax, so single-taxers returned to the principle of the Crosser Bill. Post realized the bill could obtain new support if packaged as a patriotic, war measure. Veterans of every war from the Revolution to the Civil War had been rewarded with free land. Payment in land would save the Treasury an enormous amount of money. But, Post suggested a departure from the traditional fee simple system of earlier wars, arguing that history had proven the land would be gobbled up by corporate land speculators. Land should be provided free of charge, but held in public hands and leased according to land value. Post presented the plan to Secretary of Labor Wilson, who asked Post to begin research. Subsequently Secretary Wilson endorsed the idea and took it to President Wilson who, according to Post, responded “favorably” to it. Because the plan would involve the co-ordination of the Department of Labor, Interior, and Agriculture, Wilson requested that all three department heads assent to it. According to Post, opposition by Franklin K. Lane blocked the plan.144

Franklin Lane, however, repudiated Post’s plan in favor of a slightly modified variant that he repackaged as his own. Lane framed his proposal as a way to create more centralized, tightly-knit farming communities. He emphasized regulations that would create something like cooperative farm organization, though some of this had been included in the earlier Crosser Bill.145 More problematically, Lane proposed that soldiers be allowed to earn the title to their land over time, even if it remained subject to extensive regulation.

*The Public* turned bitterly against Lane for accepting the principle of private ownership. The newspaper alleged that Lane had co-opted Post’s plan to redeem his reputation after Baker

voided an overly generous contract he concluded with coal producers.\textsuperscript{146} It seems unlikely that personal bitterness played a particularly important role, because Lane eventually reconciled with Baker.\textsuperscript{147}

Lane’s motives remain opaque, but it is likely that practical politics played a role after he had introduced several many bills for leasing only to see them defeated. Giving land to soldiers was more generous than renting it to them, and the bill attracted powerful supporters. \textit{The New York Times} editorialized in favor of it, Roosevelt advocated for it in his last published article, Wilson presented it to Congress twice, it was endorsed by the American Legion, 112,068 veterans signed petitions for it, and twenty-seven states appointed commissions to cooperate with the Secretary of Interior on the plan.\textsuperscript{148} The Central Federated Union of New York, an amalgamation of the Central Labor Federation with the old Central Labor Union that had pushed George into the 1886 mayoral race, lobbied Congress on behalf of the plan.\textsuperscript{149}

Despite some consternation on the part of George’s followers, the Lane Bill never became entirely dislodged from its origins in the movement. Lane pitched the bill to Congress as a remedy to land monopoly, contending that “the acreage should be limited to that which will be sufficient to reasonably support a family….It should be the first policy of the Nation and the States to discourage in every way possible the gathering into one hand or a few hands large bodies of land.” To prevent a concentration of land that would usher in an aristocracy inimical to

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Public}, Aug 2. 1919.
\textsuperscript{147} Thorton, \textit{Newton D. Baker and His Books}, 18-20.
\textsuperscript{149} Frank Sullivan to W. G. McAdoo, March 16, 1918, McAdoo Box 199. “To make our own country safe for democracy, the right of all citizens, native or foreign-born, to the land of their birth or adoption must be recognized if they are to enjoy their inalienable right to life and liberty; and no greater outrage can be committed oh returning troops than to permit land monopolists and speculators to deny them access to the land, and the freedom for themselves they have risked their lives to obtain for others.”

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democratic governance, Lane proposed a spate of regulations to “save the Government the opportunity to hold in its own hands the fate of these lands.” Lane proposed regulations that would prevent “speculative ventures in the unearned increment.” In 1919, Frederic Howe authored *The Land and the Solider*, a book dedicated to the Lane Bill. Howe argued that the soldiers should be perpetual tenants, not land owners. Howe supported the bill as it was, however, if it was the only available option. He contended that provisions in the bill that limited the amount of land soldiers could own and made tenancy contingent upon use—even after the land was paid for—turned “the community” into “landlord.” Even *The Public* acquiesced; the bill was a “necessary makeshift” in lieu of the “proper remedy.”

Though it was not without precedent, the movement was taking a sharp turn toward the principle of land nationalization. Land nationalization was George’s preferred term in the early 1880s and, in *Progress and Poverty*, he had contended that he favored taxation largely because it was politically expedient. That was no longer the case with the apparent constitutional obstacles to taxation and the coalition that was being formed with conservationists. Similarly, Post had long ago concluded that, though he believed taxation would be more realizable, he was not “disposed to quarrel about the cut of a garment before the cloth is woven or the sheep sheared.” Practice was demonstrating that the precedents of the public domain created an easier route to socialization than taxation.

153 Public, March 15, 1919.
154 This shift toward land nationalization, as I hope has been obvious so far, is not nearly as dramatic as some might imagine. As early as 1889, when Louis Post was writing for the Standard – under George’s direction – Post wrote about government leasing. He argued that taxation was the easiest way to institute public ownership of land values, but that the difficulty of assessing land after all its value had been taxed, meant that leasing might be necessary. He was still somewhat disposed to taxation, because leasing would involve more government
A younger generation of reformers, coming to maturity in the period, would draw off this trend toward public ownership of land. Post recruited the young Benton MacKaye to author a report for the Labor Department showing that the free land of the Crosser Bill would increase the wages of urban workers. MacKaye and the Posts became close; MacKaye, whose signature contribution to American policy was creating the Appalachian Trail, attributed to Alice Thatcher Post the idea that such a network could create economic opportunity in the mountain communities of the region.  

MacKaye wrote a series of articles for *The Public* advancing the idea of direct government ownership. On Secretary Lane’s reforms in Alaska he wrote:

> With two of these resources—the timber and the coal—the principle of ‘Singletax’ is actually on the job. Only there is no taxation about it. The public doesn’t ‘take’ the ground rent; it just keeps it. Public values are not thrown overboard for the joy of fishing after them with the uncertain harpoons of taxation; they are kept snug in the hold of the ship of state just where they properly belong.  

MacKaye’s arguments for land nationalization were not just given space in *The Public*, they were endorsed by the paper’s editorial staff. In response to MacKaye’s Labor Department report, the paper noted that:

> The adoption of perpetual lease will guarantee the right to use the land without including the right to speculate on it … The report has a broader application. It would apply this doctrine to all natural resources—to minerals, forests, water power, and site values… Let Congress begin now to conserve the common heritage of the people. There is still in the hands of the Government an empire of machinery, but was open to the possibility of either: “If we insist upon taking for public use the entire gross rent of land, a time will come when we shall have to abandon the single tax and fall back upon public letting to the highest bidder. But to do this, as is said in the neglected chapter or ‘Progress and Poverty,’ would involve the cost of an ‘extension of government machinery and loss from ‘favoritism, collusion, and corruption.’ When the time comes, no principle will be involved in the question. It will simply be one of expediency—a question of whether the single tax or public letting will more certainly and cheaply yield the nearest approximation to the whole rent.” Louis Post, “A Neglected Chapter,” *Standard*, July 27, 1889.

156 *Public*, August 30, 1919.
wealth, and another vast amount, though in private hands, can be increased in value many times by the cooperation of the government.\textsuperscript{157} The language of the endorsement indicates that the new position of \textit{The Public}, as much as it was indebted to the externalities of war, also roots in its cooperation with conservationism.

At the same time that Lane’s Bill was gaining traction with progressives on both sides of the aisle, single-taxers were joining a coalition in favor of one most expansive and radical proposals of the period. In December of 1917, the federal government nationalized the railroad system to more efficiently coordinate the shipping of war materials. Although it was a temporary expedient, single-taxers saw it as an accomplishment on which they could build. Peabody wrote Baker that the success of government operation had “done fifty year’s work in six months in some respects.” He suggested further the nationalization of mines because that was “as you well know, the only way to deal with the trusts.”\textsuperscript{158}

In April of 1919, Glen Plumb, attorney for the Railroad Brotherhoods, first published his proposal for government ownership of the national railroad system in \textit{The Public}. From its beginnings \textit{The Public}, The Plumb Plan came to be the period’s most iconic plan for government ownership. That is because it deftly wed together industrial democracy, public ownership, and the single tax in a way that appealed to wide coalition of support. The plan called for the Government to take ownership over the railroads and lease them to a private business, which would have a third of the seats on the board of directors. Another third would be reserved for presidential appointees and the final third delegated to representatives of the workers. All new railroad construction would be funded by special assessments on land values.\textsuperscript{159} The “Plumb

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Public}, Sept. 27, 1919.
\textsuperscript{158} George Foster Peabody to Newton Baker, January 5, 1918, Baker Papers.
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Public}, April 26, 1919.
Plan League” was created under the leadership of former single-tax Congressman Edward Keating, who began publishing the periodical Labor.\textsuperscript{160} The Railroad Brotherhoods promised to campaign against all representatives who opposed the Plumb Plan.\textsuperscript{161} The Fels Fund Commission financed a separate group the “Conference on Democratic Railroad Control” and Frederic Howe resigned from his post at Ellis Island to lead that effort. With George Peabody he spoke under the aegis of that organization to the Academy of Political Science.\textsuperscript{162}

Both the Plumb Plan and the Lane Bill perished in an onslaught of conservative backlash and interest group politics. Farmers were ultimately more concerned with business than the creation of an agrarian republic and opposed the Lane Bill because it would put more crops on the market, lowering the price of their goods.\textsuperscript{163} Congressional Republicans also claimed that it would be an unnecessary expense; some even suggested it would be the end of private property.

On the other hand, Samuel Gompers opposed the Plumb Plan because in exchange for an ownership stake the workers would lose the right to strike and Gompers, always skeptical of industrial democracy, believed that the only effective avenue toward higher wages was through conflict between workers and employers.\textsuperscript{164} Even the Railroad Brotherhoods began to turn away from the plan when it was credited with inspiring a handful of unauthorized strikes.\textsuperscript{165} Over both of these plans loomed the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, which made nationalization appear suddenly sinister and un-American. Senators Myer and Smith along with ex-President Taft

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\textsuperscript{160} Miller, From Progressive to New Dealer, 269. New York Times Sept. 7, 1919 & Aug. 4, 1919.  \\
\textsuperscript{161} The New York Times, Apr. 19, 1920.  \\
\textsuperscript{162} Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science 8, no. 4 (January, 1920): 213-217, 184-189.  \\
\textsuperscript{163} Bill G. Reid, “Agrarian Opposition to Franklin K. Lane’s Proposal for Soldier Settlement, 1918-1921,” Agricultural History 41, no. 2 (April 1967): 167-180.  \\
\textsuperscript{164} New York Times, Sept. 24, 1919.  \\
\textsuperscript{165} New York Times, Apr 18, 1920.
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denounced the Plumb Plan as “sovietization” and predicted that if applied to railroads it would rapidly spread throughout all industry.\footnote{166}{New York Times, Aug. 17, 1919. & Aug. 12, 1919.}

Since the Civil War, Americans had increasingly come to perceive large conglomerations of wealth as a threat to republican institutions, but foreign conflict and the rise of communism in Russia now overshadowed these domestic threats. With the onset of war, anxiety about outsiders—radicals or immigrants—reached a fever pitch. In 1917, Congress had passed the Espionage Act, making it illegal to criticize the prosecution of the war. On the grassroots level, vigilante justice threatened single-taxers.

In October of 1917 Herbert Bigelow, Johnson’s one-time candidate for Secretary of the State of Ohio, was taken into the woods and horsewhipped because of his pacifism. In fact, Bigelow had come to support the war after Wilson wrote his letter to the Pope, in which he posited a progressive rationale for America’s involvement. Baker had even forwarded Bigelow’s response to Wilson as a demonstration to the “effect of the answer to the Pope on at least one very outspoken and prominent leader of radical opinion.”\footnote{167}{Newton Baker to Woodrow Wilson, September 6, 1917, Baker Papers.} The Secretary of War doubted that patriotism was the real cause of the attack and had a certain suspicion that the fellows who took him into the country and whipped him cared very little about his opinions on the German question and very much more about his opinion on certain other economic questions in which he was constantly agitating on the Democratic side.\footnote{168}{Baker to John Sharp Williams (undated), Reel 3, Newton Baker Papers.}

Baker encouraged Attorney General Gregory to investigate the incident.\footnote{169}{Frederick, Newton D. Baker, 1:235-237.} He also issued a public statement to discourage future vigilante actions. “The cause of the United States” he wrote, “is not aided, but is hurt, by this kind of thing. No nightriders are needed, and when the
country is at war for liberty and justice they make a humiliating contrast to our national ideals and aims.” Baker was willing to extend this principle to Socialists. He agreed to make the case to the President for ending the prosecution of the Socialist journal, *The Masses*, after Albert Nock entreated him for support. Attorney General Gregory, however, persisted in that case even after a direct appeal from Wilson.

There was a political calculus behind protecting civil liberties that had long been annunciated by *The Public* and acted upon by those in its gravitational pull. As a paper that emphasized the importance of egalitarian civic discourse, censorship was naturally discordant philosophically. However, in 1901, when McKinley had been assassinated by anarchist Leon Czolgosz, *The Public* also repudiated censorship as a conspiracy that would undermine all dissent. “Blind indeed” wrote Post “must that man be who sees in this programme only a move against anarchists.”

Single-taxers stayed firm in their defense of civil liberties through the Bolshevik revolution and the Red Scare that followed. When Frederic Howe was ordered in his capacity as Immigration Commissioner to summarily deport foreign-born Socialists, he insisted that he would not authorize such action without trials. The deportation cases came under the authority of the Labor Department. Secretary William B. Wilson was conveniently unavailable for the proceedings, leaving Post to preside. Post pardoned 2,700 of the 3,400 defendants that came before him on the grounds that membership in communist organizations was not sufficient proof of disloyalty.

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172 *Pubic*, Sept 29, 1901.
173 Miller, *From Progressive to New Dealer*, 292.
Before the war was over Post, Howe, and Creel were all themselves called by Congress to answer charges of radicalism. Republican Congressman Hoch from Kansas passed a motion to investigate impeaching Post. In a testament to how divided Wilson’s coalition of southern farmers and urban radicals was, the administration even turned on itself. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer claimed he was not surprised that “when the opportunity … presented itself [to Post] in an official way to render a service to those who advocate force and violence” that he “should employ it to the limit. He has always been sympathetic to that sort of thing.”

Both Post and Howe survived Congressional investigations, though Howe expressed some concern (perhaps ironically) that his persecutors might discover the “girls with lovers, or babies unborn and Anarchists” for whom he had bent the law when he granted them entrance to the country.

Though Georgists repudiated censorship, they had always believed that, above else, the single tax would serve to fund the sort of popular education necessary for a truly enlightened voting public. In Cleveland, Johnson had used municipal money to support tax schools and community centers. In the early days of the war, The Public stayed true to this tradition by advocating voluntary censorship and a federal news bulletin to propagate Wilson’s war message, rather than suppressing alternative views.

George Creel, a longtime supporter of the

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177 For more on the national bulletin see *The Public*, Jan 12, 1917 “The announcement of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry has pledged itself to exercise its power to wipe out indecent films is most encouraging. This organization, composed of the leading producers of films, is vitally interested in escaping the censure of the public and the blighting hand of the official censor. The Association’s work will have to be done under the law, as all action should be, and it will have the publicity and time necessary to prevent hasty judgment and appeals to bigotry. It may well be with the movies as it has been with the pure food question. When the standard packers realized that it was to their interest to have all obey the law, they saw to it that the law was obeyed. Self-censorship after all, is the only censorship that effects its purpose and escapes abuse.” *Public*, Jan. 26, 1917. When the same principle was subsequently realized in the CPI, they praised it: “The agreement between the heads of the State, War, and Navy Departments and the managers of the newspapers and press agencies regarding news of the movement of ships that should not be published during the pending crisis looks very much like real
community center movement, who as police chief of Denver had given permits to IWW street
speakers, wrote Wilson advocating a similar program of “voluntary censorship.” Creel believed
that a voluntary system would restrict the dissemination of sensitive military information enough
to forestall more coercive measures.  

On April 14th, 1917 Wilson created the Committee of Public Information (CPI) with
Creel as its chair, using war appropriations that the he had unilateral control over. Creel explained his mission:

I took this position because I believed in the freedom of the press, and wanted to
be in a position where I could help to guard it.  You know and I know that this
freedom has been often abused, and that out of the abuse have proceeded injury to
institutions and injustice to individuals.  But you cannot cure such an evil by
cutting it out.  A better way is to crowd it out.  Suppression is not the wise
remedy.  Hope of betterment lies in the slow process of education and in the
development of a capacity for restraint and self-discipline.  

Nock, innately suspicious that the state could be tamed, appreciated Creel’s intention but doubted
the strategy: “you are sincere and loyal to the core, and honestly and with splendid industry and
diligence trying to make something out of your job that will reflect sincerity and loyalty… If you
do not succeed,—and you won’t —it is because it isn’t in the job.” Steffens, however, believed
that behind the scenes Creel was the primary instrument for preserving the progressivism of the
war: Creel’s “services to the forward movement here and in the world… are a fine story.  If it
hadn’t been for Creel, I think sometimes everything but the war would have been stopped ….  He

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178 George Creel to the President, Robert Lansing, Newton Baker and Josephus Daniels (undated), Box 1, Creel
Papers.

179 Walton Bean, “George Creel and his Critics: A Study of the Attacks on the Committee of Public Information,”
(PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 1941), 21-22.

180 Conference of the Press, Speech by Creel, box 5, 1917, Creel Papers.

181 Bean, “George Creel and His Critics,” 257.
has worked steadily for other things, insisted that the President hear of them and act, and fighting all the while with heads of other departments.”

Creel’s efforts to keep the war message on a progressive footing failed, especially as the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia cast a shadow over American radicals, painting them as antipatriotic. Creel himself acknowledged the failure in a letter to Wilson, shortly after the Republican victory in the congressional elections of 1918. Conservatives, Creel claimed, had called for “a reactionary trade-imperialistic war.” When Wilson redefined the terms of the conflict along liberal lines “The Big “Business patriots went with you, ostensibly on your own terms… They came into conspicuous leadership as Red Cross executives, as heads of State Councils of Defense, as patriotic dollar-a-year men. All the radical or liberal friends of your anti-imperialist war policy were either silenced or intimidated.” Because conservatives had an unblemished record of support for the war they were able to rally patriotic sentiment against liberals and ultimately “There was no voice left to argue for your sort of peace.”

The reaction was so thorough that Creel, even as the spokesman for America, was called to Congress to testify regarding his past radicalism. Republican Senator Sherman alleged that the administration was “a collection of radicals imbued with the vagaries of Karl Marx and of Lenine and Trotzky.” Sherman had once been content to attack the President for having single-taxers in his administration, now he charged the same officials with communism. Republican Senator Watson called the Lewis Senate Democratic Whip James Lewis had openly called for the single tax since the Spanish American War. Now when he proposed a bill for the nationalization of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones, he was accused of Bolshevism. Republican Senator Watson called the Lewis

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182 The Letters of Lincoln Steffens, 1:425.
183 Creel to Wilson, Nov. 8, 1918, box 2, Creel Papers
184 “Senators Attack Utility Seizures” Oversized 8, p 30, Creel Papers.
proposal a “programme of state socialism” and followed it with the accusation that “all of the radicals that are not in jail are in office under the Administration.” On this point at least, Creel and Watson might have been able to come to an uncomfortable agreement.

If the Bolshevik Revolution stole from single-taxers their comfortable perch in American politics, it also eclipsed them in the developing world as Wilsonian liberalism fell into disrepute. By the end the war, The Public was fully complicit in a new international order that only superficially altered established imperialism by renaming colonies “mandates” and placing them hypothetically under the supervision of the League of Nations. The Public recognized that if European nations divided up the Ottoman Empire they would “seize the first good opportunity to make their sovereignty absolute.” Their only alternative, however, was that America assume control for the purpose of “protecting the common people against exploitation.”

The Public was taken out with the tide of reaction against Wilsonian internationalism when the President’s agenda was outmaneuvered in the peace talks at Versailles, blocked in Congress, and finally betrayed with the exploitation of mandates. The Public ceased publication without explanation in December of 1919. The feature of the final issue was written by Sun Yat-sen. The father of Chinese nationalism cited Wilson’s doctrine of international cooperation to argue for a plan of development that would foster independence from imperial powers. Not long after, Sun Yat-sen flirted with Marxism after the Versailles talks concluded with the Japanese in control over Northern China. In the newly founded Soviet Union, Lenin curried the favor of Wilson’s discontents with pleas for national independence. While Sun Yat-sen ultimately repudiated

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186 “Accuse Wilson of Bad Faith in Cable Service” p 33 oversized 8, Creel Papers.
187 Public, Feb. 15, 1919.
188 “Since President Wilson has proposed a League of Nations to end military war in the future, I desire to propose to end the trade war by cooperation and mutual help in the development of China.” The Public, Dec. 6, 1919.

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Marxism, Mao Ze Dong, brought communism into Chinese discourse as a leader of anti-Versailles protests. Similarly Ho Chi Minh, who had sought an audience with President Wilson at the Peace Conference, gravitated to Marxism as the principle challenger to imperialism. \(^{189}\) Ironically, Lenin’s theory of imperialism had less foundation in Marxist though, which gleefully anticipated the collapse of national identities, than in the theories of British economist J. A. Hobson, who had pointed to land value taxation as the solution to imperialism. Still whatever credentials the movement had garnered in the developing world were fully spent, its labors co-opted and overshadowed.

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During the waning years of the administration Creel developed an interest in Mexico’s experiment with socialized natural resources. Although Article 27 of the constitution, established land and natural resources as public property, this was a mere statement of principle that required precise rules for implementation. One of the most important questions was how to deal with American oil companies, which the State Department and the conservative Yankee press insisted should be retained by their corporate owners. Creel, still an official agent of the government, worked to ease fears of American retaliation. On October 2\(^{nd}\) 1919, Creel sent a telegraph through Manuel Carpio to the Mexican Senate where nationalization was under discussion. Carpio, an employee of Carranza’s outreach campaign to the United States, had become a contributor to *The Public*.\(^{190}\) In his telegraph, Creel urged the government “not gratify oil interests by legislating at their pleasure.” While it brought effective nationalization of oil no closer to fruition, the letter was purportedly “commented upon generally in Mexico City.”

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\(^{190}\) *Public*, July 19, 1919 & August 23, 1919.
Mexican Consul-General in New York, R. P. de Negri, wrote to Mexican Senator Flavio Borquez, “You are probably familiar with the statements made by George Creel… on President Wilson’s views with regard to the nationalization of petroleum in Mexico.” He concluded that the “working classes, radical socialists, and honest intellectuals” in the U.S. were open to “nationalizing natural resources,” and thus the most important obstacle to such a plan was removed. Creel had at least won the attention of Mexican officials.

By 1920, the CPI had been terminated by Congress, which was so hostile that it refused even to provide funding to save the operation’s records. But in October of that year the President turned to Creel one last time, now as an unofficial envoy to Mexico, circumventing the State Department in negotiations to give official recognition to the new Mexican government. Creel met with Wilson twice and then snuck across the border under an assumed name, where he began to negotiate terms for recognition with interim Mexican President Adolfo De La Huerta. According to Creel, he did so unofficially and at his own expense, upon the urges of special envoy Pesquiera and with the blessing of Wilson. As head of the CPI, Creel had already been reprimanded by the State Department when his employees communicated directly with foreign heads of state, making Creel’s mission a serious affront to the State Department.

While the mission was intended to be secret, Creel was followed across the border by an informant of Republican Senator Albert Fall, a close associate of the oil industry and one of the most vocal opponents of the new government in Mexico. News of the trip was leaked to the

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193 Oversized 8 p 194-205 Creel Papers. George Creel, “Scrambled Washington: Battle of the Bureaus” Colliers, June 11, 1921. In the past, Lansing had already condemned Creel for allowing his subordinate to contact royalty. Creel sarcastically reflected that: “Shaken and shattered, I went back to the office, sent for Mr. Rochester, and demanded to know why he—a commoner—dared to insult royalty with blunt cables.”

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The State Department, under the Secretary Bainbridge Colby, denied that Creel’s mission was diplomatic in nature and gave every indication that it was opposed to hastening the pace of recognition. While in Mexico, Creel publically dissented from the State Department, arguing that the oil question should not be a factor in recognition. His comment provoked an unnamed “high official of the State Department” to respond, in essence, that the Department was inflexible on the oil issue. Two days after Creel returned to D.C., he conferred with Wilson and Colby, and Colby announced that he would be expediting the process of recognition. To save face, Colby claimed that Creel had no impact on his decision.

Out of office, Creel confirmed that his faith in the single tax had not waned during this tenure in the Wilson administration. Negotiations for Mexico’s recognition were ultimately stalled by Colby and entirely halted when the conservative Harding administration took power. Then, the new President of Mexico, Alvaro Obregon, issued a letter appealing to the American people. The letter claimed that “The natural resources of the country made enormous fortunes for the few; wholesale campaigns of dispossession gathered the land into great estates owned by absent landlords, industry was dragged back and fifteen million people led lives of misery.” Mexicans hoped to “finance the national progress through the medium of our natural resources.” Nationalization of natural resources would provide Mexico the wealth to build a stable democracy, and “honest taxation” would “put an end to this policy of land monopoly and non-productivity.”

194 Attorney General Alexander Palmer to President Wilson, November 8, 1920, Creel Papers.
196 Oversized 8, pp. 194-207, Creel Papers.
197 “A Report to the People’s of the World: Official Statement of President Obregon,” June 26, 1921, Box 8, Creel Papers.
Astute observers in the American press noticed a fair share of what had come to be popularly known as “Creelisms” in the President’s statement and observed that Creel was in Mexico as part of the “Obregón retinue.” Creel publically denied that he had written the letter, but the multiple drafts in his personal files suggest otherwise. Four months earlier, Creel had written an article for the American press positing a course for postwar progressivism. He concluded the article with the plea “But why not hit at the source? Why not prevent the accumulation of that sort of wealth that is not the product of courage and energy and effort? Why not fight for the adoption of Henry George’s theory, or as it is better known, the single tax?” The Single Tax Review published, without comment, Creel’s statement side by side with the first article attributed to Obregón. Because the two were written at nearly the same time, it is conceivable that Creel’s statements were unwittingly juxtaposed to one another.

Fifty years after the publication of The Irish Land Question brought the single tax into public discussion, it was endorsed by the former spokesman for the United States both under his own name and that of Mexico’s President. It was the high water mark of the movement’s struggle for political position, though, as was typically the case, it is unclear that it was ever translated into policy.

Still, Creel’s statement was not just a declaration of personal faith, it was the culmination of a national process of political mobilization. Long, dispiriting fights over franchises, taxes, and urban social services had gradually built up a constituent following in American cities potent enough to propel Georgists to positions of import within the Democratic Party. To a remarkable extent,

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198 “U.S. Finds Creel in Note Writer for Obregon” “Creel is Personal Press Agent for General Obregon,” Oversize 9, Creel Papers.
199 A Talk by Creel before the Wilmette Club of Chicago February 20, to be released to morning papers on February 21, 1921, Box 5, Creel Papers.
degree this was a fulfillment of George’s plan. This brand of partisan power was what he had envisioned when he dictated that those who supported his cause follow him into the Democratic Party under Bryan’s banner and when he decided to devote the final months of his life to chastising Bryan’s enemies in the party. It was the course Johnson pursued when he fought for hegemony over Ohio’s democratic machine and solidified his relationship with Bryan. In the end, even the highest posts in a globally transformative Presidential Administration proved insufficient to inaugurate their principle plan, but it did allow single-taxers considerable leeway in crafting tax, land, and natural resource policy.

Single-taxers played an important role in developing progressive taxation and fashioning it so as to bear heaviest on monopoly rents. Considering the income tax’s long history of retrenchment after the majority of Americans were compelled to pay it, it is probable that this was an important contribution to its development. George’s followers also extended government control over land and laid the foundation for further development toward public ownership of natural resources and utilities. Less favorably, they implicated themselves in a failed international agenda that facilitated conservative ascendency. The movement’s hike to power was long, winding, and arduous; the route back down was like a step off a steep precipice.
Chapter XI

The Will to Believe

The Decline of the Single Tax and the Rise of Regional Planning

I feel as if I might play the part of the old man at whose funeral service the best the clergy man could think of to say about him was to tell the historic story of how the world had moved during the period of this man’s long and otherwise eventless life.¹


The Uplift as a crusading spirit, as a dedication, as a religion, is comatose if not completely ossified—strangled both by the war and its own ineptitude. It was inept because its moral judgments took the place of sound analysis. It dealt in blacks and whites; it deified a muzzy and mystical conception of democracy, and found horns underneath every plug hat; it was too logical and not sufficiently psychological; it was cursed with political-mindness. But it was a gallant spiritual adventure, and before its chieftains and martyrs we stand at salute.²


After World War I, the single tax largely ceased to inspire meaningful political action. Its onetime exponents increasingly questioned it, though they largely adhered to the broader vision of republicanism, antimonopoly liberalism, and land reform that George had espoused. What had been a fairly diffuse movement from its inception, came to lack the cohesion that would generally merit the title. Because the movement George began had persisted for decades, obtained meaningful results, and recently reached the zenith of its influence among Democratic Party elites, its precipitous decline requires explanation.

In a sense, it did not so much disappear as it was transformed. Much as the homesteading movement of the nineteenth century faded into the single tax movement as the supply of unclaimed, usable agricultural land disappeared, the single tax floundered on the highways of the ascendant automobile. The spread of population out of cities blunted the force of the rent crisis

² “Where Are the Pre-war Radicals,” Survey Geographic, February 1926, 556-566.
and eliminated the imperative to live near work, reducing the appeal of the sort of urban development that land value taxation was intended to spur.

Whereas single-taxers had wanted to tax land to force owners to develop it as rapidly as possible, a new generation of reformers, sometimes evolving directly out of the earlier movement, wanted to put land under government ownership, where its use could be planned so as to beautify social life. Americans had, in their reaction to the war, adopted more individualistic and artistic philosophies for which regional planning was better fitted. The generational split between planner and single-taxer, perhaps inevitable, was facilitated by the structure of the single tax movement. Without organization, leadership had fallen naturally to George’s closest associates. Its hierarchy then was rigidly built around a generational cohort that never managed to integrate younger activists in anything more than a superficial way.

However, there was a complex array of political and economic reasons for the decline of the movement. These included: the drop of urban rents, the rise of home ownership, and the backlash against property tax regimes. The failures of single-tax referendums and pushback against land value taxation abroad suggested voters would never be willing to tax themselves as severely as George proposed. Furthermore, the now popular idea that rates of taxation should be determined by ability to pay undercut the single tax, which was intended to redistribute property by imposing burdens owners would be unwilling or unable to pay.

Importantly, the single tax, instead of being a meaningful middle ground between capitalism and socialism, became too conservative for radicals and too radical for conservatives. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia had made radicals more interested in plans for extensive government planning—such as those proposed by regional planners—while also provoking a popular backlash against anything that resembled socialism. The old republican gospel of civil
sacrifice came to be associated with World War I and Wilsonian internationalism, which single-taxers continued to support, despite their widespread unpopularity. The single tax no longer had a meaningful position on the political spectrum.

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In 1918 Lincoln Steffens traveled to Russia and met the new leader of that nation, Vladimir Lenin. “The Russian Revolution hit me very hard” he wrote to Brand Whitlock; “There I saw close up those forces which we used to feel in cities rise up and carry men away like a ship in a storm.” Principle among those forces was class conflict, which Steffens, in the republican tradition, had seen as inimical to democracy. In Russia, Steffens became confident that class conflict was natural and irreconcilable with his earlier faiths; he wrote Whitlock that the “liberal notions” that they had shared, including liberty and democracy were proven to have “been cultivated human wishes and purposes, having no parallels in nature and no foundation in science.”

If anything, Steffens’ new affinity for the Bolsheviks entailed a harder transition that he described, full of doubt and pleading. In a typically incoherent correspondence from the period, he wrote Daniel Kiefer wishing someone “would write a revision of George’s philosophy in the light of the war and revolutions. That is what Lenin thinks some Socialist should do for Marx.” At some point he entertained the prospect of a happy merger, noting “The Single Taxers could help the Socialists, if they would accept the coming of Socialism and make suggestions where the Socialists are looking for them; for a solution of the Land Question which the peasants could understand and would accept.”

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3 Lincoln Steffens to Brand Whitlock, Jan. 28, 1925, Steffens Papers.
4 Lincoln Steffens to Daniel Kiefer, June 21, 1920, Steffens Papers.
inhabited. To Frederic C. Howe he wrote that he was “hoping I will be proved wrong the way I used to seek evidence that I was right.”

The Bolshevik Revolution made Marxism a tangible reality that radicals could believe in, but time was turning the single tax into a progressively less obtainable dream. In 1899 Thorsten Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* had depicted farmers as the archetype of the honest producer, but when Veblen began work on *The Vested Interests* in 1918, the founding father of Institutional Economics was certain that they were natural allies of the vested interests that used politics to obtain unearned profits. He explained that, “the reason… American farmers have been led… to side with the vested interests rather than with the common man… comes of the fact that the farmers are not only farmers but also owners of speculative real estate. And it is as speculators in land-values that they find themselves on the side of unearned income.” For Veblen, it was now obvious that the farmer’s interest in land values was potent enough to disrupt all plans for producerist reform.

Rexford Tugwell, one of Franklin Roosevelt’s earliest economic advisers, bluntly asserted of the single tax in 1925 that: “none of the reformers with his system of reform has been able to sufficiently capture the imagination of the people to persuade them to its adoption.” Tugwell, who would remain somewhere near the Georgist tradition continued: “nevertheless, it is not often denied that the premises upon which their arguments were based are true enough: that production of exchangeable values is a very different thing from production for the satisfaction of a people’s wants.”

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5 Lincoln Steffens to Frederic C. Howe, Sept 15, 1934, Steffens Papers.
The single tax was abandoned, in part because the failed referendum campaigns of the teens suggested that voters would never understand it—that it was esoteric and its ramifications on the distribution of wealth were not clear enough for mainstream politics. The novelist Upton Sinclair was a socialist, but had also taken up residence in the single tax community of Arden, and developed enough interest in George’s remedy to donate time and money to the 1918 Great Adventure referendum in California. That controversial campaign would have immediately established a full-fledged single tax in the state where George wrote *Progress and Poverty*.

After the referendum failed, Sinclair concluded the single tax was politically unobtainable. In his 1922 *Book of Life* he wrote that “Theoretically the movement has a considerable percentage of right on its side.” However, he claimed that “to understand it requires a knowledge of the complexities of our economic system which the voters simply have not got.” Voters had no particular interest in higher taxes and the concept of incidence of taxation (where the burden of taxes actually fell after being shifted by the assessed party) was beyond the scope of their understanding. Sinclair did not abandon the land problem, but he turned to answers that were more straight-forward, including “cooperative agricultural colonies for our returned soldiers.”

This was a reference to the resettlement plan that Louis Post had first proposed. Ironically, single-taxers had helped pave the way for the alternative of government ownership that was now supplanting it as the most viable alternative to the single tax.

The single tax also suffered retrenchment in some places where it had obtained practical implementation, particularly in Western Canada. When Gifford Pinchot, who had once been on the edge of the movement, received a letter about the single tax, he wrote that he was “delighted” to have information on it. He then followed this caveat about its feasibility:

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However, there are some difficulties in the way of such a solution which raise doubts in my mind as to its feasibility. The main one is that the taxation of land values fails to provide sufficient revenue under certain circumstances. The single tax principle was given a thorough trial in certain Canadian states of the northwest about fifteen or twenty years ago. It was found to work satisfactorily while land values were increasing. But in times like that which followed the World War, when population declined in the districts making the experiment, governmental treasuries remained empty and other methods of raising funds had to be resorted to.9

In fact, while many Canadian municipalities continued to tax land at a higher rate than improvements, by the twenties they were all transitioning away from being strictly single-tax cities. By 1930, six cities in British Columbia which had taxed only land reverted to taxing improvements, though still at a lower rate than land.10

In reality though, Canadian cities were not necessarily moving against land value taxation because revenue was insufficient, but rather because sufficiently high rates resulted in major dislocations of property ownership. In Alberta alone, 6,924,800 acres of land, with an approximate value of something like 75 million dollars, were forfeited to the state for non-payment of taxes. A committee created by the Manitoba Economic Conference, including three Canadian mayors, concluded that “as experience throughout Western Canada abundantly shows, it too often amounts to nothing less than a process of fairly rapid confiscation of property in the guise of taxation.”11 Arthur M. Fraser, President of the Winnipeg Taxpayers Association, pointed to the frequency of forfeiture which he argued “prove(d) the rapidly growing inability of real estate alone to provide the cost of municipal government.”12

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9 Gifford Pinchot to Charles Corkhill, August 18th, 1932, box 739, Gifford Pinchot Papers.
11 Ibid., 401.
12 Ibid., 400.
For single-taxers, this was very much the point of their program; forfeited land was opened up for free settlement, so that those without wealth were given something like a level playing field with those who already had it. But the backlash against the loss of homes and farms was more politically potent than this essentially abstract form of equal opportunity. Furthermore, with urban development slowed, issues of rent and housing supply no longer had the same salience. Once the single-tax in Western Canada was praised for bringing skyscrapers; now it was attacked for the same reason.

Tax revolt would prove to be the Achilles Heel for George’s plan. Land value taxation had perhaps its strongest hold in Denmark, where a single-tax party—the Justice Party—joined in a coalition with the Liberal and Socialist Parties. Not only did the country have a national land value tax, it was increased several times, through the 1930s. But when the Liberal Coalition came to power in the late 50s and engineered one last hike, a tax revolt followed that slowly eliminated most of the country’s land duties.\(^\text{13}\)

Since World War II, land value taxation has undergone the most pronounced growth in Pennsylvania, where the two-rate system established in 1913 was credited with the survival of Pittsburgh and Scranton during deindustrialization. Once limited to two cities at a ratio of land to improvements of two-to-one, the tax is now open to all cities and boroughs at any rate desired; as of 2006 sixteen taxing districts had adopted land value taxation, with the highest differential at over sixty-two to one.\(^\text{14}\) The perception that land value taxation had helped save Pittsburgh’s economy established a strong current of support for it in that city. But, when the 2000 revaluation produced large increases in the assessed value of land, a sudden tax revolt upended


the long, established system. Bob O’Connor campaigned against incumbent Mayor Thomas Murphy by arguing that “large property owners have learned how to manipulate Henry George’s two-tiered system to the detriment of the poor and middle class.” To blunt the force of the tax revolt Murphy ended the two-rate system. The Pittsburgh example indicates how fragile an institution even successful tax policy can be.

But by the twenties and thirties, even the heavy property taxes that single-taxers had often supported were under attack. This was, in part, a reaction to the tendency over the proceeding decades to shift the burden of local taxation from personal property on to real estate. The National Association of Real Estate Boards, for example, alleged that by 1928 four-fifths of state and local revenue was derived from real property, constituting an undue burden on a single class of property. In 1923 Rhode Island passed a constitutional amendment limiting increases in the property tax. Within a decade, six more states had passed similar measures, and by 1936, thirty five had passed or were considering some piece of the legislative program of the National Association of Real Estate Boards. Among these was Ohio, which after an initiative campaign that collected over 900,000 signatures, passed a constitutional amendment limiting the use of the property tax.

If the tax forfeitures due to the property tax were irksome to some, it became especially so in the 1920s as the income tax gained force and popularized the principle that taxes should

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17 Ibid. “The revolt of the taxpayers is a fact. All about us we see it and hear it. Whole counties are aflame with it. Great crowds are being hurriedly mustered to march upon county courthouses, city, village and town halls and even on the district school meetings. Budgets are being slashed on every hand.” William Anderson, “Are Our Taxes Too High?” Better Roads, June 1932.

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reflect “ability to pay.” In a sense, this was a progressive doctrine dictating that higher earners pay more. It also, however, enshrined the sanctity of established wealth, treating only new, disposable income as subject to taxation.

By the 1920s, Robert Murray Haig was the nation’s leading academic expert on the subject of the income tax and one of the most vocal proponents of the ability to pay principle. However, his first major publication was a study of land value taxation commissioned by New York City in 1915. Haig argued that the general tendency toward growth in the area made it impossible to ascertain the effects of land value taxation in Western Canada, but that it had probably encouraged building and discouraged speculation in some measure.

However, Haig was troubled by the plight of property owners who lacked the revenue to pay their taxes. Of speculators in unimproved real estate he wrote “Many of the large owners of such property have few resources other than their investments in land…. With them the payment of taxes is a serious matter. Their difficulties constitute a weakness in the real estate situation.” While Canadian cities had not yet begun the sale of land for delinquent taxes, Haig wrote ominously of unpaid taxes and the possibility of “confiscation of existing land values.” That land values were increasing during the period was crucial, according to Haig, because “it is one thing to take from a man values which he already possesses and another thing to prevent him from receiving values which he probably never expected to possess.”

Underlying Haig’s preference for the income tax rather than the land value tax was not so much any sort of technical objection, as it was a value judgment about the impropriety of taxing what one already owned, much less redistributing property through a tax on wealth.

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Some single-taxers had fought for the income tax as a stepping stone to their idea, but it fared poorly in that regard. It was expected to attract support from businessmen, which never materialized but did put them in the politically untenable position of arguing for a radical redistribution of property alongside tax reductions for the wealthy. In 1894, Tom Johnson spoke in Congress on behalf of the nation’s first peacetime income tax. He claimed that with the elimination of the tariff “the great obstacle to further improvement would be removed.” Because the tariff protected wealthy industrialists it was difficult to reform, but “when we came to reform or abolish [the income tax] we should find no powerful interests, representing millions flinched annually from the masses, besieging Congress.”

Single-tax support for the income tax, then, was predicated on the idea that the income tax would make it more palatable to the economic elite, therefore bringing it into the political mainstream. In a letter from Louis Post to Anna DeMille George in 1926 that was distributed to several other chieftains like James Barry and Stoughton Cooley, the onetime labor lawyer suggested that “Our future lies in my judgment in diplomatic campaigns in business circles.” Post referenced the work of the “Manufacturers and Merchants Federal Tax League” which tried to organize businessmen on the principle that the single tax would be less onerous, and more respectful of their labor, than the new income tax. That organization managed to put out a few publications in the 1920s, including a personal attack on the economist Richard T. Ely’s Institute of Research in Land Economics. The organization never seems, however, to have been able to

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20 Extract of letter from Louis Post to Anna DeMille attached to Stoughton Cooley to Barry March 11, 1926, box 3, Barry Papers.
21 Otto Cullman to George Peabody, July 17, 1933, box 42, Peabody Papers.
affect any substantive policy changes, nor to have mobilized meaningful support from industrialists.  

More fundamentally, as the twenties progressed, rent seemed like a progressively less relevant concern, and the objective of urban development, spurred by high taxes on underused land, was out of tune with popular sentiment. In 1931 Frederic Delano, Franklin Roosevelt’s uncle, spoke to the National Capitol Park and Planning Commission. He observed that zoning laws allowed for "striking instances of reaping what some economists term an ‘unearned increment.’” But, instead of confiscating this unearned increment, Delano recommended more constant and stringent height restrictions that would decentralize business and eliminate the cause for these values. He even argued that municipal authorities reverse the trend to assess the “values of land regardless of the use burden put upon it.” To slow urban development, he encouraged taxing authorities to adopt something like the opposite of the single tax by “reducing the tax on the land and increasing that on the buildings thereon.”

Delano came to these conclusions, in part, by monitoring the way that, with the introduction of automobiles, Americans had begun to migrate to suburban communities. “The day of the larger cities has definitively passed,” he argued. Delano was not alone in looking to suburban development as evidence that public policy should suppress or even reverse urban development. Rexford Tugwell, F.D.R.’s closest adviser on land issues, similarly argued that: “The conception of suburban resettlement came less from the garden city of England than from

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24 Quoted in Stanley Buder, Visionaries and Planners: The Garden City Movement and the Modern City (New York: Oxford University Library, 1990), 177.
some studies of our own population movements which showed steady growth in the periphery of the cities.” He concluded that New Deal land policy “accepted a trend instead of trying to reverse it.”

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As far back as John Stuart Mill, classical rent theory had indicated that advances in transportation would reduce land values, but Georgists had, perhaps consciously, tried to downplay the influence of a factor that would obviate the need for the single tax as a remedy to rent. In 1908 Lawson Purdy was asked by a reporter from the London Daily News about the impact of the suburban migration. New York’s single tax assessor responded that “The development of new means of transportation … undoubtedly checks the increment in the value of residence land in the heart of the city. “ He tried, however, to diminish the significance of suburbanization on land values: “Our population, however, increases so rapidly that I don’t think the land has actually decreased in value because of suburban competition at any time,” and added that “we are at present witnessing a tremendous increase in the value of suburban land.”

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Whether or not Purdy had been feigning confidence, he came to accept the effect that transportation could have on land values. When he passed away, Purdy was working on a book explaining that it was “accessibility, rather than the aggregate amount of land, that determines price. Commuters rarely used to live more than one mile from a railroad station; now the automobile has stretched their radius to as much as five miles comfortably.”

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Purdy likely changed course because, as early as the twenties, the higher rates of homeownership and lower rents encouraged by the automobile had clearly blunted the force of his movement. In a classic study of Muncie, Indiana, Robert and Helen Lynd demonstrated that

26 Public, Sept. 11 1908.
while in 1890 local workers needed to live within walking distance of their place of occupation, but by the 1920s as many as 57% of the workers at some factories lived more than a mile away. During the same period, the construction of new rental properties in Muncie all but ended.\textsuperscript{28} The migration away from sites of employment was mimicked in larger cities like New York, with Manhattan losing 18.2% of its population during the twenties.\textsuperscript{29}

Property owners, the ancient enemy of the single tax movement, grew more numerous during the 1920s. The U.S. Census indicates that while homeownership declined slowly from 1900-1920, over the twenties it increased by 5%—more than compensating for the slump of the preceding decades. At the same time, the explosive growth in the price of real estate slowed. From 1912 to 1922 the total value of real estate grew at an average rate of 8.85% every year; from 1922 to 1928 the rate was 5.33%.\textsuperscript{30} Amazingly this slowdown in the growth of real estate occurred in tandem with record home construction and a hike in the price of construction materials. Since the value of improvements was certainly increasing, the value of land had at best begun to rise at a slower rate and probably to decline. Thus, fears about rising land value, once relevant, would likely be incomprehensible to the average voter of the twenties.\textsuperscript{31}

While undermining the economic foundations of the single tax, suburbanization also challenged its preconceptions about desirable social space. George argued that by forcing citizens to pay rent to the state to maintain their tenure on the land, the single tax would discourage “dog in the manger” land use—that is to say large lots inefficiently allocated to such

\textsuperscript{30} Newcomer, “The Decline of the General Property Tax,” 46.
small concerns as house pets. Even rural communities would be reshaped into towns with a sense of community and cultural offerings. George’s premise that cities promoted cultivation and civic education had been picked up by Hamlin Garland, whose stories of frontier life emphasized its dearth of culture and education. When Daniel Kiefer observed the early trends of suburbanization, he similarly concluded that speculation was forcing citizens out of the cities that they would prefer to live in: “Why have these suburbanites moved out of the city? It is certainly not because they like to be located at an inconvenient distance from their places of employment.” Rather than bemoaning urban congestion, Kiefer explained that the city was not growing fast enough without the single tax.32

But, by the end of the twenties it was impossible to deny a popular urge to leave the city. In 1932 Joseph Fels’ widow, Mary, wrote Newton Baker to lament their shortcomings: “the thought of the Single Taxers; including Henry George, is fixed on the town, on what it will do for town users and little, or not at all, on its relation of agriculture to man’s health of body and spirit.”33 Baker responded that “It has always been the economic rather than the spiritual side of man’s relation to the land which they have thought it wise to emphasize.” While he emphasized that he did not mean to criticize the movement, he acknowledge it had failed to appeal to “deeper values.”34

The power of the movement had always been in large part contingent upon the abilities of its leading representatives, but these supporters were now increasingly marginalized politically, socially, and culturally. The red scare propagated fears about any sort of political agitation for economic reform. Elizabeth Dilling’s *The Red Network* was perhaps the first comprehensive

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32 *Public*, Sep 16, 1910.
33 Mary Fels to Newton Baker, Sept. 25-32 1932, box 95, Baker Papers.
34 Baker to Mrs. Fels, October 7, 1932, box 95, Baker Papers.
compendium of the secret communist conspirators imagined to have captured the U.S.
Government. The named names included prominent single-taxers Frederic Howe, Newton Baker,
Frank Walsh, Lincoln Steffens, Benjamin Marsh, and Ben Lindsey.35

The wartime efforts of single-taxers to defend the civil liberties of Socialists were now paired with their own utterances on economics to seal the case against them. Such attacks were by no means limited to the right wing. In the waning days of the Wilson Administration, Frederic Howe was accused by progressive Congressman Fiorello La Guardia of providing detainees at Ellis Island with radical literature. These charges led to his wife, Marie, being seized without recourse to counsel by the Secret Service.36 Howe retired to Nantucket, where, beginning in 1922, he conducted an educational lecture series called the “School of Opinion.” Even so far removed from the Capital, with little more influence than the average lecturer, he was hounded by “big patriotic meetings” protesting what they called a “hot-bed of revolutionary propaganda.” There were even rumors that an official from the Justice Department infiltrated the meetings.37

Louis Post had dedicated more of his life to the single tax than anyone but the Georges and, during the deportation fiasco, put himself near the center of Red Scare hysteria. Not surprisingly, he was hardest hit by the country’s shift to the right. He remained in Washington D.C. during the 1920s, living in the neighborhood of Columbia Heights, where he was still able to meet regularly with the city’s great progressive notables: Louis Brandeis, T. V. Powderly, Senator George Norris, Senator Robert La Follette, Judson King, and old friends like Frederic Howe.38 But after the accusations of sedition following his leniency in the deportation hearings, he was unable to obtain a paying job. He claimed that “his services were no longer in

35 Miller, From Progressive to New Dealer, 400.
36 Ibid., 294.
37 Ibid., 334-361.
38 Diary, box 10, Louis Post Papers.
compensatory demand” because the single-tax was “out of fashion” and because of his “identification with the ‘reds.’” The demand for single-tax literature dropped off so precipitously that he could not find a publisher for his account of George’s life.

Post’s confidence in the democratic public was severely shaken. He wrote that America was drifting toward “a plutocratic autocracy” because of the mob sentiment of “pagan patriots” who “support any cause, however menacing to American ideals it may be, if its promoters decorate it with the American flag.” His unemployment and the apparent collapse of his life’s work sparked disabling bouts of depression that Post described in his diary as “trips to hell.”

Post turned increasingly to the Swedenborgian Church for solace. Instead of reporting confidently on the progress of the single tax, he emphasized that a society living under a just god would inevitably progress toward the truth, turning to a sort of *deus ex machina* to justify his life’s work. Despite his professed faith, a hint of pessimism seeped into his autobiography “Living a Long Life over Again,” the title of which suggested doubts about the trajectory he choose. On January 10th, 1928 Post passed away. On the day of his funeral *The New Church Messenger* published Post’s last piece “What Could Check Communism.” Post claimed that we “must expand the concept of ‘mine and thine’ to ‘mine, thine, and ours’ to end the “injustices that arouse and promote communist unrest.” Justice Louis Brandeis gave a glowing eulogy at the funeral. Another ceremony was held simultaneously in Chicago, where Post had published *The Public*.

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39 “Living a Long Life Over Again” p 351, Box 2, Post Papers.
40 Bobbs Merrill Company to Alice Thatcher Post, May 31, 1935, box 10, Post Papers.
42 Diary, box 10, p 20, Louis Post Papers
43 Louis Post, *New Church Messenger*, Jan. 11, 1928, con. 6, Post Papers.

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Few single-tax elected officials appeared as firmly ensconced as Ben Lindsey. As the pioneer of the juvenile courts, he had served on the bench in Denver for twenty four years, even winning reelection in 1908 as an independent with nearly as many votes as the two major party candidates combined. But by the 1920s, the fear that large financial interests were undermining the republic was eclipsed by the anxiety minorities and radicals, spurring the resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan. When Lindsey spoke up against the movement he was targeted by a Klan opponent. He won reelection with a scant majority of 130 votes, which, composed of a large plurality in the local Jewish district, ultimately did not count as a victory at all. Klan supporters took the case to court and alleged that their own voter suppression efforts made the district results unreliable and successfully sued to have them tossed out. Lindsey was removed from office and forced to repay what salary he had taken to the family of his opponent; the opponent had already taken his life after revelations of his past judicial improprieties.

After leaving office, Lindsey became the leading propagandist of “compassionate marriage,” which would legitimate birth control and easy divorces to allow for what critics claimed were essentially trial marriages. The proposition created an international controversy that culminated with Pope Pius X repudiating the idea in his encyclical “On Christian Marriage.”

Attacked by the Pope and the KKK in the same decade, Lindsey’s experience is demonstrative of the difficulties of liberal universalism in the tribal twenties.

On prohibition, Georgists followed a course that was antithetical to both sides of the polarized debate over one of the most divisive issues of the twenties. George had argued against

44 Public, Nov. 13, 1908.  
restrictive legislation generally and the prohibition of alcohol specifically. Despite his libertarian tendencies on the subject, he still repudiated vice and believed that with economic salvation men and women would voluntarily live clean lives. Creel, who had frequently spoken of prohibition as a distraction from economic issues, took the position that prohibition was bad but at least better than the saloon. Frank Stephens, founder of Arden, expressed an even more ambivalent view in a letter that was shared by Peabody and Baker: “If I do not believe in an infraction of personal liberty, that is no reason why I should be disloyal to the majority of the people who have decreed prohibition of alcohol by the methods provided in the constitution.” Newton Baker wrote that he would “prefer to see temperance through self-discipline, self-restraint, and sturdy-character” and “to approach the solution of the problem by resorting to agencies which build character and strengthen self-restraint.”

This middle course was profoundly unsatisfactory for such a divisive issue. After a speech to the Federated Council of Churches in 1932, Baker received a volley of prohibitionist hate mail, including one letter that claimed “the only way you and Al Smith can get votes is to dope the voters with narcotics.” On the other hand, Baker never seems to have garnered any meaningful support from the class of young urbanities, exemplified by the flappers, which believed that the liberty to drink should not be purely theoretical.

Single-taxers were profoundly uncomfortable with avant-garde of the twenties and its perceived preoccupation with immediate gratification. This was illustrated in Whitlock’s novel *Uprooted*, which told the story of a painter named Waldron and his relations with a flapper

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48 Peabody to Baker, August 30th, 1920, box 185, Newton Baker Papers.
named Betty Walsh. Waldron, who was modeled after the author, finds that the war has created an impassible cultural chasm between himself and Betty. In the hedonism of the younger generation he perceives a self-destructiveness that is only mitigated by the power of privilege to protect the elite from their mistakes. His biographer, Robert Crunden expressed “shock” that this humanitarian who had taken up the mantle of Samuel Jones’ anarchism became “cut off from the life around him,” because of his inability to comprehend modernist culture. 51 But Whitlock, like George, had always fought for freedom with the preconception that it would never be too vigorously used.

Even a younger and particularly anti-establishmentarian Georgist like Albert Jay Nock loathed the new avant-garde which he believed could find no higher purpose in life than moving “from one squalid little Schweinerei to another.” The purpose of freedom, he contended was “that men may become as good and decent, as elevated and noble, as they might be and really wish to be.” 52 Once again, single-taxers’ efforts to transcend social divides and find common ground for a wider public interest only put them on the margins of a discourse that was divided by irreconcilable cultural differences. 53

Albert Jay Nock, though, probably navigated the new political and cultural terrain of the 1920s better than any other Georgist. Nock had served informally as Whitlock’s personal assistant for much of his life, but in 1920 he became editor of The Freeman with the support of the onetime British MP, Francis Neilson. Louis Post contributed to The Freeman along with

53 Creel evinced the same disdain for the avant-garde even before the 20s. “Between assignments I lived in Greenwich village, supposedly the habitat of the radical movement’s intelligentsia. Maybe not to my simple Western way of thinking. One day Emma Goldman and her anarchism were all the rage, the next day “Big Bill” Haywood held the center of the stage with his Industrial Workers of the World, heaping scorn on achievement and glorifying the proletariat. The works of Freud and Jung had just been discovered, and at every so-call salon the talk was of psychoanalysis and sex. After Frank Walsh, Brand Whitlock and Ben Lindsey it was all pretty cheap and frowsy.” Creel, Rebel at Large, 96.
other members of the last generation of land reformers, like Lincoln Steffens, and some, like Lewis Mumford, of the next generation. It became a seminal journal in the history of American libertarianism, but its roots were not so easily defined. It struggled to redefine the single tax after the Russian Revolution took on the mantle of radicalism and liberalism shed the preconceptions of Adam Smith and David Ricardo that the single tax movement had once thrived on. Now it was an oddity on the political spectrum with ideas about the socialization of land that were unusually radical and ideas about private property that were unusually conservative. Nock, though, thrived on the unsettling features of his philosophy, grabbing attention by highlighting its extremes.

_The Freeman_, for example, leaned, to a wholly unnecessary degree, to the contemporary association between radicalism and Marxism. Nock praised the Russian Revolution because it “liberated the idea that democracy is an affair of economics not of politics.” Though he always disagreed with nationalizing industry, he portrayed this difference of opinion as something akin to a familiar spat between two movements that both believed in socialization, only of different factors of production. One of his articles argued that farmers had been the first to organize and most adept at adapting to a socialized system, proving that socialized land would be the foundation for any system of voluntary cooperation; “if the resources of nature were free and labour were at a premium,” it would facilitate the “gradual extension” of “co-operative methods to one plant after another.”

When, in 1920, _The Nation_ welcomed _The Freeman_ into the “field of liberal journalism” Nock harshly rebuked that paper for failing to recognize that his was a “radical” paper. He explained:

The liberal appears to recognize but two factors in the production of wealth, namely, labour and capital…. The radical recognizes a third factor, namely natural resources; and is absolutely convinced that as long as monopoly-interest in

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natural resources continues to exist, no adjustment of the relations between labor and capital can possibly be made.\textsuperscript{55}

For all his protestations, when Nock read through the list of those who had espoused his vision of “a society entirely free from class domination and class-exploitation” it read like an honor roll of world liberalism, including Adam Smith, Richard Cobden, Quesnay, Henry George, Ludwig Gumplowicz, and Theodor Hertzka. Though he also recommended that his readers peruse the final chapter of Marx’s \textit{Das Kapital}, which discussed land.\textsuperscript{56} While fully cognizant of the differences between Marxism and Georgism, Nock worked to keep his ideology relevant by positioning it within the family of socialist thought.

At the same time that Nock reached out to the radicalism of the Russian Revolution, he struck a starkly libertarian tone, attacking the very institution of the modern liberal state along with all of its progressive social and economic reforms. Nock adopted Franz Oppenheimer’s thesis that the state was an instrument of class rule by land owners and used it to justify an assault on every conceivable application of state power. Nock argued in an article published in 1920 that the “state is fundamentally anti-social” and claimed that he was “all for improving it off the face of the earth.” \textsuperscript{57}

\textit{The Freeman’s} anti-statism echoed that of its fore bearers, only with a more strident tone and more philosophical consistency. Just as Nock’s friend Whitlock had opened the saloons in Toledo; \textit{The Freeman} now chided prohibition as the resurrection of the old blue laws, taking solace only that the industry might “adopt a high standard of integrity” without government regulation.\textsuperscript{58} Because of the primacy it gave to civil liberties, it praised Louis Post for saving

\textsuperscript{55} Ib\textit{ibid.}, 36.
\textsuperscript{56} Ib\textit{ibid.}, 42.
\textsuperscript{57} Ib\textit{ibid.}, 35.
\textsuperscript{58} Ib\textit{ibid.}, 164.
socialist immigrants from deportation. At the same time, writers for the paper classed the income tax, along with other taxes on industry, as economically unsound “blackmail.” “Between the tariff and the income tax” the journal reported “American industry and commerce will shortly find itself sent to Coventry for good and all.” This reaction against government was, in some respects, natural after state power turned so harshly against the objectives of single-taxers. Even Frederic C. Howe, who had never really evinced many signs of anti-statism in the past, acquired a more temperamental disposition toward the state after the red scare convinced him that “government was a convenience of business.”

But the mantle of land reform was taken on by the regional planning movement. To a considerable extent, the movement evolved out of an awareness that taxation was a politically unpalatable means of nationalizing land. It traced its roots back to the Garden City Movement in England. The founder of that movement, Ebenezer Howard, had written in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* that by placing the whole burden of taxation on landowners George was “little likely to commend… [his] views to society.” Much of the book was devoted to proving that the single tax would be sufficient and theoretically sound source of revenue, but Howard believed that for it to obtain traction, the state would need to compensate landowners, purchasing land for communities that would serve as a model for the world. These cities would be not merely economical and egalitarian, but also beautiful and logically planned, so as to inspire imitation.

Howard seems to have been justified in his belief that land nationalization was more likely to attract support. Letchworth, Howard’s first garden city, had begun to flourish by the teens, attracting imitators from as far away as Russia. In the long run, this experiment spurred the

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59 Ibid., 3.
60 *The Freeman*, April 26, 1922.
development of government owned “New Towns” in Britain which flourished until Prime
Minister Margaret Thatcher privatized them in the 80s. By then, though, they had become a
global model, imitated as far away as Singapore, where the overwhelming majority of residential
housing is owned by the government.\footnote{Stanley Buder, Dreamers and Planners: The Garden City Movement and Modern Community.}

In the United States, the Garden City idea was taken up by the Regional Planning
Association of America. In the late teens Charles Whitaker, editor of the \textit{Journal of the American
Institute of Architects}, began to collect a small coterie of likeminded individuals around him.
Whitaker considered himself a single-taxer as well as a follower of Ebenezer Howard.\footnote{Carl Sussman, Planning the Fourth Migration: The Neglected Vision of the Regional Planning Association of America (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976).} Among
the most important members of the organization was Benton MacKaye, founder, vice president,
and originator of one its most successful projects, The Appalachian Trail. MacKaye had worked
with Louis Post on the resettlement plan in the waning years of the Wilson administration.
During the same period he had become one of the most vocal proponents in \textit{The Public} of the
idea that nationalization, rather than taxation, was the best means of dealing with land.\footnote{Edward K. Spann, Designing Modern America: The Regional Planning Association of America and its Members (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996).} In a
sense then, the new focus on state ownership of land developed directly out of the constitutional
and political hurdles to taxation that the single tax movement had encountered during the Wilson
Administration.

Most of the younger radicals had, unlike MacKaye, only watched the single tax
movement from the sidelines. This was, in part, because the structure of the movement was

maladapted for integrating new members. Its nucleus was a social club of George’s old friends. In its final years *The Public* published a steady stream of obituaries as this cohort grew old. When the Second Annual Fels Fund Conference in 1911 polled its attendees, it found that a majority of delegates had joined the movement in the last decade. A poll of the New York Single Tax Club, on the other hand, found that only 20% of its members had. New York was one of the most politically influential delegations, but it was also home to many of George’s original associates. In other words, despite the vibrancy of the cause in New York, it seems to have attracted fewer new supporters there because an old cohort had established dominance there.

The bitterness directed at the Great Adventure Movement is indicative of why younger radicals had difficulty joining movement. In California, the Great Adventure Movement was assailed because it was led by outsiders from Los Angeles who had usurped the authority of James Barry and James Maguire, close friends of George dating back to his time in San Francisco. This deviation from the deference typically given to the movement’s elder members had only really been possible because of the outside influence of the Fels Fund Commission.

Some younger radicals clearly articulated how the dominance of old movement elites deterred their involvement. Spencer Miller the Secretary Treasurer of the Worker’s Educational Bureau of America, a group that supported labor colleges through the country, related to George Peabody that he had written his senior thesis on the single tax and “became an interested member of the single tax group in New York City, but found ... that the group in New York City that was interested in the single tax seemed to be all contemporaries of Henry George” Stuart Chase, the regional planner sometimes thought to have popularized the phrase “New Deal,” had been

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67 Spencer Miller to George Peabody, April, 14, 1933, box 42, Peabody Papers.
pursuing a degree in business at Harvard when he saw *Progress and Poverty* on the shelves of the library; in the ensuring “nine hours a sword had flashed and cut him off from the cumulative ideology of twenty-three years.” Chase joined the local single-tax club, but left within a year noting that it “was composed largely of elderly men.” After he parted ways with the single tax club, he flirted with a variety of socialist groups, and ultimately synthesized many of the various stands of thought he had encountered into his own personal ideology.

The failure to integrate Chase into the single tax movement, is exemplary of how its structure cut it off from the new generation of regional planner. Chase became both a founding member of the RPAA, and, as associate editor of *Survey*, the individual principally responsible for coordinating a series of special issues that gave regional planning its first real public hearing. He brought with him some of the insights he had taken from George, but also much else otherwise that made him nothing like the orthodox single-taxer he might have been if he remained in the single-tax club.

Land nationalization proved to be a fruitful canvas on which to paint more variegated and complex ideologies. Whereas single-taxers hoped to bring market forces to bear on land, shaping its use through impersonal social pressures, state ownership allowed for conscious planning. Green spaces could be integrated into neighborhoods, providing access to nature; industrial areas could be segregated from residential areas, fostering cleaner communities; population could be redistributed outside of cites, reducing density. In the *Nation*, Lewis Mumford argued that the problem with the single tax, housing reform, and city planning was that they had acted independently. They should be thought of as part of a larger planning process. This opportunity

69 Spann, *Designing Modern America*, 71.
to experiment with and mix these earlier visions was crucial to Mumford, who, in *The Freeman*, wrote about the psychological need for younger radicals to forge their own vision. Mumford attributed this, in part, to the natural tides of generational change. He also, however, indicated that the war had discredited the classical republican ideal of disinterested and virtuous public sacrifice. Instead the new reformers were more like their individualistic, flapper contemporaries: “the war gave all the uplifters … a shocking jolt; and when they recovered consciousness they found a generation around them that was no longer interested in trying to make the machinery of society more perfect, but that sought to provide that their own lives… should be lively and enjoyable.”71 Part of this vision was new beautiful and sociable communities.

This preoccupation with aesthetics did not end interest in George’s land values, but it shifted the analysis from an almost exclusive focus on economic distribution toward more social and cultural critiques of the unearned increment. Frederick Ackerman argued that the real sin of “appreciation of value” in land was that it fostered overbuilt urban centers. This was because “no speculator in urban lands and buildings will interest himself in an enterprise unless the prospects surrounding it show the promise afforded by growth and concentration.”72 Younger planners like Mumford and Chase felt that the war had debunked their elders’ belief that humans were logical, atomistic individuals as liberalism had imagined them to be. Instead the species was tribal, psychological, and irrational. To cater to people’s needs was not just to provide for material well-being but also to satisfy an intangible yearning for a beautiful community. It was a familiar ebb and flow, a reaction to the violent overextension of liberalism in the war, analogous to the romantic backlash against the French Revolution a century earlier.

71 *The Freeman Book*, 84.
The faith of regional planners in their superior sense of psychology, however, was eventually proven to be fatally wrong. They failed to realize that there was considerable variance in what an ideal community would look like, so that they were essentially propagating their own idiosyncratic visions. The power of George’s movement had been that it spread a systematic ideology, creating a cohesive community of thought, even absent direct organization. The Regional Planners were unable to craft consensus around actionable ideas even among a small cohort of organized intellectuals. Regional planning successfully spread the idea that the state should do something about land planning but rarely won people over to a particular vision of what it was that should be done.

Though they were seen perhaps as a bit outmoded, the most prominent of the old single-taxers were still heroes of an earlier epoch, with records that made them hard to dismiss. Many of the single-taxers who were most successful in politics had found their way into Woodrow Wilson’s administration and became at least as well associated with his doctrine of internationalism as with the single tax or other species of progressive economic reform.

This association with Wilsonianism was both a strength and a liability in so far as it conferred status as leaders in an important school of thought, but a school that had ardent detractors on both the left and right. After the election of 1920, widely perceived as a repudiation of Wilson’s doctrines, Creel wrote of Wilson that “history will rank him with Washington and Lincoln as one who expressed the soul of America.”73 He depicted the President not as a traitor to the cause of international independence and cooperation, but a as a shrewd politician, presciently aware of how unlikely the immediate realization of his ideals were. He was a tragic character, who in their final meetings sat “plucking ceaselessly at his inert hand, his face white

73 “For Release in Morning Papers of February 19 1921 Speech of George Creel at the Union League Club’s Saturday Luncheon February 18, 1921,” box 5, Creel Papers.
and ravaged, and a terrible desolation in his eyes. ‘I failed.’ Was his cry. ‘I failed.’” Creel, however, reassured his audience that the President was wrong in his pessimistic assessment:

“The fire that he kindled in the souls of mankind still burns, and its flame will someday show a hate-sick world the path to the heights.” George Peabody, on the other hand, worked to realize Wilson’s vision by financing the “Match the President” fund, which lobbied for the League of Nations. Collectively they tried to resuscitate the ideals and reputation of a president whose once messianic appeal had soured due to distrust and disappointment.

But nothing so perfectly represents the convergence of the Wilsonian and Georgist political traditions as the fact that a single individual, Newton D. Baker, was arguably the preeminent inheritor of both. Baker was both Tom Johnson’s handpicked political successor and Wilson’s Secretary of War. He had been party to an eccentric circle; privy, for example, to watching the utopian socialist Sam Jones stand on his head for two minutes in Johnson’s parlor. But he became so closely association with the cause of international cooperation that he was appointed to the Hague Tribunal and widely speculated to be a contender for the post of Secretary-General of the League of Nations even though his country was not represented in that body.

By the 1920s, Newton Baker was one of the most respected political figures in America. Despite having never served in a war, he was inducted into the military society, The Society of

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74 According to Creel Wilson told him on the way to Versailles “It is to America that the whole world turns today, not only with its wrongs, but with its hopes and grievances. The hungry expect us to feed them, the roofless look to us for shelter, the sick of heart and body depend upon us for cure. All of these expectations have in them the quality of terrible urgency. There must be no delay ... People will endure their tyrants for years, but they tear their delivers to pieces if a millennium is not created immediately. Yet you know, and I know, that these ancient wrongs, these present unhappiness, are not to be remedied in a day or with a wave of the hand. What I seem to see – with all my heart I hope that I am wrong – is a tragedy of disappointment.” “Speech – Woodrow Wilson Dinner Los Angeles,” December 28, 1935, box 5, Creel Papers.
75 Ware, George Foster Peabody, 195.
Cincinnati, and was widely honored for achieving the apparently unprecedented feat of readying a demobilized nation for total war. Once there were questions as to the competence of his administration, but those he squashed, fairly or not, in a spectacular manner. Republican Senator George Chamberlain had, during the first months of mobilization, turned the Senate Military Affairs Committee into a highly public investigation of Baker’s ineptitude. Baker was called before the committee, to which he delivered a five hour extemporaneous speech, including a thorough summary of the mobilization rife with statistics. Baker never consulted a note during the oration. It was widely regarded as an exceptional performance. Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels claimed that “No such speech, restrained and fortified with logic and evidence, had been heard in the capital in a generation.” Baker’s repudiation was so thorough that it not only silenced criticism for the remainder of the war, but sent Senator Chamberlain to a resounding defeat in his reelection campaign.

Baker’s decision to devote twenty years to public service meant that he had never been able to accumulate any wealth; he was, in fact, eight thousand dollars in debt by the time he left Washington D.C., even though he was one of the best trial lawyers of the era. He went back into private legal practice, but remained an active participant in so many civic groups that he once observed that the list extended for more than two type written pages when divided into multiple columns. As a member of the Carnegie Foundation, he proposed a research project that in 1944

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76 Quoted in Cramer, *Newton D. Baker*, 147. “I have just come from the Capitol after listening to the entire speech by Secretary Baker, which lasted four and a half hours. It was wonderful. It was not only convincing, but it was a masterpiece of description. He gave the best picture of the war and the responsibilities it involves that I have ever heard or read. He was forceful and had his back into the speech in such a way as to catch one’s emotions. Everybody in the room was thrilled by his recitation of what we have accomplished in this war. And when the hearing was over many people came forward to congratulate him – Republicans as well as Democrats. Those Republicans who did not dare to say so publically, admitted privately that Baker has made a great speech. Weeks of Massachusetts particularly was impressed, I am told by Mr. Hooker of the Springfield Republican, who saw Weeks for a few minutes after the hearing….It was easy to see that they did not care, and will not dare, to go at him in a hostile spirit again, because he gained the sympathy or (sic) every fair-minded man.” David Lawrence to Woodrow Wilson Jan. 28th, 1918, Reel 5, Newton Baker Papers.

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became the groundbreaking civil rights study, *An American Dilemma*. He was a trustee of six institutions of higher education and President of the Association for Adult Education. His biographer explained Baker’s interest in adult education as a function of his early experiences in Cleveland: “One of Johnson’s great services, in Baker’s judgment, was that he kept the whole of the population fully informed on his purposes and his plans, with the result that Cleveland had the best-informed body of citizens to be found anywhere in America. Later Baker wanted Cleveland College to perform a similar service.”

Baker was more thoroughly associated with Wilsonianism than any other cause, so much so that a fanciful rumor began to circulate that he had made a deathbed promise to Wilson “never to make a public address without endorsing the league.” The pivotal moment at which Baker took on the mantle of Wilsonian internationalism was the 1924 Democratic National Convention. There he authored the minority report calling for America to immediately enter the League. He made the case for the League in a speech aired nationally over the radio. Evoking the memory of the recently departed president he reminded his audience that “I served Woodrow Wilson for five years. He is standing at the throne of God whose approval he won and received. As he looks down from there I say to him, ‘I did my best. I am doing it now. You are still the captain of my soul.’” It was an unusually melodramatic speech for the typically analytical speaker, who, in fact, believed his speech had fallen short because of several consecutive, late nights spent working at the conference. Few others felt the same way. He brought several in the audience to tears; William Allen White proclaimed him “a prophet.” It did nothing, however, to abate the nationalist feelings of European ethnics who felt betrayed because the Treaty of Versailles

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78 Ibid., 209.
79 Ibid., 218.
shortchanged their countries of origin. Delegates sided with the predominating isolationist sentiment, voting Baker’s plank down by a margin of over two-to-one. 80

In Newton Baker the movement found its last great hope for political relevance, but it was a fleeting opportunity hobbled by lingering disdain for Wilson. When the stock market crash of 1929 sent the economy into a downward spiral, the complacency of the twenties gave way to a revival of reform. Baker’s assistant, Ralph Hayes, and Justice Clarke, an old Johnson appointee, began a campaign to promote the Clevelander for president in 1932. Educated opinion was largely behind Baker, with one poll from Outlook showing newspaper editors in thirty-four states favoring him. 81 Walter Lippmann, one of the greatest voices of American journalism, pronounced that he was the “inevitable candidate.” 82 His most vocal opponents were Oswald Garrison Villard of The Nation and William Randolph Hearst, one of the largest publishers in the nation. Both were isolationists and loathed Baker for his stance on the League of Nations.

Villard and Hearst spread the rumor that Baker was the candidate of a shadowy conspiracy of financiers, though this was unfounded. 83 Roosevelt explained to Josephus Daniels that Bakers real weakness was that he had cavalierly disregarded interest groups:

I don’t need to tell you how much I admire and respect Newton and what a wonderful asset he can be to the Party during the next four years if we win. The trouble is that he labors under very definite political handicaps. Because of, or rather in spite of, his perfectly legitimate law practice he is labeled by many progressives as the attorney for J. P. Morgan and the Van Schwerinens; he is opposed by Labor, he would be opposed by the German Americans; and also by

80 Ibid., 219-220
81 Ibid., 236
82 Ibid., 238.
83 Ralph Hayes goal was to raise only $2,000 for the campaign, enough to pay for constituent telegraphs to delegates during the convention. Much of this was paid for by Georg Peabody, who, though he was a financer, supported Baker for progressive, even radical reasons. George Peabody to Ralph Hayes, June 22nd 1932, box 40, Peabody Papers. Ralph Hayes to George Peabody, June 25, 1932, box 40, Peabody Papers. Ralph Hayes to George Peabody, June 19, 1932, box 40, Peabody Papers. In total, Hayes only wanted to raise $2,000, enough to pay Ralph Hayes to Wendell Willkie, June 19, 1932, box 40, Peabody Papers.
the bulk of the Irish because of his consistent League of Nations attitude up to this year.\textsuperscript{84}

Baker’s most outspoken opponent, however, was himself; he refused to campaign, disavowed any aspirations for the presidency and actively discouraged those working on his behalf.

To the press, Baker reported that he did not care for the lifestyle that a residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue would require, but privately he confessed a dearth of confidence. To Mary Fels, he confided that much of the platform of the leading Democratic contender, Franklin Roosevelt, was “at variance with what I have always regarded as the lessons of human experience and the teachings of sound theory.” But he added that: “I would not know what to do in the crisis with any certainty that my thought is better than his and second, he is at least doing something.”\textsuperscript{85} He felt that, in some sense, it was the economy which had diverged from his theory, rather than his theory from the economy. He took solace “that Florida land booms and bull stock market seem … excellent illustrations of the fact that natural laws still work even in our highly artificial industrial economy.”\textsuperscript{86}

As a Burkean, Baker had always feared the unknown implications of untried ideas, but had found in Johnson’s theories sound cause to action. As his faith in that theory came into question, he was paralyzed by a fear of action: “the older I get the more convinced I am that the only fears I have in the world are fears of ignorance. I am afraid of my own actions when I am acting ignorantly and I am afraid of other people and their actions when I have reason to believe they are acting ignorantly.” In his later years, he responded to most requests that he express an opinion regarding some political topic or another with the rebuke that he did not know enough.

\textsuperscript{84} FDR to Daniels, May 14, 1932, Cont. 29, Papers as Governor, Roosevelt Library.
\textsuperscript{85} Newton Baker to Mary Fels, Mar, 17, 1934, box 95, Baker Papers.
\textsuperscript{86} Newton Baker to George Peabody, Dec. 27, 1929, box 185, Newton Baker.
At one point he wrote that his comprehension of urban policy was as “rusty as my knowledge of the middle voice of Greek verbs.”

Baker’s dearth of confidence was typical of his cohort. Whitlock’s crisis of faith was better remembered, often discussed by reformers of the New Deal generation as representative of progressivism’s passing. Its drama was punctuated by the fact that it occurred at the height of his career. His diplomatic work to ensure that Belgium was allowed to import food despite the allied blockade made him a close personal friend of King Albert—in 1934 the King and Queen of Belgium traveled to France to see Whitlock on his deathbed—and even earned him a Boulevard in Brussels named in his honor.

Despite his newfound status, Whitlock was alienated from his times. He had once governed one of the country’s more ethnically heterogeneous cities but was now furious with the way that immigrants’ loyalty to their countries of origin had animated opposition to World War I and to the Treaty of Versailles. His private diaries, with their violent harangues against the same immigrant constituents he had once represented, reveal a deeper discontent than the idle longing for luxury that most assumed had inspired his retirement. As the voting public came to embrace new, alien ideas, Whitlock, Nock, and Baker all expressed doubts about the influence of foreign cultures—particularly that of the Jews. With his declining faith in the masses to transcend their

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88 “One thing, in all this mess, at least clear, i.e., that in America we have got to stop immigration. We have not all this mob of Russian Jew and General dago, and wop, filthy and lousy combings of Europe’ and we must let no more of them come in, nor in any way pass Ellis Island, where all applications present and future, should be shot. Such is my view of the questions of immigration; wholly contrary as it is to the soft and romantic silly notions I cherished a few years ago, in that other life of damned illusions.” July 25, 1918, Diaries, box 4, Whitlock Papers. Albert Jay Nock, “The Jewish Problem in America,” The Atlantic Monthly, July 1941. Newton Baker to Theodore Roosevelt Jr., January 14, 1937, box 202, Newton Baker. This reversal of sentiment reflects a general absence of faith in the polls
narrow interests, he sought to strengthen the once porous divide between his art and his politics. Whitlock developed “serious doubts as to whether there is, or ever will be, any such thing as democratic art.” This sentiment evolved into questions about the extent to which his political affiliations had compromised his own work, because “when propaganda comes in at the door art flies out of the window.” Whitlock chose to abandon his life in America and to live out the rest of his days in Cannes, France. In Cannes, he joined the ranks of the fulltime literati and through correspondence conveyed to his friends in the United States his deep-seated antipathy to the politics of both Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt.

Similarly, Clarence Darrow became disillusioned with the single tax, even if it remained an important intellectual framework for him. In his autobiography, published in 1932, he reported that he was no longer a “pronounced disciple of Henry George.” He complained that the movement never confronted the obstacles to its success. He objected to its “cocksureness, its simplicity and the small value that it placed upon the selfish motives of men.” Furthermore, he was “weary of everlasting talk of ‘natural rights.’” Even though he tired of George’s liberal faith in humanity, he still believed that the nationalization of land was the only avenue to a better society: “I never believed that land should be reduced to private ownership, and I never felt that any important social readjustment could come while any one could claim the unconditional right to any part of the earth and ‘the fullness thereof.’”

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90 Darrow, *The Story of My Life*, 52
Directly before World War I, Darrow had been a regular contributor to *The Everyman*, which was the paper of the Great Adventure referendum campaign in California.\(^91\) This put Darrow in a corner of the movement considered too doctrinaire even for the likes of Louis Post. But, after the World War, a moment of deep personal disillusionment for Darrow, he rarely mentioned it. He had praised George as proof that believing in a higher ideal could ennoble life. However, in 1920 he began to speak on the virtues of pessimism, because “the pessimist expects nothing. He is prepared for the worst. It is something like getting vaccinated so you will not get the smallpox.” He had investigated everything from Christian Science to the Single Tax and Socialism only to conclude that “I cannot take the dope.”\(^92\) While Darrow never entirely disentangled himself from the ideas of Henry George, the changing political climate had forced him to abandon it as the sort of semi-religious faith it once was.

Like the rest of this cohort, Baker had also had his faith shaken but by not quite destroyed. He contributed to a small project called “The Henry George I Knew.”\(^93\) Will Atkinson had set out on a desperate attempt to preserve the disappearing history of George’s influence on the modern world after realizing that he “did not get from Charles Frederic Adams, before he died, the vivid picture he would have drawn from McCabe, the Maori … from Sun Yat-sen, his acknowledgment of the debt New China owes to the Prophet of San Francisco.”\(^94\) Baker gave Atkinson a nuanced endorsement of the single tax that provided for the hard times the movement had obviously fallen upon:

> The world has never suddenly accepted and applied any change in its political or social philosophy so radical as that embodied in the single tax. Great truths have to be accepted piece meal. Many of the implications of the single tax which were


\(^{92}\) Clarence Darrow, *Pessimism* (Chicago: Rationalist Educational Society, 1920), 13, 19.

\(^{93}\) Newton Baker to Will Atkinson, June 26\(^{th}\), 1925, Baker Papers.

\(^{94}\) Will Atkinson to James Barry, April 2, 1925, box 1, Barry Papers.
startling in Henry George’s day have become commonplace parts of our later thinking and have modified economic doctrines which seemed final before they came into contact with the philosophy which Henry George preached.  

Baker accepted the ultimate implications of George’s philosophy but no longer affiliated himself with the movement, confirming that to Mary Fels that he “believed in the Single Tax” but “is not a Single-Taxer.”  

However, when presented an opportunity, he still engaged in his old pastime. Baker twice visited Mexico to stay with Antenor Sala, the proponent of a “sole tax” on land. Sala suggested that his plan was not the single tax, but the only distinction seems to have been the minor detail that Sala would validate assessments with the threat that government was empowered to purchase plots at the assessed price.  

Baker endorsed Sala’s plan.

Despite his uneasiness with the proposition, many advocates of the reform tradition to which Baker belonged fought for his candidacy. Mary Fels, widow of Joseph Fels, lobbied him with an enthusiasm that connoted utopian aspirations: “It is need of the world that you should become President of the United States. You know that I have always felt the call would come to you when world need became very urgent.”  

George Creel authored a laudatory article in which he brushed aside Baker’s objections as a facet of the “old-fashioned belief that the office should seek the man” and claimed that he had actively refused the endorsement of the American Legion along with several state delegations.  

A small campaign fund, intended to sponsor telegraphs to

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97 Newton Baker wrote “Since I returned for Mexico I have several times referred to the ingenuity and depth of the Sala System but I am, of course, unprepared to express any opinion upon its practical stability for Mexico and its people. My brief stay in your beautiful City gave me no contact with Mexico and its intimate problems, and I cannot feel that I know how the Mexican mind would accept this suggestion though it seems to me a very wise and promising one. It cannot be accepted generally until a laboratory experiment has demonstrated its soundness and I therefore would think it better to press it in Mexico and then let the rest of the world profit by your experiment.” Newton Baker to Antenor Sala, April 16, 1932. Antenor Sala to Newton Baker, April 28, 1932. Newton Baker to Antenor Sala, Feb. 16, 1932. Antenor Sala to Newton Baker, undated 1927, box 202, Newton Baker Papers.
98 Mary Fels to Newton Baker, July 30, 1931, Box 95, Baker Papers.
the convention endorsing Baker, was supported by George Peabody and Wendell Willkie, who was inspired to spend the rest of his life working for international arbitration after Baker’s 1924 Democratic convention speech. That had been the “greatest speech in the world” according to Willkie.\footnote{Ellsworth Barnard, \textit{Wendell Willkie: Fighter for Freedom} (Marquette: Northern Michigan University Press, 1966), 63. According to Peabody, Baker’s nomination “would, undoubtedly, be the best thing that could happen to this country.” George Foster Peabody to Newton Baker, Apr. 11 1931, box 186, Baker Papers. After receiving a fundraising piece for British land tax fight, “What tremendous things Henry George did Say in “Progress and Poverty’.” I doubt whether a more eloquent piece of English was ever written by anybody.” Newton Baker to George Peabody, Oct. 17, 1931, box 186. George Peabody to Newton Baker, Oct. 7, 1931, box 186, Peabody Papers.}

Peabody, on the other hand, argued for a Baker candidacy because “the great foundation in economic thought which you have had,” amid exchanges during which the two reminisced over \textit{Progress and Poverty} and the British fight for land value taxation. Even a particularly keen devotee like Peabody was aware that land value taxation had lost much of its appeal and suggested that it was better for the “public mind” to have “someone emphasize the second fundamental of Henry George’s principles, “government ownership of all Public Utilities.”\footnote{George Peabody to Charles O’Connor Hennessey, Dec. 22, 1931, box 186, Baker Papers. (forwarded to Baker).} Peabody targeted public ownership of railroads as the timeliest plank in the Georgist platform. Baker assented to the principle but not the timing because “the street railway business itself has been greatly changed by the development of busses on city streets and suburban dwelling by people with cheap and efficient automobiles” so that such an enterprise was now “a very perilous asset” for the public.\footnote{Newton Baker to George Peabody, March 17, 1936, box 186, Baker Papers.} Baker also garnered supporters as the inheritor of a revered tradition of reform by many who were not quite adherents themselves. Walter Lippmann, the journalist who did more than most others to promote his candidacy, was attracted to his record in municipal reform. Author
Frazier Hunt gave a radio endorsement of Baker in which he emphasized that he was “inspired by great men and great books” and followed the lead of “his three great heroes:” his father, Woodrow Wilson, and Tom Johnson. More oblique was the tendency to praise him as the lineal descendant of the Jeffersonian tradition. Cleveland Mayor, Ray Miller, campaigned for Baker as “the Jeffersonian apostle of the North.” Martin Davey, a onetime Ohio Gubernatorial candidate, declared: “He is old-fashioned enough in his political philosophy of the Jeffersonian school to be a real Democrat, and yet he has intimate knowledge of modern life and its economic processes.” For voters in Ohio, who had gathered under Johnson’s tent to listen to lectures about what Jeffersonian Democracy meant in modern America, these references would have been easy to decipher.

The tradition to which Baker belonged, the force of his supporters, and his record of reform brought the Clevelander surprisingly close to the Presidency, despite the candidate’s resolve not to stand for election. Franklin Roosevelt entered the Democratic National Convention with a solid majority but, party rules required a two-thirds of delegates to pick a candidate. Recalcitrant delegates from the South and West refused to concede to Roosevelt’s candidacy and it appeared the convention would, as it had eight years earlier, compromise on a dark horse candidate. After failing short on three successive ballots, Roosevelt was so certain of his defeat that he called Baker to concede. “It now looks” he purportedly told Baker “as though the Chicago Convention is in a jam and that they will turn to you. I will do anything I can to bring that about if you want it.”

104 Cramer, Newton D. Baker, 236.
105 Martin Davey to Newton Baker, Dec. 5, 1931, Box 82, Baker Papers.
Of course, Roosevelt’s phone call was premature. On the next ballot he won the necessary majority. As Roosevelt was calling Baker, Joseph Kennedy appealed successfully for intervention from William Randolph Hearst. Hearst, an isolationist who disdained Baker’s Wilsonianism, made a frenzied late night campaign to sway the Texas and California delegations. William McAdoo, who had clashed with Baker under Wilson, acted as “his agent.” These two states gave Roosevelt the necessary votes after which the other delegations.¹⁰⁷ Half a century after George had encouraged Tom Johnson to pursue power in the Democratic Party, Johnson’s protégé nearly fell into the White House. By then, however, Baker knew he had so little of relevance to offer the country that he made no effort to secure the job.

For a couple of years, at least, the inheritors of George’s tradition rallied behind the new president. George Creel and George Peabody acknowledged their initial support for Baker, but pledged to work for Roosevelt and became close associates.¹⁰⁸ Baker seemed frankly relieved and was particularly happy that the President “knows how to choose counselors” —the architect of his “Brains Trust” was Raymond Moley, a former student with whom Baker retained a professional relationship.¹⁰⁹ The most organized endorsements were in the form of water power lobbies, which embraced the issue of public ownership of land and utilities in a syncretic way.

The most symbolic endorsement, however, came from George’s daughter. Anna George de Mille sent Roosevelt a portrait of her father, painted by George Beatrice Mari, daughter of Henry George Jr., and, as de Mille pointed out, a Delano on her mother’s side. Frederic C. Howe acted as an intermediary, delivering the picture with the observation that he was “one of those

¹⁰⁸ George Peabody to FDR, June 20, 1931, Cont. 63, Papers as Governor. George Creel to FDR, July 7, 1932, 2340-2371, PPF, Roosevelt Library.
who have long accepted the philosophy of the ‘The Prophet of San Francisco’™ The painting included an embossed quote by Henry George, supposedly anticipating something like the League of Nations. Actually, the quote appears to have been apocryphal. In spirit, if not degree, this was nothing if not typical; the movement had always reached out to incorporate new causes in accord with the broader outlines of antimonopoly liberalism. So many of the leading lights of the movement had become active internationalists that it was natural for his daughter to write Wilson back into her father’s speeches.

Urban administrators who had grown up in the shadow of Tom Johnson played an important role in the new administration. Toward the old single-taxers, Stuart Chase expressed a mix of veneration and disdain that was natural for those who hoped to strike out on their own and surpass their adolescent icons. But, even apart from this ambivalence, it was improbable that a younger generation could have fulfilled the mandates of Johnson’s movement. They had only ever watched it from afar, where they digested political rhetoric, simplified for a popular audience and bereft of the deeper logic that had been hashed out in the private homes and correspondence of movement elites.

The organizer of F.D.R.’s Brains Trust, Raymond Moley, admitted that he owned a “much used copy of Progress and Poverty” rife with evidence that he had “read it with considerable care but not much understanding except to the note the main thrust of [George’s] extraordinary argument.” Tom Johnson was Moley’s lifelong idol, but Moley’s understanding of Johnson was flawed. He never seems to have comprehended the way in which Johnson’s war on

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110 Frederic C. Howe to Franklin Roosevelt, Jan. 23, 1934, President’s Personal Files, 9, box 24. Anna George de Mille to Franklin Roosevelt, Dec. 21, 1936, President’s Personal File 450. “It is too soon to hope that it may be the mission of this Republic to unite all nations of English speech, whether they grow beneath the North Star or the Southern Cross, in a league which, by insuring justice, promoting peace and liberating commerce, will be the forerunner of a world-wide federation that will make war the possibility of a past age and turn to works of usefulness the enormous forces now dedicated to destruction.” Fourth of July Ovation, San Francisco 1877
the streetcar monopoly was an integral part of George’s plan to socialize values accruing to scarcity of space. Instead, he believed Johnson had accepted that the social value that accrued to land was only one example of a much broader phenomenon of expropriation that permeated capitalist society. On the other hand, he saw that the compromise solution Johnson had reached on the street car issue demonstrated that regulation was the solution to such ills. Political expediency was confused with theory and Moley interpreted a faith that prioritized sharp distinctions between public and private property as an amorphous tendency toward regulation. As single-taxers faded from prominence they found themselves faced with a new administration that shared enough with them to attract their interest, but also differed from them in fundamentally irreconcilable ways.
Chapter XII

Back to the Land
The New Deal, Land Policy, and the Single Tax Movement

As the thoughtlessness and aimlessness of the ‘twenties became more and more apparent, I’d grown more convinced that someone must be found who could do on a national scale what Tom Johnson had done in Cleveland. There was no Tom Johnson. But out of the field, by January, 1932, it seemed to me that the buoyant likable man in Albany [Franklin Roosevelt] was the only hope.

Raymond Moley, (1939). 1

During the New Deal, George’s influence on liberalism expired but not before obtaining some level of realization. Georgism as a coherent, comprehensive ideology all but disappeared from positions of power, but his principal innovation to classical liberalism—the notion that land and utilities accrued social value—inspired efforts toward public ownership by certain important figures, particularly, Rexford Tugwell and Raymond Moley. Perhaps most importantly, George’s adherents had established precedents for hydroelectricity and public ownership of land that New Dealers would build on, sometimes because the relevant institutions were already in place, other times because of a lingering sense of importance attached to the dramatic battles that had often inspired New Dealers to politics in their youth.

The response of once prominent Georgists to the New Deal illustrates the fallacy of perceiving them as part of a general tendency toward reform. As would be expected of a group that was committed to a nearly communistic philosophy of land tenure, they lauded and encouraged most every effort the administration made in this direction. However, as they had endorsed the socialization of land in part as a means of liberating a truly free market, they resented the broader interventions of the New Deal. They particularly targeted regulation, using arguments that stretched back to George’s critique of prohibition and Johnson’s traction war in Ohio.

Eventually, most broke in a painful ways with their party, their associates, and the general current of politics. That they abandoned all of these things for a philosophy that had become progressively more tenuous illustrates the extent to which those affiliations had always been secondary to the real animating force of their public lives.

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Remembered for Social Security and the labor rights enshrined in the Wagner Act, the New Deal might seem to have little in common with a nineteenth century land reform movement. Its origins, however, have been obscured first by Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to accommodate the political forces unleashed by the Great Depression, and, secondly, by the relative importance certain programs had in the light of history. In his first presidential campaign Roosevelt, promised very little of the welfare state that he is popularly remembered for and, to a considerable extent, delivered as promised. In his campaign book, *Looking Forward*, Roosevelt mentioned organized labor once, incidentally as a source on the question of unemployment.\(^2\) Appropriately, the signal labor legislation of the New Deal, the Wagner Act, established federal regulation of labor, a policy traditionally advocated by the Republican Party and long opposed by unionists who favored an unrestricted right to organize.\(^3\)

A chapter of *Looking Forward* was devoted to social welfare but posited that it was a function reserved to the states and best paid for with funds provided by the workers themselves.\(^4\) As President, Roosevelt only committed to federal involvement after considerable popular pressure from radical figures like Francis Townsend and Huey Long and built Social Security on


a system of regressive taxation with meager payouts relative to international standards. Likewise, in his “Forgotten Man” speech, the most famous of the campaign, Roosevelt rejected deficit spending and public works projects because “it is clear that even if we could raise many billions of dollars and find definitely useful public works to spend these billions on, even all that money would not give employment to the seven million people who are out of work.” To this pledge Roosevelt proved historically untrue, but according to Raymond Moley it was made in good faith. Roosevelt agreed to it only under pressure from progressive senators and under the precondition that it be dedicated to cultivating natural resources under the direction of the Civil Conservation Corp.

Initially, Roosevelt focused on issues that resonated with single-tax interests. Looking Forward included chapters on the “Tariff,” “State Planning for Land Utilization,” “The Power Issue” and “The Railroads.” He, also, arguably went further in realizing these than the social welfare policies with which he is often associated. The Reciprocal Tariff Act of 1934 allowed the President to negotiate bilateral tariff reductions, paving the way for a gradual transition to free trade. The PWA not only provided much of its funding to projects for municipally owned utilities, but also dedicated manpower to overturning debt limits and other laws that had prevented the spread of public ownership. By 1937, lawyers associated with PWA had drafted over five hundred bills to facilitate municipal ownership. Similarly, not only was the diminution of the public domain through halted, public lands were expanded as the federal government

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7 Raymond Moley, *After Seven Years*, 173-175.


purchased 22 million acres—approximately 1% of the total land mass of the United States—of land deemed to be “submarginal” or inadequate for agriculture. As the government moved some farmers off of private land because of a glut of agricultural goods, they were moving others onto public land, rented by the government. No factories were requisitioned and forced into operation with employment hovering around twenty percent. But the federal government was tasked with building and operating approximately one hundred communities so that the federal government became, in effect, a major landlord.

Over time, single-taxers would break with the administration, often after a long period of accommodating policies with which they disagreed. But, in 1932, what little remained of the single tax movement largely rallied around Roosevelt, on the presumption that he represented many of their core concerns. Frank Walsh, Basil Manly and Frederic C. Howe organized the National Progressive League, picking George Norris as the President, so as to the issue of public power issue to cleave progressives from the Republican Party.10 Similarly, Walsh worked with the utilities advocate Judson King to mobilize members of the Progressive Era Popular Government League into a campaign for Roosevelt. The result was the “Roosevelt Campaign Committee of the Popular Government League on Power, Natural Resources, and Forestry.” As members of this group, Alice Thatcher Post; Jackson Ralston; and William U’Ren signed on to support Roosevelt’s natural resource and power policies.11

Many single-taxers rallied to Roosevelt’s trade policies. Will Atkinson formed the “All American Reciprocity Union,” with a letterhead that included quotes of praise for Henry George

10 Because of his appointed office, Walsh refrained from formal association with the organization, but behind the scenes was one of the principle organizers. The effort, in fact, was largely a reiteration of a similar plot contrived four years previously by Walsh and Howe to swing progressives to the Smith campaign because of his support for public power. George Norris to Basil Manly, Sept. 1, 1932, box 36, Walsh Papers. Miller, From Progressive to New Dealer, 377-380.

11 Judson King to Members of the Popular Government, Sept. 23, 1932, box 36, Walsh Papers.
by John Dewey and Leo Tolstoy, and a membership comprised of old-timers like David Lewis, Bolton Hall, Jackson Ralston, and Hamlin Garland. The organization was designed to support Roosevelt’s policy of tariff reduction through reciprocal trade agreements. Atkinson and Peabody wrote Roosevelt to suggest pushing the tariff issue as a means to split businessmen in the Republican Party. Roosevelt expressed his approval and promised to discuss it with Peabody in their next meeting. Peabody was an old friend of Roosevelt, which probably explains why Roosevelt was so receptive to this appeal, but Atkinson had also been able to insert George into the contemporary tariff debates in a way that likely gave the pair a modicum of credibility. The progressive Republican Senator Burton K. Wheeler read into the Congressional Record an abbreviated version of Protection or Free Trade that Atkinson had edited. This was the third time that work had been read into the Congressional Record.

It is improbable, though, that Roosevelt perceived single-taxers as a particularly meaningful basis of support. The reasons that so much of the early New Deal resonated with single-taxers is that many of the early New Dealers had grown up in their shadow. This was particularly true of one of the central figure in the campaign, Raymond Moley. Born in 1886, he was raised in Olmstead Falls, Ohio. At fifteen he bought a copy of Progress and Poverty and took to reciting it in the woods, both as oratorical training and as part of a juvenile game in which he pretended that he was a radical orator. As a newspaper boy in the Cleveland suburbs, he kept a close watch on and developed a lifelong affection for Tom Johnson. He went to the tent meetings, saw Johnson speak, sat at the feet of Frederic C. Howe, wrote a Master Thesis on

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12 Peabody to Roosevelt, July 8th, 1931, Roosevelt to Peabody, July 13, 1931, Cont. 63, Papers as Governor, Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York.
judicial reform during the Johnson’s administration, and briefly took a course taught by Newton Baker on property law.¹⁴

Baker, who had worked with Moley on the Cleveland Crime Survey, recommended him for appointment to The National Crime Commission, a group run by then New York Governor, Franklin Roosevelt. Moley endeared himself to the Governor and was tasked with finding a group of intellectuals to advise him during the ‘32 presidential campaign. In addition to organizing what came to be known as the “Brains Trust,” Moley served as the candidate’s principle speech writer, writing his famous “Forgotten Man” speech. That Moley claimed to be searching for a national Tom Johnson when he settled on Roosevelt as the closest substitute was not a swipe at the President. He saw a degree of equivalence between the Roosevelt Presidency and the Johnson mayoralty or, as he called it, a “more localized New Deal.”¹⁵

Among the people that Moley invited into Roosevelt’s inner circle was Rexford Tugwell, who would be the chief architect of Roosevelt’s land policy. He had read George while exploring radicalism in his college days, followed Steffens closely, and studied the policies of Tom Johnson and Brand Whitlock. He concluded that these municipal single-taxers had failed to offer “fundamental changes.” This was a reference to the fact that single-taxers still believed that the purpose of state interference in the economy was to restore free competition, whereas Tugwell believed a planned economy was now necessary. Over the long run, this would serve as the principal cause for the divergence between the two groups. However, like Moley, who argued that Johnson’s policies needed to be brought to the national level, Tugwell concluded that

¹⁵ Moley, After Seven Years, 4.
Johnson’s platform of “public ownership of utilities… if extrapolated, might extend to national programs.”  

Tugwell and Moley believed that to the extent that the New Deal inherited something from progressivism, it was largely through a school of urban reform deeply indebted to George. For Tugwell, agrarian reform, because it had sought to realize itself in the sluggish venue of national law, had produced few results, so that most experienced New Deal administrators naturally followed in the footsteps of “city reformers” to whom Henry George’s “influence was, indeed, immense.” After reviewing the roll of New Dealers he concluded that “Tom Johnson, Brand Whitlock, John Purroy Mitchel, and Blackenburgh had not been permanently defeated, and the patient advocates of better administration had started an evolution essential to the burdens of the welfare state.”  

Not surprisingly for someone who roomed with Frederic C. Howe in the early days of the New Deal, Tugwell identified George as part of “Progressive Tradition” that had culminated in the New Deal.  

Similarly, in a speech in Atlanta in 1934, Moley entitled “The Men behind the New Deal,” Moley discussed the legacy of Cleveland’s most famous mayor:

I want to add to these ... names another, not nearly so well known, but vastly significant in the development of American progressive ideas, and to me the greatest teacher of politics that I have known personally... Constructive progressivism in this country recently grew first in cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Toledo, thirty years ago when Johnson was the master and the teacher of municipal reform.

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18 “The Progressive Tradition” address by Rexford Tugwell Union College Schenectady NY, Jan. 2, box 56, Roosevelt Papers.

Henry George was too generously credited by Moley with something like initial authorship of the entire progressive movement. Moley credited George with reforms like the regulation of monopoly that the author of the single tax actually disapproved of. This was indicative of how complex an inheritance the single tax was. Even those who perceived themselves as following in George’s footsteps, did so misapprehending what that meant.

The Department of the Interior was home to a particularly heavy concentration of urban reformers who developed an interest in land issues while working with single-taxers. Until 1933, Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior had been spent his life as a campaign organizer for reform candidates. His first political idol was Mayor of Chicago and Governor of Illinois, John P. Altgeld, who had tasked single-taxer George Schilling with conducting an investigation of the state’s tax system and encouraged William Jennings Bryan to support George’s mayoral campaign in 1897. Ickes worked closely with William Kent, for whom he expressed considerable admiration. He sent his son to attend school at the Georgist commune, Fairhope.

20 “In my judgment George brought home, with perhaps the most easily understood illustration, the concept of social value which inspired the whole Progressive movement in the United States in the generation which began near the dawn of the twentieth century. For anyone can see that the individual who holds a piece of land with no effort to improve it and who has small taxes to pay cannot help but be enriched by those whose industry enriches the entire community. He toils not and neither does he spin, but his land increases in value. But the subjects George considered in his many speeches and writings touched all of the corrective influences which were the result of the Progressive movement. The restriction of monopoly, more democratic political machinery, municipal reform, the elimination of privilege in railroads, the regulation of public utilities, the improvement of labor laws and working conditions – all were in one way or another accelerated by George.” Raymond Moley, The American Century of John C. Lincoln (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1962), 160.

21 During one of his earliest campaigns, he appealed to William Kent to write broadsides on the mismanagement of electric power, because, as he wrote to Kent, “no one can do that sort of work so well as you.” The two remained close associates; Ickes even borrowed Kent’s office for at least one campaign meeting. Ickes veneration extended to single-taxers outside of the narrow circle of America’s second city. He wrote glowingly about meeting Francis Heney and reported that every time he read about his work in the paper “in connection with the San Francisco graft scandals, I wish I were out there to do what little I could to help them fight.” He organized Senator Johnathan Bourne’s trip to Illinois. Ickes was no single-taxer, but he developed politically in a big city but, considering his environs, was unusually primed to focus on land due to the labors of George’s followers. Harold Ickes to William Kent, March 16, 1909, box 35. Harold Ickes to William Kent, Jan 23, 1912, box 35. Harold Ickes to Harry Murray, September 25, 1920, all box 31, All Harold Ickes Papers, Library of Congress.
of Indian Affairs, Ickes appointed his good friend John Collier, who had worked for Frederic C. Howe at the People’s Institute and advertised for his Training School for Community Workers in *The Public.*

Harry Slattery served as Ickes assistant, Under Secretary of Labor, and head of the Rural Electrification Administration. Previously, he had been the Executive Secretary of the National Conservatism Association, in connection with which he had solicited single-taxers for help in Congress, used William Kent to reach out to Wilson, and written to *The Public* and J. J. Pastoriza for information about “land monopoly.” Although none of these men could reasonably be construed as single-taxers, all three fought for government ownership of land. As late as 1939, in his report on Alaskan development for the Interior Department, Slattery recommended property taxes as a solution to land speculation in that state. However, that was only because the complete absence of property taxes in Alaska had facilitated a rash of absentee owners who prevented close settlement thereby hindering economic developing and exacerbating infrastructure costs.

Hydroelectricity was the question that most attracted single-taxers to the New Deal and to which they contributed the most. During the Wilson Administration, Newton D. Baker had

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24 It was important in Alaska because, without any property taxes, there were so many absentee landowners that population was scattered in a way that prevented development and increased the price of infrastructure. Harry Slattery, *The Problem of Alaskan Development* (Washington: Department of the Interior, 1939).
25 Here I focus on the largest of these projects, the TVA. But Georgists also played a role in the Central Valley Project, which comes up later, and the Boulder Dam, which does not. In 1897, Arthur Powell Davis, nephew of the famous explorer John Wesley Powell, authored a book *The Single Tax from the Farmer’s Standpoint*, which pitched
presided over the construction of two wartime dams in the Muscle Shoals Region of Tennessee.

In the waning days of the administration, Baker submitted to Congress the Wadsworth-Kahn Bill for continued development of the projects under the direction of a federally-owned corporation. Baker testified to Congress on behalf of the bill, solicited the affirmative testimony of Russell Bower, Washington Representative of the Farmer’s Union, and even secured testimony from John J. Pershing, supreme commander of the US military, as to the project’s usefulness for national defense. The war, however, was over and Congress’ tolerance for spending had evaporated.

Republicans claimed the Wadsworth-Kahn Bill was merely pork barrel legislation intended to benefit Democratic constituencies in the South. But, there was no alternative plan and a tremendous infrastructure project, which was funded by taxpayers and estimated to have a

George’s ideas to the agricultural classes. Five years later he presented at a conference of engineers a comprehensive plan for the management of the Colorado River and that same year was appointed to the Reclamation Service, ultimately as director of the long term director of the Department. As a leading figure in American irrigation programs, he retained the Georgist skepticism that public improvements under a system of fee simple ownership were beneficial, observing that “so long as the value that attaches to land goes into private pockets there appears to be no escape from the fact that the benefits of all public improvements, including irrigation works, insure to the landowners almost exclusively.” But Davis advocated using whatever means available to mitigate speculation and believed that with public recapture bringing civilization to the west could be a tremendous source of public wealth. He noted that “if this increase of land value, or any large fraction of it, could be promptly returned to the Government ... it would afford a large profit on investment.” Davis remained particularly interested in his early notion of a comprehensively planned Colorado River, which he worked on during the Wilson Administration with Franklin K. Lane. In 1920, Powell was appointed by Franklin K. Lane to lead a survey of the Colorado River, the central recommendation of which was a hydroelectric dam at Boulder Canyon. Powell served as the principle technical consultant throughout the process of state negotiation over access to the river’s water and in 1929 published an important piece on the subject The Atlantic Monthly. Here he demanded not only public hydroelectricity, but also water diversion projects “to be paid for by the lands benefited.” Arthur Powell Davis, Irrigation Works Constructed by the United States Government (New York: J. Wiley, 1917), 394-5. Arthur Powell Davis, “The Development of the Colorado River: The Justification of the Boulder Dam,” The Atlantic Monthly, February 1929, 255-263. Norris Hurdley, Water and the West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
potential yield of $2,900,000 annually, sat idle. Baker had set up a situation wherein a fight for public ownership was all but inevitable.\textsuperscript{26}

The development of public hydroelectricity in Muscle Shoals was imperiled in 1924 when Henry Ford offered to take over the dams and to produce inexpensive fertilizer. The prospect of recruiting one of America’s leading industrialists to alleviate agricultural despair proved so attractive to rural constituencies that even George Norris, the Senate’s foremost proponent of government ownership, initially vacillated when confronted with such an offer from the inventor of the Model T. \textsuperscript{27}

Benjamin C. Marsh, who began his career fighting for two rate land value taxation in New York City, planted the first seeds of doubt about agricultural support for the Ford offer. In Senate testimony he claimed that the Farmers’ National Council, of which he was the General Secretary, represented 800,000 farmers, a third of whom were laborers. The members of his organization opposed a hundred year lease of natural resources to Ford; the rival Farm Bureau, which supported the deal, was manipulated by financial interests according to Marsh.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} Preston J. Hubbard, \textit{Origins of the TVA: The Muscles Shoals Controversy} (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1961), 1-27. That the government had already invested money in the project would be the principal fact keeping public ownership alive during the otherwise conservative twenties. George Norris presented the case as such: “In this particular case, who built the mighty dam on the river at Muscle Shoals? Whose money paid for the giant steam power plant located there? Who built the three towns located in that vicinity? Who macadamized the streets? Who owns all of it, and who toiled in order that great improvement might be possible? Certainly not those who would lease this property for a song or who would buy it under untruthful representations as to its value. The river has been harnessed. More than $125,000,000 of taxpayers money has been expended in the operation. The electricity is being generated and yet it seems the people who own it cannot get the benefit of the improvement and the investment because somebody is afraid that the Government might go into business. Nobody objected when the Government spent its money to harness the property that already belongs to the people, but now, when the proposition is made that the labor-saving improvement should reach the factory and the home without profit to private parties, there goes up a great cry form men who are anxious that the people should not enjoy comforts and the blessings of their own property unless they pay tribute to the millionaires in Wall Street and elsewhere.” “An Article by Hon. George W. Norris Printed in Congressional Record Dec. 19, 1927” (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1927), 5-6.


\textsuperscript{28} Hubbard, \textit{Origins of the TVA: The Muscles Shoals Controversy}, 64, 114.
Newton Baker joined in the effort to blunt the momentum of agricultural support for the proposal by lobbing W. I. Drummond, of the International Farm Congress, to reach out to Norris: “apparently the House Committee was made to feel that the agricultural interests of the country were a unit back of the proposed lease to Mr. Ford. I know this is not so, but it is very important, I think, that the real facts of this matter be gotten into the hands of Senator Norris for use before the Senate Committee.” Drummond was persuaded partly by the idea that the plant was an outdated way to produce nitrates for fertilizer and partly by Baker’s larger contention that “The water powers of America are our one great inexhaustible asset and any gift of them to private individuals on practically any terms for long periods of years menaces the future.”

In the long run, the disposition of the Muscle Shoals dams was important because it would be the foundation of the most nation’s prominent experiment in public ownership. At the time though, at least as important was that Ford’s offer did not comply with the provisions of the Water Power Act, designed as a model for protecting the public’s right to purchase hydroelectric plants. As one of the authors of that act, Baker joined with other administration officials to form the National Committee for the Defense of the Water Power Act. Baker’s participation was particularly important because he had a longer and deeper relationship with the issue than anyone else. In March of 1924, after the House had passed a bill authorizing Ford’s purchase, Congressman John Hull of Iowa read a letter of Baker’s to the House, describing him as “having more to do with Muscle Shoals than any one else (sic).” Baker used this influence to introduce a Georgist understanding of land’s role in wealth distribution into the debate. He was quoted in

29 Baker to Drummond, March 29 1924, Newton Baker to Mr. W. I. Drummond, March 17, 1924, box 160, Baker Papers.
31 “House Votes Favor Ford’s Shoals Bid,” New York Times, March 8, 1924,
Congress as saying that the development was “a gold mind… everlasting and increasing in value each year.”32 This referred back to the idea that: land accrues value more consistently than capital.

No one was more important for saving Muscle Shoals than the Republican Senator from Nebraska, George Norris. Behind Norris stood Judson King and the Popular Government League, responsible for drafting much of the legislation he presented.33 The Popular Government League had been formed in 1913 to lobby President Wilson for progressive policies. Single-taxers played the predominant role in its founding, with an initial membership that included William Kent, Edward Keating, Robert Crosser, Frank Walsh, Jackson Ralston, and William U’Ren.34

By 1924, Judson King had signaled that hydroelectricity was beginning to eclipse the “land question.” In one pamphlet he wrote that

This League has taken a hand in the struggle for the conservation of water power not only because it is, next to the land question, the most important economic problem of our day, but because it is at transcendent political issue as well … the power trust is rapidly taking the place of the railroad interests as the master non-partisan political force.”35

The land and power issues, however, were not mutually exclusive. King objected to the current regulatory regime for utilities because it allowed for “the unjust capitalization of land values.”

Much as Tom Johnson had once argued that the exorbitant profits of utilities were due to their monopoly over the increasing value of space, King argued that the reproduction cost theory

32 Cong. Rec., 65th Congress, 1st sess., (March 10, 1924), 3911.
34 Judson King, Twenty Years of It (Washington: National Popular Government League, 1933), Box 69, Gifford Pinchot Papers. The pamphlet’s title is itself a reference to Whitlock’s Forty Years of it.
of valuation allowed utilities to claim “the increase of land values—due almost wholly to social growth and the labor of an entire community” Though the reference to community created land values was clearly Georgist, by the twenties and thirties, this thesis no longer belonged to any particular sect, having become practically a popular truism. In the aforementioned pamphlet, King was able to quote Joseph Eastman, Commissioner of the Interstate Commerce Commission, to the effect that utilities valuations were rising “largely on estimates of land values which have increased since the land was originally purchased or leased.”

George Norris was no single-taxer, but his political career had hinged in large part on the aid from Georgists who found his position on natural resources favorable. When Norris had run for reelection in 1918, he was so hobbled by charges of disloyalty resulting from his opposition to the war, that his long-time campaign manager abandoned him as a lost cause. Single-tax Congressman William Kent, took an interest in Senator Norris due to his stand “in all the great policies of conservation and democratization of our national resources and national industries.” Kent funded a tremendous publicity campaign, including a broadside sent to every registered voter in the state that was authored by Judson King of the Popular Government League. Even after Kent’s death, the Popular Government rallied single-taxers to support Norris financially. During Norris’ 1930, reelection campaign King solicited funds with a circular that claimed progressives:

36 “The Ethics of Public Utility Valuation” for release to the morning papers Monday January 7, 1929 by Judson King. Box 69, Gifford Pinchot Papers. King ultimately did not believe in the regulatory method at all though. As Special Consultant to the Rural Electrification Association, King claimed that the regulatory efforts of Theodore Roosevelt had failed and that the first progress on the utility question was made when several cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, and Cleveland built light plants, went into direct competition, and rates came down. That method worked.” The work of the Rural Electrification Association, he argued, feel into that tradition. “The Why and How of the REA Address before the Annual Meeting of the New Hampshire Electric Cooperative at Concord, New Hampshire, March 4, 1941, by Judson King, Special Consultant to the Rural Electrification Administration,” p 4-5 box 719, Gifford Pinchot Papers.

37 Lowitt, George Norris, 96-97.
would never forgive themselves and those on the watch tower if, through
carelessness or over-confidence, [Norris] should not get the financial and moral
support he deserves and be defeated. We must beware the similar fate of Mayor
Tom Johnson in Cleveland.… The generous, white souled Kent has gone the way
of all humans. But we are here—Norris is here—and the Old Cause is here.38

By evoking the memory of both Tom Johnson and William Kent, King would have left few
doubts in the minds of the faithful as to which “Old Cause” Norris was carrying on. Frank Walsh
alone donated a third of the funds to the Popular Government League’s campaign for Norris.

During the fight over Muscle Shoals, Norris request Baker testify about the history of the
project but also asked for information about the history of the public power plant that he and
Johnson had built in Cleveland.39 Baker’s response was cited by Norris at length in congressional
debates on Muscle Shoals.40 Because the power question had until then been essentially local, it
was natural that municipal projects would be the primary point of reference. But the Cleveland
example was referenced so often that by the end of the 1920s some Senators were able to
reference the local power rates off-the-cuff. 41

Cleveland became one of the principal examples of a “public yard stick” in electricity
partially because it was a particularly successful instance of a project rarely endeavored by big
cities. While municipally owned electricity was not uncommon,—Cleveland first obtained its

38 Judson King to Frank Walsh, July 2, 1930, box 17, Walsh Papers.
39 Baker was considered, next to Norris, the most potent voice in congressional debates. Particularly famous was
an assertion of the preeminence of economic power to political power, which, while apparently hyperbolic,
reflected a long-standing concern that monopolistic privileges would undermine democratic power structures. “If I
were greedy for power over my fellow men,” he claimed, “I would rather have control over Muscle Shoals than to
be continuously elected President of the United States.” Hubbard, Origins of the TVA, 145.
40 Newton Baker to George Norris, Feb. 27, 1925 and George Norris to Newton Baker Feb. 21 1925, Newton Baker
Papers, box 177, Baker Papers.
plants by annexing two separate suburban developments—most public power projects were
developed in small towns that private power companies refused to invest in. But the Cleveland
example was different because it was inspired by an ideological agenda, not the pragmatic
concerns of small town Americans. It was also particularly well run. Cleveland shared with
Jacksonville, Florida a claim to the cheapest public electricity in the country. Though smaller
towns like Jacksonville were assumed to have lower operating expenses and thus to be invalid
points of comparison for private companies in large markets.\textsuperscript{42} Therefore, from a purely
statistical perspective, Cleveland supplied the best evidence that public ownership was more
economical than private ownership.

These special circumstances also meant that Cleveland was a unique example of the
advantages of public ownership relative to regulation. As with Johnson’s signature struggle with
the streetcar company, a campaign for price controls was initiated at the same time as public
competition. The Cleveland Illuminating Company successfully avoided statuary, local price
controls by subjecting itself to statewide regulation.

In his letter to Baker in 1925, Senator Norris was particularly interested in confirming
that the company was subjected to regulatory control at the same time that it was induced to
compete with the public plants. The simultaneity of these events allowed for an unusually strong
demonstration of the superiority of public ownership. The private plant in Cleveland had
distributed electricity at 12.1 cents per kWh but the public plants inaugurated a rate of 3 cents per
kWh. In order to compete the private company was forced to halve its own rate to 5 cents per
kWh. The change was estimated to have saved Cleveland’s citizens $13,849,000 from 1915-
1923. Norris emphasized in Senate debates that the Cleveland Illuminating Company had

\textsuperscript{42} Cong. Rec., 68th Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} sess. (Jan. 9, 1925): 1506.
persuaded the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio that it could not possibly distribute power for less than 10 cents per kWh only six months before competition from the public plants forced them to cut that rate in half. Here was a uniquely powerful demonstration that a public yardstick was the only way to check monopolistic rates. According to Norris, “it goes quite a distance toward demonstrating that regulation, while perhaps bringing much benefit, is far from being an efficient and complete remedy.”

When he ran for President in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt was well positioned to capitalize on this debate over hydroelectricity because as Governor of New York he had taken a strong stance in favor of a public yardstick, often building directly off the work of single-taxers. Upon his election as Governor, he began working with Frank Walsh, who as chairman of the CIR during the Wilson administration had authored the first federal report to recommend land value taxation. Roosevelt nominated Walsh to serve on the state Commission on Revision of the Public Services Commission Law, an investigation into the performance of the state’s utility regulations. Walsh immediately wrote Judson King to ask for an extended report on the operation of the Cleveland power plant. Later, he followed up for information about other publically owned power plants. But the Cleveland example was the foundation for his argument that regulation was utterly ineffective and the only solution was to offer a public option that ensured private operators would not use their monopoly to demand exorbitant rates.

Walsh failed to sway the commission, but F.D.R. endorsed his minority report, making a public yardstick in electricity the central tenet of his utility program. Roosevelt picked Walsh

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44 Frank Walsh to Judson King, July 12th, 1929, box 16, Walsh Papers.
to chair the new State Power Authority, whose mandate was to lead negotiations between the federal government and Canada for the development of a publically-owned hydroelectric project on the St. Lawrence. Roosevelt supported the private distribution of electricity, but ensured in the legislation creating the State Power Authority that the river itself “shall always remain inalienable to, and ownership and possession and control thereof shall always be vested in, the people of the state.”\(^46\) In essence, the legislation treated natural resources and capital as qualitatively distinct, one legitimately private, the other naturally public.

Until he died in 1939, Walsh continued working for public hydroelectric power under Roosevelt. When Roosevelt ascended to the White House, he nominated Walsh to the National Resources Planning Board, designed to set a national policy for land utilization. After it was determined, however, that New York law would require Walsh to relinquish his position with the State Power Authority, he opted not to take the position. He remained a close adviser to the President, with an unofficial right to review the reports of the National Resources Planning Board prior to their public release.\(^47\)

Single-taxers were right to see in these gestures the prospect of a President concerned with the economics of land. Raymond Moley claimed that when he met Roosevelt hydroelectric power was the “subject to which Roosevelt had given more painstaking study than he had to any other single one.” But this was really “in a sense, part a larger policy which had included the conservation of both land and water. Roosevelt had advocated reforestation, land utilization, the


\(^{47}\) For example, when Morris Cooke proposed a project of rural electrification to Roosevelt, he chose Walsh to act as his intermediary, suggesting that he saw him as Roosevelt’s point person for power policy. Morris Cooke to Frank Walsh, March 12, 1932, Frank Walsh to FDR, March 14, 1932, box 82, F.D.R. Papers as Governor. M. H. McIntyre to Frank Walsh, Sept. 12, 1934, 778-792, President’s Personal File. Memorandum for Secretary Ickes by FDR, September 14\(^{47}\), 1934, 1091-1092, President’s Official File.
relief of farmers from an inequitable tax burden, and the curative possibilities of diversifying our
dustrial life by sending a proportion of it into the rural districts.”
In fact, as Governor of New
York he had been sent a free copy of *Progress and Poverty* by the Georgist Robert Schalkenbach
Foundation and replied that while he did not “got all the way” with George, he was “one of the
really great thinkers produced by our country” and that his writings “contain much that would be
helpful today.”

Actually Roosevelt did not go very far at all with George; he criticized even the moderate
property taxes of his own day for bearing down too heavily on farmers and violating the
principle of ability to pay in taxation.

But it is possible that Roosevelt was not being
dissembling and that he believed George had important lessons to teach about the effect of land
ownership on the distribution of wealth. Rexford Tugwell even suggested that land policy was
the central axis of Roosevelt’s political philosophy: “It was naturally transformed into more than
concern for the land and natural objects; it became a concern for people as well. And this
gradually opened out, as we know, to caring for all the resources and all the people of the
nation.”

This President’s commitment to land policy had often developed in close proximity to
Georgists. Roosevelt had first taken an interest in land policy upon his chance appointment as
New York State Senator to be the Chairman of the Committee on Forest, Fish, and Game.

48 Moley, *After Seven Years*, 12.
50 Franklin Roosevelt, “The Excessive Cost of Local Government – Address before roundtable, University of Virginia,
July 6, 1931,” box 283, Raymond Moley Papers. This concern was also evinced by internal memos written by Louis
51 Rexford Tugwell, *The Democratic Roosevelt: A Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Garden City: Doubleday &
Company, 1957), 32.
52 “A good many of you know my personal interest in conservation because I came to Albany as a baby senator in
1911 and was made chairman of the Forest, Fish, and Game Committee.” “Governor Franklin D Roosevelt’s Address
to State Forestry Association, 17th Annual Meeting, Albany, NY,” February 27, 1929, *Franklin D Roosevelt &
From this position he began a conservation campaign with Forest, Fish, and Game Commissioner, Thomas Mott Osborne. Osborne, a single-taxer and great-nephew of William Lloyd Garrison II, would remain one of Roosevelt’s closest associates through the teens, funding the organization Roosevelt used to engage in the Wilson campaign, The Empire State Democracy. Similarly, the Campfire Club, a conservation group that advocated land value taxation, organized a pivotal presentation to the New York State Legislature, both winning the fight for Roosevelt’s Conservation Commission and making a deep impression on the future president. Daniel Beard, who was the organization’s president and had the distinction of introducing Henry George at his last public appearance, presided over the meeting. Beard and Roosevelt would remain great friends; in private, Roosevelt praised Beard’s utopian, single-tax novel Moonblight, wherein workers took over the local coal mind and imposed land value taxation.


53 Tugwell, The Democratic Roosevelt, 85-87. Identified as a single-taxer by the New York Times on the heels of his career as mayor of Auburn in 1906, Osborne was still Albany’s representative in the Single Tax League in 1913, shortly after his conservationist work with Roosevelt, and in 1916 was that organization’s Vice-President. The New York Times Aug. 9, 1906. The New York Times, July 5, 1913. William (illegible) to Frank Walsh, April 21, 1916, box 34, Walsh Papers.

54 The organization’s position was that “the land itself may bear an annual tax fixed on the land value apart from its timber cover.” A. S. Houghton to Daniel Beard, Jan 12, 1912, box 62, Beard Papers. William E. Coffin to Daniel Beard, Aug. 15, 1911, box 33, Beard Papers. Report of the Committee of Conservation of Forest and Wild Life of the Campfire Club of America, Jan. 14th, 1913, box 217. “Conservationism Redefined” Address by Rexford Tugwell before the fiftieth anniversary the founding of New York’s forest reserve,” box 56, Tugwell Papers.

55 Beard sent the book to Roosevelt with the reservation that “Possibly the book is out of date, and the world has caught up and passed Uncle Dan....” Dan Beard to Franklin Roosevelt, Oct. 21, 1938, box 105, Daniel Beard Papers. Roosevelt wrote back three months later that “It is only now that I have had a chance to read ‘Moonblight’ and it is delightful to associate both you and my old friend Louis Post with it. The book most certainly is not out of date. It is of the vintage of 1939 – and so are you. Thank the Lord there are some people like you who see visions when they are young and do not lose them in passing years.” Franklin Roosevelt to Daniel Beard, Jan. 19, 1939, PPF 1093-1124. In Beard’s utopian fantasy “the miners of Moonblight... run the mines themselves” and ninety-nine year leases were instituted such that “all land-rent should go toward public improvements.” A. S. Houghton to Franklin Roosevelt, Feb. 14, 1912, Cont 7, Papers as NY Senator, Roosevelt Library. As a young state senator Roosevelt
But most significant was Gifford Pinchot’s speech at the event organized by Beard’s Campfire Club. Pinchot used slides of a Chinese city before and after deforestation to demonstrate the social importance of deforestation. A week after the meeting Roosevelt spoke at the People’s Forum in New York City. He recounted Pinchot’s slides and declared that they were “the most striking example of what happens” when “many persons who still think that individuals can do as they please with their own property even though it affects a community.” He predicted a day in which the state would tell farmers how to farm or how many trees to cut, but also used the issue of land utilization as the foundation of a larger philosophical dispute between “liberty of the community” and “liberty of the individual.”

When Roosevelt joined the Wilson Administration as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, he naturally meshed with Georgists who shared an interest in land policy. One of his closest associates was Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane, but he also formed relationships with Newton D. Baker, George Peabody, George Creel, and Louis Post.

While hydroelectricity might seem far removed from the hardships of mass unemployment engendered by the Great Depression, it addressed a prevailing concern about underconsumption. Many concerned with underconsumption emphasized the uneven distribution of wealth between employer and employee. Some looked to the British economist John Maynard wrote Ben Lindsey to say that his work had inspired a new generation of civic minded reformers. His “...work has been of the kind which has had real influence on younger men and which has been a factor in getting better public servants.” Franklin Roosevelt to Ben Lindsey, approx. Feb 1913, box 13, Papers as State Senator, Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

56 “We can prophesy today that the State (or in other words the people as a whole will shortly tell a man how many trees he must cut, then why can we not, without being radical, predict that the State will compel every farmer to till his land or raise beef, or horses? For after all if I own a farm of a hundred acres and let it lie wasted and overgrown, I am just as much destroyer of liberty of the community, and by liberty, we mean happiness and prosperity, as is the strongman who stands idle on the corner, refusing to work.” Address at People’s Forum, March 3, 1912, Cont. 1, Papers as New York State Senator, Franklin Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York.

57 Franklin Roosevelt to George Peabody, Dec. 31, 1913, box 69. Peabody Papers.
Keynes and argued that the depression was not caused by the distribution of wealth but rather that deficit spending would, in a famous latter day saying, “lift all boats.”

But, in the meetings of the Brains Trust during the campaign, Rexford Tugwell emphasized the ideas of J. A. Hobson, a British economist influenced by George.\textsuperscript{58} According to this school natural resources were a particularly important pivot for the misdistribution of wealth because as a monopoly landowners were able to extract unusually high rates of return.\textsuperscript{59} In his 1925 book, \textit{American Economic Life}, Tugwell had quoted Hobson at length as to what a post-war program of economic reform should look like. In the excerpt Tugwell quoted, Hobson had emphasized the importance of “mineral rights, industrial power, future site, and other land values. This involves not merely control but ownership i.e. the conservation to the people of specific property rights.”\textsuperscript{60}

Tugwell did not go all the way with this mode of thought. Influenced by American economists like Charles Van Hise, he argued for price controls to regulate these monopoly profits rather than taxes. Furthermore, neither Tugwell nor Hobson had George’s faith that land was the only important axis for the unequal distribution of wealth; Tugwell would also advocate extensive price controls in industry, irreconcilable with a true single-taxer’s faith in unfettered competition. But, single-taxers and planners could both agree that public ownership of

\textsuperscript{58} Tugwell seems to have associated this thesis of maldistribution at least in part with George. He refrained from identifying the idea exclusively with Hobson because “there had been hints of it in earlier works;” in his 1925 book \textit{American Economic Life} Tugwell had introduced an extended quote of Hobson’s theory of demand with George’s juxtaposition of “progress and poverty.” In his 1934 book \textit{Our Economic Society and its Problems}, he dedicated two pages to an extended quote of \textit{Progress and Poverty} in which he demonstrated that “production alone cannot raise levels of living,” because the proceeds of progress accrued to a small elite. R. G. Tugwell, \textit{The Brains Trust} (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 43. Rexford G. Tugwell & Howard C. Hill, \textit{Our Economic Society and its Problems} (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), 246-8. Rexford Tugwell, \textit{American Economic Life} (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1925), 245.

\textsuperscript{59} Tugwell, \textit{Democratic Roosevelt}, 234.

\textsuperscript{60} Tugwell, Murno, and Stryker \textit{American Economic Life and the Means of its Improvement}. 

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waterpower would reduce the monopoly rents of enterprises like water power, boosting consumer spending and the sale of electric community goods.\(^61\)

As President, Roosevelt resolved the Muscle Shoals controversy by not only putting the two existing dams under public ownership but also building an entire network of plants under the authority of a new comprehensive planning board, the Tennessee Valley Authority. This reflected the influence of regional planners, who emphasized that aspects of land utilization should be managed in tandem.

The President developed a commitment to regional planning in part because of the politics of urban rent that he had confronted as Governor of New York. His predecessor and sometime mentor, Al Smith, was, perhaps wrongly, suspected of Georgism because he fought for the exemption of improvements in New York City.\(^62\) Smith’s deeper commitment, however, was to the ideas of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA), which was founded in 1923 with the goal of replacing the gigantic, sprawling metropolis with smaller, planned, state-owned communities. Smith asked Clarence Stein of the RPAA to chair a state housing commission, whose report called for active planning to obviate the difficulties incumbent upon a system wherein “the heaping of population into New York City creates the highest land values in

\(^61\) Frank Walsh makes this argument later in this chapter. Also, this was a point advanced by the Public Ownership League, which had been promoted by The Public in its final days. By 1928 two thousand municipalities received it magazine. It argued for the importance of public hydroelectricity because “All wealth is produced by the application of human energy to the raw materials obtained from the world’s natural resources. And of necessity the great bulk of the wealth that is thus produced must be consumed by the producers themselves because they make up the consuming masses.” G. H. Sherman, “Public Ownership of Superpower,” Public Ownership, May 1928, 77-81.

\(^62\) “I have already met ex. Gov Smith. He knew I was the daughter of Henry George and there was a chance for him to say something in praise of the man, but instead he told of his first election ... celebration being held on the night of the H. G. fight in ’86. I do not believe he is looking very steadily in our direction.” Anna George DeMille to George Peabody, Feb. 16, 1932.
the world” while “within a hundred miles of the lower tip of Manhattan land may be bought for unpaid taxes.”

Roosevelt, who harbored a Jeffersonian disdain for large cities, eagerly followed Smith’s example on the issue. He invited Stein to the Governor’s Mansion, where he promised his support. In 1932, he traveled to Charlottesville, VA to speak a conference organized by the RPAA. At the Charlottesville Conference, one of the speakers observed that “most of the speakers stated frankly that they did not know what they were talking about.” This was a crude way of saying what conference organizers admitted; the only thing attendees could agree on was that land use should be planned. There was little consensus as to what precisely planning would entail. Still, that year Roosevelt publically announced that he was “a great believer in… regional planning” and was interested in a “far-reaching policy of land utilization and of population distribution.”

Roosevelt incorporated several members of the RPAA to posts in his administration, but most floundered with vague aesthetic principles, too idiosyncratic to provide a foundation for collective action. Robert Kohn was appointed head of the Housing Division of the PWA. Falling into “a state of paralysis,” he was removed after one year’s work, during which he had failed to approve a single project. Benton MacKaye, on the other hand, was assigned a promising role as the director of Regional Planning Section of the TVA. MacKaye worked to reconcile the plans of experts in forestry, housing, and water management into a coherent whole. He found these visions, however, to be fundamentally incongruous, with some of his subordinates only

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63 Report of the Commission of Housing and Regional Planning to Governor Alfred E. Smith (Albany: J. B. Lyon Col, 1926).
64 Spann, Designing Modern America, 127-128
65 Ibid., 151.
66 Ibid., 146-7.
concerned with efficiency, others only with aesthetics. By 1934, MacKaye had produced his own plan for the entire Tennessee Valley Region, but few people in the department paid much mind to what was essentially an expression of individual taste. MacKaye was fired without realizing any substantive results.  

The most tangible gains were made by regional planners who, closer ideologically to Henry George, were principally interested in the economic facets of housing and land use. Frederick Ackerman and Henry Wright, working with the New York Municipal Housing Authority and Housing Division of the PWA respectively, lead a series of slum clearance and public housing programs. Ackerman, more than many of his cohort, emphasized the economic ideas of George and Wright was similarly concerned with the economic function of land values. In series of articles in *The New Republic* co-authored by Lewis Mumford and Albert Mayer, Henry Wright argued for a public housing program that would mean “an end to dealing with the fundamental environment of human living as a means of speculative profit—hence the end of the slum and values based on congestion…. the end of providing expensive public utilities for houses and neighborhoods so badly planned and built they cannot carry the full burden of costs.” His sovereign diagnosis was “publically owning and controlling all the land used in community building” because “planning of the order suggested cannot take place if speculation and private profit continue to be attached to land ownership.” Wright’s state ownership of land values was immediately realizable through public housing developments and provided a clear and actionable basis for policy.

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67 Ibid., 157-159.
The person most responsible for Roosevelt’s land policy was Rexford Tugwell. In a later book on the origins of the New Deal, he devoted a chapter to the study of single-tax mayors, from which he concluded that “of all the possible choices between private and public activity—that is, not excepting the utilities—the ownership and management of land and the manipulation of its values had perhaps the most disastrous consequences.” Tugwell’s relationship to the president dated back to the early days of the Brains Trust. Tugwell and Roosevelt reportedly tossed around the idea of government-owned towns during the ’32 campaign. But, the President’s imagination outran even that of Tugwell, who doubted the practicality of Roosevelt’s plan for subsistence homesteads, which took unemployed workers, sometimes with no agricultural experience, and gave them small plots for farming.

These subsistence homesteads came to fruition, as part of the Resettlement Administration that Tugwell led from 1935 to 1936. Other ambitious dreams that the pair discussed were never realized. There was, for example, the idea of a shelter belt of forested land that would cut through the Great Plains in half and break the harsh winds of the region to ease the process of erosion. The Forest Service drew up a plan that called for a line of public domain forests stretching from Canada to Northern Texas, a hundred miles wide and 64 million acres in toto, requiring the purchase of an estimated 190,000 individual properties.

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69 Rexford G. Tugwell, *In Search of Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 69. Specifically he concluded that their work had evolved out of conditions created by their predecessors who had been “the most ardent defenders of real estate speculation” even though “low values meant better living for citizens.” Elsewhere he expressed the Georgist position that land values were a socially created form of wealth: “many a fortune has been made by owning a piece of land the price of which was enhanced by social development.” Tugwell and Murno, and Roy Stryker *American Economic Life and the Means of its Improvement*, 428.

The shelterbelt idea is consistent with recent scholarship that has framed the New Deal’s expansive land policy as a reaction to environmental catastrophe. Over-farming had stripped much of the nation’s land of its agricultural fertility and left top soil exposed so that it could be picked up by wind and turned into gigantic dust storms. Under a conservationist resource program, retired land, purchased by the government, would be reforested, easing the process of erosion.

While it is doubtful that the political will for such programs would have existed without such tangible conservationist concerns, it is also the case that these fears provided a pretext for some who were already predisposed to believe that land should be held under government ownership. When TVA geologists found a large deposit of minerals in the Muscle Shoals region, Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins and Arthur Morgan decided to categorize the land as submarginal and therefore place it under public ownership, precisely because they determined that it “will yield an enormous profit.” This was at best tangential to the stated ecological goals of reclaiming submarginal land.

For some in the administration, conservation programs were part of a larger platform of socialization land. Frederic Delano of the National Resources Planning Board objected to those who thought just in terms of conservation: “I can’t help feeling that even today a man like Secretary Wallace has a much too narrow point of view of the term ‘land use.’ He does not realize that one half of the population live in cities and that to them submarginal land, desert areas, and reforestation don’t have any particular appeal.” As Administrator of the

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71 Sarah Philips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


73 Frederic Delano to Franklin Roosevelt, June 26th, 1934, 1091-1092, President’s Official File.
Resettlement Administration, Rexford Tugwell explained the purpose of government-owned suburban developments like Greenbelt, Maryland; they were “designed for those who are employed in industrial or commercial activities” so as to “enable low-income workers to retain more of their earnings for self-advancement because of lower rents.”\(^74\) As administrator of the program Tugwell confirmed that he was not just protecting the environment but also overturning “the ancient customs of the landlord system.”\(^75\)

This was a principle that was at least acceptable to single-taxers and had, to some measure, been encouraged by them. In one of his columns for *Colliers*, George Creel surveyed the long list of New Deal land programs and concluded “More and more the truth is being driven home that no man has the right to say, ‘I am absolute owner of my ground, and will do with it as I please.’”\(^76\) Raymond Moley, head of the Brains Trust, observed that “In the perspective of time” it was George’s “diagnosis,” more so than his remedy, “that was important.” “The tremendous fact which George so diligently promoted,” he observed, “was that of social value. To point out that a piece of land in itself is valueless unless there are people how find it useful is to shake the very foundation of all ancient concepts of property. Moreover, land exploitation is the easiest form of exploitation to understand.”\(^77\)

The primacy of George’s diagnosis, rather than his remedy, can perhaps be seen in the story of Roosevelt’s long-standing Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace. Wallace was part of a line of agricultural reformers, all of whom had been editors of *Wallace’s Farmer*. That line began with his grandfather, after whom he was named. When speaking to the Iowa Legislature,
Wallace appealed to the moral authority of Mosaic Law, which he claimed established that “that the land is Jehovah’s and they are the tenants, the rent being paid in tithes.” This was very much like George’s argument in “Moses,” that the Old Testament established a precedent for communal ownership of land.

However, Wallace did not seem to agree with George’s contention that Moses’ method of redistributing land during the Jubilee was outdated. Instead he argued that by preventing the “accumulation of great wealth in the form of landed estates in the hands of the few,” Moses had “wiped out the unearned increment.” Here Wallace was taking George’s arguments about the social construction of land values and the religious propriety of confiscating these values, as a moral foundation to support any number of agricultural reforms. That Moley, Tugwell, and the regional planners articulated similar views about the social construction of land values, all suggest that George helped encourage a particular focus on land within the New Deal.

The philosopher John Dewey was one of the few prominent intellectuals who moved closer to the single-tax during the New Deal. In 1933 he became the President of the People’s Lobby, a holdover of the Progressive Era that was designed to counteract special interest lobbies. In his first article for that organization’s monthly bulletin he demanded the taxation of land speculators. In his second, published in February of 1933, he argued that “access to land… is blocked by our tax system.” In three more of his articles that year, he called for the taxing of land values. In four, he alluded to land values, the selling price of land, or land speculators. In only two of twelve articles, did he fail to mention land speculation.

This newfound persistence was probably encouraged by the company he kept; the organization’s secretary was Benjamin Marsh. But more important was the fact that Dewey

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78 “The Mosaic Legislation” Address delivered at YMCA to members of Iowa Legislature, by Henry Wallace, editor of Wallace’s Farmer, box 12, Amos Pinchot Papers.
understood the Depression to have been caused by factors very much like those that George had described in his writings on economic downturns. He argued that consumer demand had been stifled by the high price of land and that banks were collapsing because debtors were unable to pay for mortgages taken out on inflated wartime land values. Dewey argued that limiting the supply of agricultural goods was only inflating the cost of land to bring it up to par with the value of mortgages. While this might provide temporary relief, it was ultimately fueling the cycle of speculative boom and bust that had precipitated the crisis.

But Dewey’s logic actually went a long way why, during this period, land nationalization would eclipse taxation as a remedy to many of the ills that George condemned. If farmers, the archetypical victims of the depression, were suffering because the value of their land had collapsed, taxing it out of existence was hardly the quickest road to recovery. Dewey was less concerned with recovery than with reforming the system to prevent a similar crisis. But few would be so patient or see in one of America’s poorest classes a scourge that needed to penalized with taxes.79

In this context, even many of George’s old-time followers, while still confident that land was the central axis for economic inequality, increasingly advocated reforms based not on the principle of taxation but of government ownership—or at least more widespread private ownership—of land. Frederic Howe sent F.D.R. a letter calling for the government to provide veterans with a “low-cost suburban homes or small farmstead.” He claimed that the plan for the government to create veteran communities sprang from “ten years of very close association with Mayor Tom L. Johnson of Cleveland.”80 Nothing closely resembling this plan ever reached fruition. On the other hand, when Howe wrote Eleanor Roosevelt about the prospect of

80 Frederic Howe to Franklin Roosevelt, June 29, 1936, 3677-3713, Presidents Personal File.
purchasing the abandoned land of the defunct C&O Railroad to serve as a park, it set in motion a series of events that led to the creation of a trail extending from Washington D.C. to Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{81} Similarly, Newton Baker forwarded Moley a plan to provide the unemployed with land for homesteads, though, characteristically self-doubting, he admitted that he was weak when it came to economics.\textsuperscript{82}

George Peabody, on the other hand, lobbied the administration to pass the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, which provided funding for sharecroppers to purchase their own land.\textsuperscript{83} He served as the President of the National Committee on Small Farm Ownership, which lobbied on behalf of the bill.\textsuperscript{84} Benjamin Marsh, acting as Secretary of the People’s League, argued for modifications of the same Bankhead-Jones bill to ensure that loans were not used to purchase land above its value in a way that would spur speculation. He enlisted in his efforts Jackson Gardner of the AAA, who argued to Congress that without such provisions it would “impose an indefinite burden on the general public for the owners of land… perpetuate rather than end the enormous land speculation.”\textsuperscript{85}

Georgism continued to cast a shadow over the regional planning movement as it reached its zenith in 1937. That year Congress debated legislation to divide the nation into a seven regional planning boards with extensive control over land and water policy. They were to be demarcated by natural watershed much like the TVA. Congressman John Rankin (D-MS) testified on behalf of the bill with an extended exposition on savings from municipal power

\textsuperscript{82} Newton Baker to Raymond Moley, Sept. 20, 1932, box 3, Moley Papers.
\textsuperscript{83} George Peabody to William McAdoo, April 20, 1935. George Peabody to FDR, April 20. 1935, box 660, President’s Personal File
\textsuperscript{84} “Farm Tenancy – The Remedy: 20 Questions Asked & Answered,” Box 186, Baker Papers.
plants, concentrating on Cleveland, which he called the “pacemaker in low electric rates.”

Rankin even gave an extended history of the project all the way back to Tom Johnson and “his crusade for a 3-cent rate light plant.”

Roosevelt contributed to the debate by forwarding a report by Frank Walsh, in which he estimated that government ownership of hydroelectric power cut the price of electricity in half for consumers. Walsh again impugned the efficacy of regulation, suggesting instead that the “retention of natural power resources for the people” would create sufficient savings to enable a leap in consumer purchasing power that “will mean a great market for electric appliances.” He estimated that nationwide spending on such appliances under a system of public power would amount to $3,000,000,000. Stuart Chase and the Republican Congressman from New York, Francis Culkin, contended that projects should be funded according to “the general theory in municipal practice … to assess the abutting property for benefit,” bringing the young radical who had found George in the school library back to the principle of land value taxation. This ambitious legislation ultimately fell victim to opposition from an unlikely alliance of Southern Democrats, fearful that regional boards would usurp the power of states; utility interests, jealous of proprietary rights; and the progressive Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who believed that it would obviate the need for his own department. 86

But regional planning suffered from a more general lack of intellectual clarity that hobbled it politically. It was the dearth of actionable policies that made the administrative careers of Henry Wright and Benton MacKaye so lackluster. While the single-tax was subject to the charge of being a panacea—less complex than planning—it had provided a clear answer to a multitude of social problems. Supporters argued that it would accomplish everything from

86 House Committee on Rivers and Harbors. Regional Conservation and the Development of National Resources. 75th Cong., 2nd sess., 1937, 481-484, 466., 781-785, 826, 827.
creating a more competitive and meritocratic market to providing the funds for a socialist society. As such, it fostered a nexus of intellectual unity for people of disparate backgrounds. Regional planning, with its conscious eclecticism, did no such thing, and thus floundered on its own disunity.

In this climate, even political entrepreneurs who had once coalesced around the single tax could no longer reach an accord. In the 1934 California Democratic Gubernatorial primary, Upton Sinclair challenged George Creel on a platform of radical economic reform that he called EPIC: End Poverty in California. The centerpiece of the plan was state purchase of land and industrial facilities for worker’s cooperatives, similar to what he had recommended as an alternative to the single tax after the failure of the Great Adventure referendum. 87

Creel repudiated Sinclair’s plan, suggesting that “instead of the Socialistic proposal that the state take possession of farms upon failure to pay taxes, turning it over to the unemployed, many of whom never saw a farm, I hold that the state should accept a first lien for delinquent taxes, spreading amortization over a long term at a low rate of interest.” 88 In addition to protecting small farms, Creel called for the public ownership of all utilities and the construction of the Central Valley Project, a gigantic water management and power development.

Creel had been part of the California delegation that successfully lobbied for federal funding for Central Valley Project and so made public hydroelectricity a centerpiece of his campaign. 89 Like Sinclair, he argued for land nationalization, only of a different stripe: “the people of the United States never made a greater blunder than in permitting their natural

88 “Radio Speech of George Creel over State—wide hook up from Los Angeles Friday Evening. July 13 at 7:30 o clock”, box 5, Creel Papers.
89 Speech of George Creel at Visalia, Aug. 22, 1935, box 5, Creel Papers.
resources to pass into private ownership. I stand for the development and the utilization of such natural resources as still remain in our possession, and particularly pledge myself to construct the great Central Valley Water project."⁹⁰

Despite an acrimonious campaign during which Creel alleged that Sinclair was a communist, the two briefly reconciled after Sinclair won the primary. Creel was elected chairman of the state Democratic Convention and the two negotiated a platform that that reflected their shared roots in the single tax movement. Small properties worth less than $100 would be exempted from the property tax, but there would be hikes on “large landholdings held out of productive use.” The platform followed “our natural resources, which have hereto escaped their just proportion of taxation, must be recognized as natural sources of state revenue.”⁹¹ The two split again after the convention, when Sinclair returned to advocating for state owned farms. Sinclair lost in the general election, amid opposition from his own party, including Creel.

Ironically one of the most visible lapses of unity in the Democratic Party during the thirties was spearheaded by two individuals who shared a faith that state ownership of land was one of the nation’s most urgent needs. Once upon a time, the single tax had united people, like Creel, who saw this dream as a way to foster small proprietors with people like Sinclair, who saw it as path to a more expansive social state. As George’s proposal fell to the background, the myriad dreams it had encompassed came to be embodied in a diverse and contradictory set of proposals that served as a shaky foundation for collective action.

But a deeper divide existed between the Progressive Era single-taxers and younger New Dealers that would only grow over time. The latter during their youth had perhaps watched single-taxers with respect and developed an interest in finishing the campaigns that the Tom

⁹⁰ Untitled 1934, box 5, Creel Papers.
⁹¹ “Sinclair Modifies Some of His Plans,” box 13, Creel Papers.
John and Frederic Howe had begun. They had never developed much of an interest, however, in the accommodations that George had made to Gilded Age political values: his faith that private property was as sacred as social property, his vision of the state as little more than an agent for distributing revenues from the single tax, or even his republican belief in the primacy of a general public interest. Roosevelt readily accepted the bargaining of modern interest group pluralism and worked hard to assuage everyone from labor to business. In a speech to The People’s Institute in 1912 he had taken a swipe at classical republicanism that could easily have been a reference to George himself: “sounding orators have called it the ‘brotherhood of man,” but that this was not “possible to us anywhere outside of a heaven of community of interest… where everybody wants the same thing.” This was anathema to followers of a leader who, even while running on a labor party platform, had repudiated the claim that he was for working men with the famous line: “I am for men.”  

For single-taxers, economic planning was typically the most egregious breech with tradition, because it violated their principles of competition, a non-coercive state, and hostility to interest group politics. The flagship program of the early New Deal, the National Recovery Administration (NRA), limited work hours, determined wages, set prices, and restricted industrial output. The most immediate inspiration for planning was Charles Van Hise’s *Concentration and Control*, which argued that all sectors of the economy were tending toward monopoly and that something like the power of utility commissions, regulating the price of commodities, should be extended throughout industry. Single-taxers had only ever accepted the principle of public ownership—not regulation—and only in special sectors deemed to be natural monopolies. Single-taxers believed regulatory regimes would be captured by business; New Deal

92 Address at People’s Forum, March 3, 1912, Cont. 1, Papers as New York State Senator, Franklin Roosevelt Library.
Planers made no attempt to fight the trend, integrating business into the decision making process as senior partners. Rexford Tugwell, who more than most looked back to the Georgist tradition, realized that he was making a radical break with it. Brand Whitlock and Tom Johnson, he noted, had always aspired to the restoration of the competitive market. With planning though, the goal was more “fundamental” —to replace an economy governed by competition with one governed by expertise and logic.\(^93\)

Most single-taxers were sufficiently interested in the New Deal’s land program, attached to the Democratic Party, and sympathetic to the general trajectory of reform, to retain for some time an ambivalent allegiance to the president, even as they differed with him on a fundamental philosophic level. But, they eventually split with the President. Furthermore, the ideas that precipitated the split preceded the New Deal.

In fact, perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the single-tax position on the New Deal was mostly written before Roosevelt was elected. George L. Record, the great single-tax leader of New Jersey, died in 1933, leaving little opportunity to articulate his opinion on the matter. But, in 1936, Amos Pinchot organized his writings into a coherent statement of opinion entitled *How to Abolish Poverty*. Record’s extended criticism of regulation allowed Pinchot to frame his corpus to mean that “The true function of government in relation to economic life is a constructive, not a restrictive one… When the government intervenes, it should be only to assure the free use of capital… the maximum employment of labor at a wage of increasing purchasing power. No plan, such as that of the New Deal, that fosters monopoly, reduces production and diminishes consumption of goods, should be tolerable to intelligent men.”\(^94\)

The body of the Record’s text included only fleeting references to Roosevelt’s program of regulation, but in the introduction Pinchot brought to bear his own personal knowledge of Record’s views. Demonstrating some of the discomfort Record felt breaking ranks with the forces of progress, Pinchot declared that “Record admired Franklin D. Roosevelt, and believed in his good intentions, but had little faith in his economic views. He altogether disbelieved in his program of regimentation that is now summed up in the words ‘managed economy.’” It was an incongruous affair, positing a comprehensive critique and alternative to the New Deal by repurposing old writings that predated the subject in question. That it worked is illustrative of how powerfully the single tax had conditioned its adherents against the new liberalism of the thirties.

Many other single-taxers made a quick transition away from the New Deal. As a progressive mayor, Whitlock had frequently intoned that social property should be as sacred as private property. At the time that meant that the community’s rights to land and utilities should be protected, but as the political spectrum moved to the left it became evident that he was just as committed to the other side of the equation. Looking at Roosevelt’s interventions into the private economy, Whitlock flatly called him “a robber.”

William U’Ren had supported Roosevelt in the 1932 campaign because of his position on hydroelectricity. This quickly changed though. Following the logic of their motto “Justice not Charity,” he attacked the New Deal for establishing “the government dole” instead of creating an economically independent citizenry with a proprietary right to the means of production. Like many of the old municipal reforms, he feared the strong federal government constructed during
the New Deal. Large labor unions represented a threat to republican unity as did, after World War II, the “‘growing influence of the military.’” ⁹⁷

Newton D. Baker quickly moved to oppose of the New Deal for many of the same reasons that he had once fought for public ownership, rather than regulation. As a constitutional lawyer, Baker was troubled by the extensive but poorly-defined administrative power of the NRA. He believed the NRA administrators were essentially allowed to punish at will, violating rule of law. He discussed the fears evoked by this precedent in the same breadth that he discussed Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. ⁹⁸ Baker’s fear of regulatory power inspired a new found appreciation for the strictures of constitutional law. He publically challenged the constitutionality of the TVA, even though his work for hydroelectric power in Muscle Shoals had laid the foundation for that program. Many of Baker’s closest friends assumed that he had turned his back on his principles. Actually, he had always insisted that federal power projects should not undercut private business—though that is what his power plants in Cleveland had done—and that the surplus profits from market rate distribution should be treated as federal revenue. ⁹⁹

Baker’s strict constructionism was not, however, the principle reason for his split with the New Deal. In Cleveland and Washington he had often worked to circumvent or rewrite constitutional obstacles to reform. His strict constructionism was itself the product of fears evoked by powerful and broad regulatory regimes. To the progressive department store owner,

⁹⁷ Quoted in Johnston, The Radical Middle Class, 135.
⁹⁸ Newton Baker to Henry Bates, July 5, 1934, & June 22nd, 1934, box 157, Baker Papers
⁹⁹ I do not advocate that the government go into the business of using this power to enter into business competition with private industry, but I think the government ought never to give up its ownership of this power, but ought rather to complete the dam, install the power plants, unit by unit, as the field increases its capacity to absorb and use the power developed there, and by holding in its hands this great source of power, be able to dominate and control the power service of the whole industrial section of the southeast and prevent a monopoly in private hands.” Newton Baker to Charles Mooney, Dec. 7, 1923, box 157, Baker Papers.
Edward Filene, he admitted that he was “instinctively cold” to the programs of the New Deal. After searching for the causes he concluded “having devoted the major part of my life to the advocacy of liberty and to the defense of every freedom which I found to be assailed, I find it impossible to turn speedily to believing in a system which either invites or demands the surrender of liberty in a wholesale way. Every time I think of business and industry getting together and giving me orders, I want to rebel…”

His sense that regulatory regimes were ultimately manipulated by sophisticated business lobbies and used to extend industry’s authoritarian reach was a lesson he had learned from Johnson and shared by many of his compatriots.

The most vocal of the single-tax antagonists of the New Deal was Alfred Jay Nock. In 1935 he published the libertarian classic, Our Enemy the State, which synthesized many of the arguments he had been working on since his days publishing The Freeman. His old Georgist faith had changed, but not disappeared. After his paper folded, he came across the ideas of Ralph Adams Cram, a neo-Gothic architect, who argued that mankind’s intellectual facilities were innately limited. As more people gained access to culture and education, standards declined because the unintelligent mass obtained influence over once rarefied media. Nock recognized that this conflicted with George’s idea of human perfectibility, but, even more importantly, he believed that it meant the voting public would never have the sense to bring the single tax into practice. In all likelihood he turned to Cram, much as many old single-taxers had developed doubts about the democratic electorate during to twenties, to explain the poor reception to his ideas.

100 Newton Baker to E. A. Filene, May 22, 1934, box 95, Baker Papers.
In his 1939 biography of George, Nock split his subject into two characters: the philosopher and the politician. As a politician, George had engaged in a foolhardy effort to popularize his program and had only managed to obscure his ideas. By joining the progressive mainstream, single-taxers had compromised their ideas, becoming “double-taxers” or even “triple taxers” and losing sight of the ethical conclusions of their philosophy.\textsuperscript{101} As a philosopher though, George was beyond reproach, and the obstacles to his dream were of no moment. Nock wrote that the single tax “will continue to locate and identify the ideal which is needful for right guidance, however far in advance of practicability.” The existence of this ideal undermined Nock’s faith in any other form of social organization because it “reprehend[s] those who habitually identify the proximate-best with the ultimately best.”\textsuperscript{102}

Nock’s \textit{Our Enemy, The State} argued that the state was fundamentally antithetical to society and became an important work in the history of libertarianism but, on a formal, philosophical level, it was a case for the single tax. Nock claimed that the state was class government, the use of “political means” —the same term used by the German Georgist Franz Oppenheimer—to redistribute wealth. Citing American Indian tribes as an example, Nock contrasted the state with “government” which did not redistribute wealth and was merely “the common understanding and common agreement of society.”\textsuperscript{103}

Nock spent much of the book elaborating on Oppenheimer’s single-tax history of the state. Nock devoted a considerable portion of it to arguing that the U.S. Constitution was designed as a power grab by landowners. He explained that his intent was to “show why the State system of land-tenure came into being, and why its maintenance is necessary to the State’s

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, 221-22.
\textsuperscript{103} Nock, \textit{Our Enemy the State}, 36.
existence.” Most essentially, he claimed that “if this system were broken up, obviously the 
reason or the State’s existence would disappear, and the State itself would disappear with it.”\textsuperscript{104} Nock argued that under “actual free competition” society would be resilient enough to resist the state so that “a serious or continuous misuse of social power would be virtually impractical.” To the response that laissez-faire had failed in Victorian England, he retorted that a system that tolerated private ownership in land was not “actual free competition.” The poverty that resulted from landed property created a “standing brief for addicts of positive intervention.”\textsuperscript{105}

In essence, Nock argued that once land was nationalized a natural distribution of wealth would be realized that would obviate the need for “a state” to redistribute wealth from one class to another. Though he has popularly been read as such, Nock was not, at least not philosophically, an anarchist. Though he disdained the state, he would replace it with “government,” a consensual political system similar in which there would be no class, because landed property was abolished.

But, much as single-taxers had once joined the country’s wider movement to the left, tolerating more in the way of socialism than they actually believed, Nock became a leading conservative intellectual. He effectively resigned himself to the impossibility of the single tax and committed to attacking its antagonist, the state. He asked what could halt the progress of the state and responded bluntly “Simply nothing.”\textsuperscript{106} The only reason he bothered to define government—which was a society without property in land—was to answer the question: “But it may be asked where we are to go for relief from the misuses of social power, if not to the State? What other recourse have we?”\textsuperscript{107} This was analogous to his conclusion in \textit{Henry George} that the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 108.
  \item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 199
  \item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 203.
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 195-196.
\end{itemize}
single tax continued to be important because it located the absolute best, rather than the proximate best.

Nock now used his intellectual inheritance from the anti-vice law mayors of the teens to attack all manifestations of state power. At the beginning of Our Enemy, The State he cited William Jay Gaynor’s arguments against a larger police force to claim that every time the power of the state grew the power of society was diminished.¹⁰⁸ In Harpers he cited Whitlock’s On the Enforcement of Law in the Cities, to argue that there was a distinction between “statues” and “laws” — one with and one without the force of natural law behind it. Without the force of natural law, statues would always lack moral authority and go unenforced. Prohibition and every other species of moral legislation was merely a “statue,” that he would readily admit to violating. But, if he indicted the current system for enforcing statues that violated natural law, it also indicted it for not enforcing actual laws. Because the single tax was natural law, at its foundation every political system without it was criminal—a violation of true, moral law.¹⁰⁹

One of Nock’s most memorable devices was his coinage of the “remnant,” a term that referred to the vibrant minority of “alien spirits,” who he believed would see past the short-term incentives tending toward a larger state and challenge, probably futilely, its expansion.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 2. Interestingly Nock always focuses on the state as an anti-social, rather anti-individual. The focus on society was a Georgist inheritance. It reflected the distinction George made in The Principles of Political Economy between unconscious and directed cooperation. Nock was interested in the principle that society under a market economy provided services on the basis of unconscious cooperation. George argued that organization by the state was, though more obviously a form of cooperation, a less efficient means of cooperation that distracted from the more organic alternative.

¹⁰⁹ “From the Constitution down to the municipal ordinances of one-horse towns, we have a mass of enactments, many of them practical enough and some of them rather sensible, that somehow fail of being laws; they are not obeyed or enforced or even ever heard of, and they apparently have no power to rescue themselves from this extreme desuetude. Whichever way one looks at it, there seems a most important essential difference between a law and a statue: between a law and an ordinance; even between a law and a constitutional provision. Albert Jay Nock, “Officialism and Lawlessness” Harpers, January 1929, 11.

¹¹⁰ Nock Our Enemy, the State, 208.
Actually, Nock attracted considerable support. In evaluating the book, Baker concluded “Nock’s style is, it seems to me, almost as powerful, and often more pungent than that of Henry George.”
If anything, Baker was even more skeptical of public power—less certain that even “government” would not be subject to an inevitable tendency for institutions to aggrandize themselves.\(^{111}\) Nock and his friend, the journalist H. L. Mencken, became the first prominent intellectuals to identify themselves as libertarians, because “liberal,” adopted by Roosevelt as his favored identifier, no longer connoted a faith in the competitive market.\(^{112}\)

Nock ultimately proved to be an important figure in the emergent conservative movement. After Nock died in 1945, *The Freeman* was revived by a group of Nock’s former associates, including the Georgist Frank Chodorov and Suzanne La Follette. By the mid-1950s the editorial staff was divided over political in-fighting and a wealthy young Catholic, whose father had been a close friend of Nock, recruited most of the *Freeman’s* staff to found a new, broader conservative magazine. William Buckley’s *National Review* was, in the assessment of historian George Nash “strikingly similar to the pre-1953 *Freeman*. In fact, most of the names which initially graced its masthead had worked for or at least contributed to that magazine.”\(^{113}\)

Nock’s reaction to the New Deal, however, was extreme; many old single-taxers experienced more complicated and ambivalent interactions. Frederic C. Howe’s time as Consumers’ Consul for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, for example, spoke to both to New Dealers’ admiration for and intellectual incongruence with the single tax. The position of

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Consumers’ Counsel was created to ensure that the AAA, designed to increase the price of agricultural products, did not inflate costs at the expense of the consumer. It was a job that required a vigorous concern for the public interest and the ability to communicate those concerns to the electorate, embracing both Howe’s historical commitment to political education and public interest. Tugwell expressed the initial enthusiasm with which the announcement was made:

It happened that Frederic C. Howe, who was venerated by all younger liberals as a warrior in many old battles, was drawn to Washington…. He seemed an ideal person to represent consumer interests. Above all, as Wallace saw it, his presence among us would guarantee that farmers’ gains were not to be at consumers’ expense. 114

Howe’s appointment was purportedly set in motion by his old admirer, Raymond Moley, but was advanced by a coterie of nostalgic young liberals in the AAA. Louis Bean recommended him to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace with the observation that “Here’s a fine old liberal of the Tom Johnson School.” Jerome Frank claimed to have proposed Howe’s name for the post because “Fred had been one of the respected men of my college days. He’d written The City: The Hope of Democracy, was a great liberal, a friend of Tom Johnson and so on.” 115

This admiration for the battles of the old Tom Johnson school though, did not translate into philosophical consistency; once Howe began his new job, he found it to be incompatible with his ideals. Howe was immediately excluded from policy discussions in the AAA. The department’s Administrator, George Peek, envisioned the division narrowly. It was to lift the price of food stuffs in the interests of the nation’s farmers. However, Howe saw his role as adversarial, ensuring that the public interest in lower commodity prices was protected. He spoke

115 Miller, From Progressive to New Dealer, 382-383.
weekly on radio and published a *Consumer’s Guide* to inform consumers of excessive price increases.\textsuperscript{116}

Howe objected to the principle of the planning that stood at the very heart of the department that employed him: “The main underlying purpose of trade agreements” he contended “is to legalize monopoly in industry in return for prospective gains to the farm producer and consumer.” His position on this had not evolved: “I know fully the difficulties, personally I should say impossibilities of regulation of monopolies. I have never known it to succeed.”\textsuperscript{117}

Howe never publically lost faith, but was deeply perturbed by the stymieing of his cause. Even in 1935, a time that would appear to most observers as the zenith of reformist sentiment, Baker confided in a friend that Howe “is often beguiled by beautiful notions, for which the world should be ready but is not, and he is often rather downcast because his fellowmen just will not do wise and beautiful things!”\textsuperscript{118} To Steffens, Howe expressed the hope that there was something deeper behind Roosevelt: “he must have a philosophy and it goes pretty far. But wise man that he is, he only exposes a bit of it at a time.”\textsuperscript{119} It is not clear that much held Howe to the administration other than this hope that it would eventually move further in his direction. Certainly that was the case with other single-taxers.

In 1935 Howe was fired, along with a slate of old-time progressives in the AAA. At a press conference, Secretary of Agriculture Wallace denied that politics played a role, but

\textsuperscript{116} Alger Hiss expressed much the same view of Howe’s distressing position “His progressive credentials were greatly important and he could be counted on to support liberal views. But there was little he could do, I suspect, to aid consumers. Our job was to raise farm prices.” Miller, *From Progressive to New Dealer*, 413.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 388.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 422.
\textsuperscript{119} Frederic C. Howe to Lincoln Steffens, July 1938, Steffens Papers.
inquisitive reporters were inclined to believe that Howe had been sacked because of his agitation for lower milk prices.\textsuperscript{120}

Howe’s firing was followed by an appointment of wider import, though his new position conveniently removed him from the field of domestic politics. Presumably this solution balanced the popular respect for the man with a consciousness of the friction that his ideas produced. Upon the request of President Manuel Quezon, Howe was invited in 1937 to travel to the Philippines and design a system of land reform. The report he produced recommended land taxation and the formation of agricultural colonies that would facilitate an equal subdivision of land. He found an ally in the U.S. field marshal stationed in the Philippines, Douglas MacArthur. Though it might seem like an unlikely alliance, MacArthur’s most famous action as Governor of Japan after World War II was an ambitious program of land reform.\textsuperscript{121}

George Peabody was personally closer to F.D.R. than any other single-taxer, but even his friendship was rooted in exaggerated hopes about the President’s willingness to act decisively on the issue of land. Peabody had introduced Roosevelt to the Warm Springs, GA estate that Roosevelt converted into a treatment center for polio. Peabody used this relationship when Roosevelt was elected president. He sent a pamphlet on the British Labor program, which he described as rooted in the “principles of Henry George;” accounts of land-taxers that had proceeded George; and articles he authored on the role of Resettlement Administration in fighting “land monopoly.”\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{120} Ed. Michael Vincent Namorato, \textit{The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell} (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 204.


\textsuperscript{122} George Peabody to FDR April 3, 1933, & George Peabody to FDR, Feb. 20, 1934,, \textit{The Saratogian} July 18, 1936, box 660, PPF, Roosevelt Library.
As much as Peabody was interested in what Roosevelt might do about land, he was largely indifferent or hostile to what Roosevelt had accomplished in other areas. He related an anecdote about a domestic servant who quit his job to secure assistance from the Civil Works Administration, complained that rates of pay varied arbitrarily from one relief agency to another, and suggested that, under General Johnson’s administration, the NRA favored big business.\textsuperscript{123} He was willing to cede to Roosevelt’s policy of planning for the present, but believed that it ultimately portended a fascist state run by big business:

It is not illogical for the financial powers that have controlled heretofore in such amazing fashion, through high tariff and Eminent Domain … to believe that President Roosevelt is now pointing the way for them to have a Democratic Fascism. If they shall continue to hold the control of the billions invested in railroad and the utilities, they can patiently wait for 1940 when they can utilize a modification of the N. R. A., if still buttressed by control of monopolies, to give them a cinch on government that is way beyond anything in our past history.\textsuperscript{124}

Ultimately, Peabody was as concerned about planning as any of his single-tax compatriots.

On his 85\textsuperscript{th} birthday, perhaps cognizant of the fact that his time was running out, Peabody encouraged FDR to “re-read” \textit{Progress and Poverty} and to “build deep and strong foundations.” Otherwise Roosevelt’s administration become like that of Theodore Roosevelt which “left no record for history.”\textsuperscript{125} Apparently, as late as 1936, Peabody believed FDR might make some progress toward the single tax, likely because of the President’s famous ability to seem sympathetic to nearly anyone he spoke to. With his apparent disdain for most of the New Deal, it is probable he would not have otherwise remained on such good terms with Roosevelt.

While Georgists were no longer so prominent, their opposition to planning could be especially important. That is because they were identified with progressivism and thus struck at

\textsuperscript{123} George Peabody to J. H. Dillard, March 5, 1934, George Peabody to FDR, Feb. 12, 1934, box 660, PPF.
\textsuperscript{124} George Peabody to Eastman, June 27, 1934, box 660, PPF.
\textsuperscript{125} George Peabody to FDR July 27, 1936, box 660, PPF.
the liberal base of the New Deal. One of the hardest blows incurred by the NRA came from Clarence Darrow. To manage mounting criticism against his flagship program, Roosevelt created an independent investigative commission: the National Recovery Review Board. On March 7, 1934, Clarence Darrow, presumed to be friendly, was appointed to chair the Review Board. Although Darrow had departed somewhat from Georgist principles, he never lost faith that fee simple land ownership was the central axis of economic inequality or that the role of government was to promote competitive, small enterprise without recourse to regulation. He produced a report that, according to the Brookings Institute, was “of very great importance” in rallying opposition to the NRA.126

Darrow’s report was so scathing that Roosevelt refused to release it, but the rebellious lawyer leaked it to the press, sparking a public controversy. Darrow concluded that its regulations were designed by major industrial interests to perpetuate monopoly. “There is no hope,” Darrow concluded “for the small businessman or for complete recovery in America in enforced restriction upon production for the purpose of maintaining higher prices.” Instead, Darrow argued for the selective socialization of natural resources, concluding that “the hope for the America people, including the small businessman … lies in the planned use of America’s resources following socialization.”127 These conclusions, together with Roosevelt’s apparent efforts to suppress the report, constituted a casus belli for congressional opponents of planning. Senate Resolution 79 established a congressional investigation into the Review Board and the NRA. Darrow was called before Congress to testify.

127 “Special and Supplementary Report to the President by Clarence Darrow and William Thompson of the National Recovery Review Board.” President’s Official File 466, box 22, Roosevelt Papers.
At the same time, one of the most prominent organizations of the Progressive Era, now largely dominated by old single-taxers, used the report as justification to challenge the NRA. Benjamin C. Marsh, acting as executive secretary of the People’s Lobby, wrote Roosevelt to plead with him to continue the investigation of the Review Board. Ultimately, The People’s Lobby, with John Dewey as President and a council of old-timer Georgists like Charles Ingersoll, F.C. Leubuscher, Jackson Ralston, and William U’Ren, came out publically in favor of the report’s conclusions.\footnote{Benjamin Marsh to FDR, May 21, 1934, President’s Official File 466, box 22, Roosevelt Papers. New York Times May 23, 1934.}

This antipathy to the liberalism of the New Deal only grew with time. George Creel remained influential because of his role in the operation of the NRA on the West Coast, but he was ironically never really able to reconcile himself to the principle of federal regulation. Creel was appointed Chair of District Recovery Board and helped establish the NRA on the West Coast. Following the precedents set by the Committee on Public Information, Creel sent around speakers and organized parades publicizing the NRA so that his home of San Francisco led the country in enrollment.

Creel was disgruntled, however, to find that the national administration refused to allow exemptions he had written for small shopkeepers.\footnote{“Creel Names Committee to Aid Code Worker,” SF Chronicle, Oversized 10, Creel Papers. SF Leads Big Cities in Drive for NRA Eagle.} He wrote Secretary of Commerce Daniel Roper to complain that the NRA did nothing to “guard against monopolistic practices.” He complained of “over-centralization” and instances “where pacific Coast industries have not even been consulted or considered” in the design of codes.\footnote{George Creel to Daniel Roper, Sept. 5, 1933, box 4, Creel Papers.} A couple of weeks later on September 23rd, he sent Roosevelt his resignation with the observation that California was too far from
Washington to be subject to national administration. A host of business and labor groups, including The California Manufacturers Association, Board of Supervisors of San Francisco, San Francisco Labor Council, The Boat Builders Association, and California The State Chamber of Commerce, wired the President asking that Creel be granted the autonomy necessary to keep him in the position. Under pressure the administration refused to accept Creel’s resignation and promised to address some of his concerns.

Creel subsequently cultivated the appearance of independence so that his district was sometimes referred to as the “little NRA.” He challenged decisions made by the AAA which he perceived as injurious to California canaries. Sometimes he even ventured to question the logic of economic planning. To an audience at the International House in Berkeley, Creel defended the thrust of the NRA’s work, but admitted “it stands proved already that industry has gone code crazy. Of the six hundred codes either adopted or in the process of adoption, at least three hundred have no excuse whatsoever.”

Ostensibly Creel was a stalwart supporter of the New Deal, but he hid a growing discontent with the President. At a closed meeting in 1936, Creel “turn[ed] state’s evidence” and confided that he believed the President refused to listen to contrary views and that, as an heir to a great family fortune, he did not understand poverty. Because poverty was an abstraction for Roosevelt, he turned for solutions to “theorists” without a pragmatic grasp of the subject. By 1942, Creel had worked up the courage to publically declare his ambivalence that Roosevelt’s

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131 George Creel to Roosevelt, Sept. 23rd 1933, box 4, Creel Papers.
133 “Creel Decides to Keep Post as NRA Administrator,” San Francisco Chronicle, Oct. 12, 1933.
134 “Creel Takes up Peach Row,” Oversized 10, Creel Papers.
135 Speech at the Conference on Government: International House, Berkeley, March 28 1934, box 5, Creel Papers
136 Speech at Trent Club, New York, Feb. 11, 1936, box 5, Creel Papers.
“greatness is no less obvious than are his weaknesses.”137 Beginning in the same year, he founded a series of campaign organizations representing “dissident democrats,” that worked to elect Republicans candidates in California like Earl Warren, William Knowland, and Richard Nixon.138

The divide between Creel and the Democratic Party expanded into a chasm when Harry Truman succeeded Roosevelt as President. Truman began his political career as an agent of the same Kansas City Prendergast political machine that Creel had fought in his youth.139 This solidified the suspicion that New Deal liberalism had devolved into a nationwide permutation of the old machine system wherein voters were gifted thanksgiving turkeys with the presumption that friendly votes would be forthcoming. “What started out as a determination to take some of the terrors out of life by the provision of social security” wrote Creel “has degenerated into vote buying on an ever-ascending scale.”140 He reached out to Virginia Senator Harry Byrd to build a national organization of conservative democrats and was aghast when Dwight Eisenhower, intolerably left-wing according to Creel, was nominated for the Presidency by the Republican Party.

Creel, however, became close to Eisenhower’s more conservative Vice President, Richard Nixon. The two became both friends and political associates; Nixon asked Creel for speechwriting help and advice about how to spin the accusation that he had taken bribes.141 Still, Creel gave no credence to the notion that he had undergone a transformation. He

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139 George Creel, Rebel at Large, 353-355.
140 George Creel to Henry, Feb. 26th, 1953, box 4, Creel Papers.
141 “... I should like to have your ide on the train so that I can have the benefit of your suggestions as to how we should attack our major pr9blems from bow until Election Day.” Nixon to Creel August 30, 1952, box 4, Creel Papers. Richard Nixon to George Creel, Nov. 28, 1952, Creel to Nixon, Dec. 23, 1952, Richard Nixon to George Creel, Sept. 27, 1952, box 4, Creel papers. Richard Nixon to George Creel, Dec. 20, 1952, box 4, Creel Papers.
never ceased to revel in his Progressive Era victories or to contend that he had not left the Democratic Party but that the party had left him. He fondly remembered that “the clarity and force of Henry George was heaven,” bemoaning that “if anybody … had told me that the day would come when the single-tax movement could be housed in a telephone booth, I would have hooted.”\(^\text{142}\)

Though initially one of Roosevelt’s closest advisers, Raymond Moley split with the President after he harangued “economic royalists” at the 1936 speech at the Democrat National Convention. Moley was particularly concerned with the implications of the heavily progressive income tax Roosevelt proposed in that speech. Moley saw it as the inauguration of class politics and so he, according to historian Frank Friedel, “like most of his generation of Ohio reformers intellectually rooted in the doctrines of Tom Johnson and Henry George, moved permanently into emphatic opposition.”\(^\text{143}\)

Moley, in breaking with the President, was not entirely departing from his earlier convictions. He became a stoutly conservative commentator. He contributed to the Freeman and was one of the first writers that National Review solicited for contributions, but was principally occupied with his work for Newsweek.\(^\text{144}\) As late as the 1950’s though, the lynchpin of his conservatism was the old progressive faith that “it is the task of statesmanship… to eradicate special privileges.” But Moley now saw in the welfare state a new set of privileged interests, “who would threaten the integrity and safety of the state” by demanding that politicians enact an escalating program of redistribution. The street car monopolists had been supplanted by

\(^{142}\) Creel, Rebel at Large, 47. In breaking with the Democratic Party, Creel believed that he was demanding “a return to the first principles as laid down by Jefferson, Jackson, and Woodrow Wilson.” George Creel to Jesse, Jan. 25, 1952, box 4, Creel Papers.


\(^{144}\) Suzanna La Follette to Raymond Moley, March 26, 1954, box 30, Moley Papers.
“pensioners with a statutory or constitutional first claim on specific tax receipts, labor leaders with legal exemptions not accorded to management, political bosses operating under election laws of their own fashioning.”  

Moley gradually became associated with the Republican Party, writing speeches for Eisenhower and Thomas Dewey while offering insights from his experiences during the 1932 election to the presidential campaigns of Eisenhower, Nixon, and Goldwater. He took a special interest in coaxing Nixon back into politics after he lost the California gubernatorial race in 1962.

Moley demonstrated more direct and orthodox interest in Henry George after joining the conservative movement than he had at the height of career with Roosevelt. In the 1960s, he spoke frequently to the Henry George School and served as director of The Lincoln Foundation, which, founded by a disciple of George, sponsored academic research on land value taxation. At a presentation to the Henry George School in the 1950s, he explained that he had broken with Roosevelt after his DNC speech because it was about “class against class, and not unity—not the forgotten man. That was when I walked out and never went back. Henry George rises above all of this recent disunity.”

In *How to Keep Our Liberty*, Moley laid out a conservative rubric for revenue: tax burdens should be ascertained by voluntary consumption, rather than ability to pay; they should be direct, rather than covert; and they should be universally felt, rather than targeted at the wealthy. If the state was funded through means burdensome to all citizens, its growth

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would naturally be restrained to healthy levels. Moley singled out property taxes as giving “the citizen a more or less reliable gauge of what he was paying for government.”  

Moley turned against the principle of ability to pay in taxation, which seemed to him to represent class warfare and back to the principle of “Justice.” George had defined Justice as “the law of health and symmetry”—symmetry implying reciprocity. While he had believed that his remedy would benefit the poor, George had argued that all should pay not in proportion to what they could, but in proportion to what they consumed of the nation’s surface. As liberalism came to be defined by the principle of ability to pay, this was an essentially conservative proposition.

But the curious combination of socialism and capitalism that George had promulgated was no more at home in the new conservatism as it was in the new liberalism. In 1937, Moley helped found The Tax Foundation, an anti-tax think tank on whose Board of Trustees he was a permanent member. In 1958, surrounded by corporate executives, he delivered a speech to the group and made an oblique reference to Henry George:

It is fantastic but true that no subject is so neglected in our universities, our great foundations and in our trade associations as the scientific study of taxation… Not too long ago I asked a clerk in a bookstore … by the University of Minnesota for a book on a great economist who was known all over the world 50 years ago. The clerk said that he was an economics major in the university but had never heard of the man. He added: “We’re all Keynesians up here.”

148 Raymond Moley, How to Keep Our Liberty (Knopf: New York, 1952), 229-230. The conference report of Moley with Henry George News echoes this narrative: “Raymond Moley, Contributing Editor of Newsweek magazine, spoke at a luncheon meeting. He mentioned the fact that he had lived in Cleveland when Tom Johnson was mayor and thus was exposed in his early life to Henry George’s ideas. However, his present belief in land value taxation has been developed from his observations of government in recent years. He pointed out that we are facing the nation-wide problem of attempting to check the growth of centralized government and returning some of the responsibilities that have been lost by the local community and the states. The burden of providing services which are either essential or expected at the local level is extremely severe. Therefore, it is necessary, unless we are to become entirely dependent upon the Federal income tax, to exact more revenue from the property tax. A major factor in this is to tax land more heavily and improvements less.” “Henry George Address,” August 31, 1964, box 142, Moley Papers.

149 Henry George, Progress and Poverty, 491.

150 Raymond Moley “Citizen Action and Government Economy,” Tax Foundation Address, box 139, Moley Papers.
Tellingly, even as he bemoaned his disappearance from popular thought, Moley never mentioned George by name. A prolific writer, Moley’s omission was clearly intentional. The subject of the speech was the income tax; Moley apparently did not see it as the venue to venture his budding interest in a reformed property tax. There was no longer any really comfortable place on the political spectrum for the single tax.
Conclusion

The strange story of the single tax begins with a labor party campaign in 1886 that Karl Marx’s daughter supported and fades away with George’s closest intellectual descendants rallying around Richard Nixon. In this respect, it speaks to both the potential and limitations of classical liberalism as a doctrine of reform. When meritocracy, competition, or democracy were at stake, it justified the abolition of entire classes of property from human chattel to land and utilities. But the New Deal’s price regulations, moderate efforts to redistribute wealth, or codification of special legal status for organized workers, were all anathema to single-taxers.

At its root, the single tax was about facilitating unhindered economic mobility. The goal was to destroy a species of property that grew without the effort of the owner, impoverishing those who worked hard but did not inherit the expensive urban properties that would allow them to live rent free. Rent impinged on labor, but so too did the New Deal. Whether through taxes or regulation, it seemed to sacrifice a perceived right to keep what one had produced in favor of economic security.¹

The role of Henry George in the transformation of liberalism is perhaps embodied in the story of “the forgotten man.” In 1932, Raymond Moley wrote a speech for F.D.R.’s campaign in which he employed the term to reach out to those who he argued had been forgotten by the federal government during the Great Depression. It was a powerful device that made the speech Roosevelt’s most important during that election cycle. However, it had seemingly incongruous roots. The phrase was coined in 1883 by William Graham Sumner. A classical liberal, Sumner had used the term to refer to a middle class deprived of their fair market returns by

philanthropists and social reformers. By Sumner’s account, the forgotten man was precisely those who would be injured by government programs like those of the New Deal.

The history of the phrase, however, has a rational midpoint in Newton D. Baker, who had learned from George that these workers would be deprived of their fair market returns precisely if the government did not assume key public functions. In 1926, Baker used the term in a well-read article on the decline of progressivism. He wrote that:

Liberalism is a state of mind and not a creed. A liberal uses his fellow men for their benefit and not for his own. He judges political purposes by their effect on the common good and he has in his mind’s eye, as the ultimate object of his concern, ‘the forgotten man,’ remote, obscure and inaudible in high places. Liberalism of this quality is imperishable and it has many brave servants for the American people.²

Baker intentionally referenced Sumner’s “forgotten man” to establish the longevity of the liberal tradition, even as he reconfigured it as a doctrine of reform. Moley would build on this, but he would also do so in ways incompatible with Baker’s philosophy. Baker—like the movement to which he belonged—was a waypoint, ultimately lost in translation during the transition of liberalism.

The single tax never quiet died. Today it lives on in institutions like the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and the Henry George Schools. Single-taxers failed, however, to retain their place in mainstream discourse by moving to the right. When interviewed by C-Span in 2000, William Buckley, whose National Review had become the most important conservative journal in the nation, confirmed that he had always believed in the single tax. He acknowledged his indebtedness to Albert Jay Nock, but he claimed to have received too many objections from his conservative colleagues to ever push the point.³

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² “Where are the Pre-War Radicals?” Survey Geographic, February 1926, 556.
Though the conservative movement in general might not have been particularly hospitable, some remnant of support survived where Nock’s influence was greatest: libertarianism. Frank Chodorov carried on Nock’s legacy for many years. Even today, pieces published by the libertarian think tank, The Cato Institute, cite the single tax as a possible foundation for a libertarian social safety net or refer to George as “one of the greatest economists and social philosophers of the past two centuries.” Some libertarians trace their history back through Nock and see in George a sort of founding father. Libertarian.org concludes its treatment of Henry George with the summary “Libertarians ought to treat George as an important piece of our heritage, exploring the application of his work to today’s issues.” Though a fascinating testament to the way George has appealed to diverse audiences, such sentiment manifests only on the fringe of the most intellectual sectors of a large, mass movement.

Long forgotten, Henry George has returned to public discourse in recent years. The Canadian MP Chrystia Freeland argues that we should look back to him as a model because “he addressed the obvious inequality of 19th century American capitalism without disavowing capitalism itself.” Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz has argued that we should reconsider George because “land does not disappear when it is taxed.” Taxes are ostensibly detrimental to

the extent that they discourage whatever species of exchange they are imposed upon, but land exists in fixed quantities and so a tax on it hypothetically has little negative impact (conceivably even some positive influence) on economic growth. This makes it apt for a global economic system wherein international competition has undermined the stability of public revenue streams. It seems highly improbable that even the best lawyers could devise a means to hide a Manhattan block in a Swiss bank.

The single tax has always risen and fallen with the city, grown with the backlash to urban rents. Thus it has been discussed as a solution to San Francisco’s modern rent problems by the New York Times and Matthew Yglesias of Slate. In New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio has called for a tax on unused land similar to what George once suggested. In 2015, Peter Orszag, former director of the Office of Management and Budget under President Obama, came out in favor of a land value tax as a way to fight economic inequality. The Economist called for land value taxation alongside an end to restrictions on building. That magazine estimated that “lifting the barriers to urban growth in America could raise the country’s GDP by between 6.5% and 13.5%.”

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These statements have followed upon important research suggesting the distributional impact of land. The young economist Matthew Rognlie has shown that, when depreciation is considered, virtually all of the increase in wealth disparity in recent years has been from the housing sector.\textsuperscript{12} This is a revelation that seems to reinforce George’s understanding of land’s impact on distribution, particularly his observation that: “Land is permanent and fixed in quantity…. But capital is an ephemeral production, dying from its birth, and therefore there is not the same compulsion to take existing capital as there is to take existing land.”\textsuperscript{13}

Though Henry George often comes up in modern discussions of land value taxation, its contemporary advocates—aside from a small group of true believers that has remained remarkably unchanged over the years – rarely share much in common with him. Few advocate that it as the only tax or argue that the state should confiscate all rent. Its supporters do not envision it as part of a broader social agenda or orienting philosophy. Ironically they are typically professional economists who point to fairly abstract points regarding economic efficiency and distribution. That they have not gained much traction outside of this sphere should make sense in light of the history of the single tax movement. The behavioral patterns of rent-seeking along with the general instability and unpopularity of tax regimes make it a difficult policy to put over and harder to keep there. That Georgism obtained the influence it did is largely attributable to the almost messianic appeal it had among a group that saw it as a comprehensive worldview and dedicated their life to it.


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But there is still a great deal we can learn from George and his movement. Several writers have drawn comparisons between George and the modern economist Thomas Piketty. Like *Progress and Poverty*, Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* became an instant bestseller by exposing a growing economic divide. It even called for a shift from the income tax to wealth taxes—taxes on property not altogether dissimilar from George proposed. But there the comparison ends. *Progress and Poverty* became something like a religious text for a cadre of people who for decades dedicated their lives to realizing its dream. It made land nationalization a viable and more or less mainstream cause in a conservative nation of property owners. People who bought *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, though it was a clear and well-written book, rarely finished it. *Progress and Poverty* helped shape American history. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* probably will not.

What distinguishes George from so many modern advocates of reform is his ability to weave into his economics complex, layered appeals to values. He did not speak in strictly quantitative terms about efficient policies nor did he try to impose his own values. He spoke to the fixed verities of the reading public—even those he did not believe in. He told people that their religion, their liberty, and the democratic institutions of their nation were intertwined with his idea, and he made that idea a part of their inherited faiths. The introduction of the concept of socially created value into classical liberalism was a masterful example of reinterpreting the principles of an established faith to make a case nearly antithetical to its original intent. It is an example then, worth the study of anyone eager to reach across an ideological divide. But, more particularly, George offers an extensive tool kit for people who argue for land value taxation.

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or—for that matter—any system of thought which contends that individuals do not have an
unfettered right to dispose of the earth as they please.
Appendix A

In “Seeing the Cat,” I argue that many contemporaries put the single tax very near the center of progressivism but not because of an exaggerated sense of its popular appeal. Instead these assessments often reflected the more nuanced factors that I argue made single-taxers the vanguard of progressivism reform. I have included a variety of these quotes, with italics added to emphasize the factors that I point to. These include: a religious zeal that inspired concerted, devoted activism; a tendency to question established institutions; and access to monetary and professional resources. Collectively, these raise questions about the extent to which progressive reform was initiated—if not executed—by moderate experts. Instead they point to the argument, articulated by thinkers like C. Wright Mills, that ideologically structured dissent is essential for beginning the process of rethinking and reforming established institutions.¹

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“Political action had no appeal for me, but I appreciated the movement [of 1886] as a demonstration of protest…. It proved a sort of vestibule school for many who later undertook practical work for human benefit. Many leaders in the constructive work of the following years were recruits of the Henry George campaign.”

Samuel Gompers: President of the American Federation of Labor (1886-1894 and 1896-1924).²

“It is wonderful how many of the men who are working for political reform got their inspiration from Henry George. ‘I am for men,’ George said, and he made men. No matter what the world may decide to do about his single tax, some day it will have to acknowledge that Henry George brought into the service of man more men of more different kinds than any other man of his day.”

Lincoln Steffens, Muckraker.³

“The single taxers…are as a rule members of our dominant middle class. Moreover, their strength is especially great in that wing of the middle class which is active in molding public opinion, the ‘intellectuals,’ to borrow an excellent descriptive term from Russian politics. Among the single taxers are to be found writers and educators, members of the legal and medical

² Samuel Gompers, Seventy Years of Life and Labor (New York: 1925) I, 313
professions, social workers and ministers of the gospel. *It is this fact of an exceptionally influential personnel that chiefly lends political importance to the movement.*”

Arthur Young, Contemporary Academic.⁵

“It has appeared from the foregoing discussions that the American single tax movement has not had large accomplishments either in the way of legislation secured or number of adherents gained for its essential principles…. The Henry George movement has been to American economic thought in large part what socialism has been to economic thought in Europe. *It has been a stimulating challenge, making necessary a rigorous re-examination of currently accepted ideas. It was a force operating to shake them out of their rut, to broaden the field of interest, and to make clearer to all the vital importance of economic problems.* The result of the challenge of *Progress and Poverty* has not been the general acceptance of Henry George’s system of economic thought. But the fact that economic thought has been broader and deeper in the years since 1880 than in the century preceding is due in no small degree to the publication of *Progress and Poverty.*”

Arthur Young, Contemporary Academic.⁵

“As a rule, they are an active class, and are successful in forming sentiment.”

John Altgeld, Governor of Illinois 1893-97.⁶

“Many of the implications of the single tax which were startling in Henry George’s day have become commonplace parts of our later thinking and have modified economic doctrines which seemed final before they came into contact with the philosophy which Henry George preached.”

Newton Baker, Mayor of Cleveland (1912-1916), Secretary of War (1916-1921), Presidential Candidate (1932).⁷

“Roosevelt and James and Henry George were the three greatest forces of the last forty years.”

Franklin K. Lane, Secretary of the Interior (1913-1920).⁸

⁴ Atlantic Monthly, January 1917, 27.
⁶ John Altgeld to William Jennings Bryan Sep 20 1897, box 20, Bryan Papers.
“Behind this movement there were three American theorists of the nineteenth century, Henry George, Henry Demarest Lloyd and Edward Bellamy…. Henry George, however, did capture the imagination of an impressive group. [Progress and Poverty] became the bible of an able and vociferous lot of men: Joseph Fels, the millionaire manufacturer of Fels Naptha soap; Tom Johnson, the traction monopolist who became an enemy of the very process by which he had amassed his own fortune; Peter Witt, the Populist who came under the spell of Johnson; Brand Whitlock, humanitarian and artist; U’Ren, the shy Cornishman of Oregon, and many others. Out of it the Single Tax movement grew to dignified proportions in the stirring years before the World War.”

John Chamberlain, Popular Historian.  

“...I learned of this meeting only this morning, but I was glad to add another meeting to the already crowded programme for to-day because I appreciate the activity and the zeal which have been manifested by those who belong to your organization throughout the United States. You can always tell a single taxer, and whether you believe him or not you are bound to admit the single taxer believes in himself and the theory that he advocates…. When you compare the life of the man who devotes himself to the uplifting of his fellows… when you compare the life of such a man with the life of a man who simply tries to see how much money he can make in this world without being very careful about the means of making it— I say when you compare the lives of such men you can see how a great purpose will ennoble, and how a selfish purpose will belittle human effort.

William Jennings Bryan, Delivered to the Henry George, Bryan, and Stevenson Campaign Club, Chicago, 1900.

“Here let me say there is one remarkable peculiarity about the Singletaxers which has always struck me much. The doctrine is held with such fervor, it is believed to be potent with so much power in removing human inequities, that it creates among all its adherents a curious kind of devotion and of fraternity which amounts to a new religious doctrine. All barriers of race and creed fall down; the Orange Singletaxer, if such there be, would grasp the hand of the Catholic Nationalist Singletaxer with more sense of fraternity than either would approach his co-religionist who holds conservative views on the land question. Henry George, in fact, has founded not merely a new school of economical thought but almost a new Christian communion.

T. P. O’Conner, M. P.

“My meeting with Henry George was in the spirit only; but I think it was as complete and intimate as it could have been had we met in the flesh. I was a young man, teaching school and

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10 Public, Nov 10, 1900, 493.
11 Chicago Tribune, August 25, 1912.
studying law. I had lost all my real hope of any redemptive force in society which could abolish poverty and give all men equal chances according to their ability, and assure even the most poverty-stricken in efficiency a certainty of necessaries of life, given the possession of industry. In other words, I had adopted the gospel of economic gloom.”

“The reading of Progress and Poverty and Poverty had a marvelous effect upon me, I passed through a phase somewhat like that described in the old-fashioned revivals as experiencing religion; only my exaltation was based on a hope founded on logic. It changed my whole life. It was a barrier to advancement to the best places in my profession of the law, but it made my life richer in every other respect.”

“For forty years I have been searching for an answer to the social message of Henry George. The economic system George laid before the world has never been refuted, and is irrefutable.”

“Moreover, in spite of the fact that the first fervor of the 80’s has cooled, the system must win eventually if civilization is to be saved. Socialism of the governmental sort is a dream as wild as it would be for a man to seek to control all his vital processes by his brain. The involuntary nervous system of society must control its activities in the main and these could work under the single tax. We should obtain reform without revolution. It is this high faith in the slow perfectibility of society to the end that we shall win eternal social life, and not come to one of the smashes of civilization with the wrecks of which history is strewn: that I owe to Henry George.”

Herbert Quick, Mayor of Sioux City and Chairman of the Federal Farm Loan Board.12

12 “Extracts from the Henry George We Knew,” James Barry Papers, Box 1.
Note on Sources

Chance played an important role in this dissertation. I proved to be tremendously lucky in that the majority of the manuscript collections of Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet members’ found their way to the Library of Congress. By happenstance I found myself residing a short subway ride away from the private papers of most of the individuals who defined my narrative. Some of these papers, like those of Newton Baker, were perhaps inexplicably underused, but none were untouched. However, I had an especially long period to interact with all them. This proved invaluable.

It wouldn’t have made sense, however, to study these papers together without the paradigm of Georgism to bring them together. Thus these papers developed new significance in the light of some sources which have gone almost entirely unused. Most notable among these was The Public. The Posts’ paper was intended, in part, as a running narrative of the single tax movement. With this context, the aforementioned manuscripts developed a new significance. It became easier to see how papers from the Wilson Administration fit into the larger story of this dissertation. Also important in this regard were the works of Henry George himself. In order to comprehend the movement it was important to understand the philosophy that it represented. Hopefully this study has demonstrated that George’s writings should be required readings for anyone interested in the “Age of Reform.” Unfortunately, they have not been. This, however, meant that that with a decent comprehension of George’s thought I was able to understand the movement differently than my predecessors.
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