

The Civic Revival in Ohio*

By ROBERT H. BREMNER

I

IN THE YEAR 1897 the people of Toledo, Ohio, chose as their mayor Samuel M. Jones. He was a manufacturer of oil well appliances who in the middle of life had begun to read and wonder about the ethical and economic problems of human existence. His conduct embarrassed some of his fellow townsmen because both in public and private life he was willing to translate the abstractions of Christian philosophy into homely practice.

Jones' most marked personal characteristics were an almost overpowering feeling of kinship with the rest of humanity and a direct, unsophisticated habit of mind which made it possible for him to infuse commonplace events with a spiritual significance. It did not seem incongruous to him that his belief in the brotherhood of man and the eight hour day should be voiced in the same poem nor that in another poem he should treat the right to work as a corollary of the Golden Rule.

Jones was more fortunate than many lovers of humanity for, while he necessarily made many political enemies and was continually reviled as a humbug and a hypocrite, he nevertheless convinced the mass of Toledoans of his sincerity. They responded loyally in every crisis, re-electing him mayor in 1899, 1901 and 1903, each time against the opposition of the major and minor political organizations, the preachers, the reformers, the business associations, the newspapers, and the orthodox Socialists.

Jones died in 1904. A year later one of his disciples, Brand Whitlock, succeeded to the mayoralty and retained that office until 1913. Whitlock was a young attorney and novelist who was to achieve international recognition as the American Minister to Belgium during the first World War. His friendship with Jones left a deep impress on his life, but even before coming under the Mayor's influence, Whitlock had been exposed to a variety of social environments which in themselves were enough to produce an unusual type of politician.

He had grown up in Methodist parsonages in a succession of small towns in Northern Ohio; he had been a newspaper reporter in Chicago

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during one of the more flamboyant periods of that city's history; later he had known and admired John Peter Altgeld and had held a political job during the latter's term as Governor of Illinois.

Long before he became mayor, he had begun to feel a distaste for politics. Though a lawyer, or perhaps because of it, he had acquired a distrust for statutes. He was convinced that in every case, mercy was a more rational ideal than justice. By the time of his first election he had published two novels and was working on a third. Already he had begun to want to give up everything else and devote himself seriously to a literary career.

While Jones and Whitlock were revolutionizing the theory and practice of politics in Toledo, a still more commanding figure rose to dominate the political life of the neighboring city of Cleveland. Tom L. Johnson, mayor of Cleveland from 1901 to 1909, was the son of a former slave owner. Wealthy before he was out of his twenties, Johnson was on the road to becoming a millionaire when his interest was dramatically diverted from money-making to the social philosophy of Henry George.

Though himself a successful street railway operator, Johnson never lost an opportunity to point out the virtues of public ownership of public utilities. Similarly, although at one time prominently identified with an important steel enterprise, he was a vociferous free trader. By 1901 he had divested himself of all his business holdings and henceforth directed his energies exclusively to politics.

As Mayor of Cleveland, he led the citizens of that city in one of the twentieth century's most interesting experiments in democracy. The qualities of resourcefulness and leadership which he displayed in his fight to build what he called "a city on a hill" entitles him to rank as one of the outstanding statesmen of the last fifty years.

Closely identified with Johnson in his work in Cleveland were Newton D. Baker and Frederic C. Howe. The former was a brilliant attorney who served as City Solicitor under Johnson and was elected mayor after Johnson's death. Like Whitlock, he won national prominence during the administration of Woodrow Wilson. Howe was a serious young reformer who was converted into a radical by association with Johnson. His career is the best documented illustration we have of the evolution of an Eastern intellectual liberal, schooled in civil service and tariff reform, into a middle-western democrat.

II

THE POLITICAL MOVEMENT evoked by the ideas and personalities of these men and the issues which they brought before the people of their respective

cities has been called the "Civic Revival." It was so named because it represents the reawakening of faith in cities as positive agents of civilization. Specifically it marks a revival of hope in the possibility of achieving democracy in an urban environment after a long period in which the problems wrought by city and industrial growth had seemed so complex that many Americans despaired of a democratic solution to them. Thomas Jefferson was but one of a succession of philosophers and statesmen who looked upon democracy as the peculiar property of an agrarian people.

The rising interest in civic affairs in the early Nineteen Hundreds was not confined to the cities of Cleveland and Toledo nor even to the State of Ohio. Indeed this period is known as an era of municipal reform. The "Civic Revival," however, was not a typical municipal reform movement. Unlike so many other contemporary movements, the Civic Revival was not a short-lived uprising of the people of the two cities against notoriously corrupt administrations. The aim of its leaders was not to "throw the rascals out" by electing the other party to office. Certainly it was not an attempt by good government groups to give the cities involved a businessman's government. While the movement introduced many reforms which made the politics of the two cities cleaner and the administration of their affairs more efficient, its main impulse was not toward reform. From a political standpoint the Civic Revival was not primarily an effort to secure "good government" but rather one to regain self-government.

For this reason, to understand "The Civic Revival in Ohio" one must understand the political personalities, issues, philosophy, and techniques of the movement. But the leaders of the Civic Revival were interested in such political measures as municipal home rule, the destruction of party rule, and the democratization of state and local government through the use of direct legislation, not as ends in themselves, but only as means by which a definite social program could be realized. As it happened the Civic Revivalists never won the complete political control over all the agencies of government which was a prerequisite to putting their program into effect. Consequently their movement is an example of conflict rather than achievement. This story aims to show, in as concrete a way as possible, what the Civic Revivalists were fighting for, what they fought against, and how the fight was carried on.

III

THE CIVIC REVIVAL occurred during the period of American history which is known as the Progressive Era. Although the period was charac-

terized by a sensible awareness of the need for improving the political methods of democracy, it was a time when the basic premises of American political philosophy were accepted with more enthusiasm and less questioning than ever before or, perhaps, since. Because the leaders of the Civic Revival believed so thoroughly in the promise of America's future and were so confident of the ability of the individual average man to determine his own economic and political destiny, the writer's original intention was to present the Civic Revival as the urban phase of the national Progressive Movement. As his research progressed, however, he became more and more impressed by the features which distinguished the Cleveland and Toledo movements from the numerous other local, state and national reform and trust-busting activities which were taking place at the same time. He began to believe that in this particular instance it was the features which made the movement unique instead of typical that made it worth study. Consequently the elements deserve emphasis which separated the Civic Revival from the other progressive movements of the time.

The majority of the other uplift movements occurring simultaneously with the Civic Revival were political manifestations of the reform or (as one of the leaders of the Civic Revival phrased it) the "evangelical" psychology. Their aim, reduced to its lowest common denominator, was simply to make people be good. Their program was to induce upright men to unite into a militant political force, secure the passage of good laws, enforce them rigidly, and put the bad people (*i.e.* the law breakers) into jail. The Civic Revival was also an attempt to improve men's characters but unlike most of the reform movements contemporary with it, it was animated by an economic rather than a moralistic approach to the problem. Leaders like Golden Rule Jones and Tom Johnson believed that unwholesome social conditions and not wicked or weak men and women should be the target of the true reformer's zeal. They thought that human beings grew better from the inside out instead of vice versa; therefore they had no interest in using coercive laws or revolutionary force to impose a higher standard of conduct on society. What they did hope to do was to rid society of two factors which they felt made the normal development of an individual's personality much harder to achieve than it should be.

IV

THE TWO FACTORS the Civic Revivalists sought to uproot were privilege and poverty. To them the two were inseparably linked, for, as they saw it, privilege was the cause of poverty and poverty was the social condition

out of which ignorance, despair, crime, and vicious habits grew. According to their definition, privilege was akin to monopoly. Our present economic system offers a prize to men for being unscrupulous, they said. That prize is privilege. Privilege is the right acquired or protected by law of doing business under more favorable terms than those enjoyed by the rest of the people. It is the economic advantage private individuals derive from such benefits as protective tariffs, franchise grants and tax exemptions, or from the private enjoyment of the socially-created values of land, natural resources, and public utilities. Frederic C. Howe called privilege the art of getting something for nothing, of gaining wealth without labor.

The Civic Revivalists were disturbed by privilege, not just because they believed it unjust that a few men should profit at the expense of the rest of society, but because they thought that no matter in what way privilege was expressed, its economic result was always the same: Privilege is a means of siphoning off, or taking wealth, they said, but not of producing it. It is destructive rather than creative in its results for it blocks the normal avenues by which wealth is produced. Its result is poverty—not the material poorness of the philosopher or the pioneer farmer—but the enforced sordid destitution of the slums and tenant farms.

The Civic Revivalists were aroused because they thought that privilege, far from being a necessary or natural phenomenon of social development, was an artificial, abnormal condition. They were worried because they thought that ultimate control of politics, as of nearly every other phase of American life, was passing into the hands of a small group of men who used their wealth and social prestige to win new privileges which would in turn bring them still more wealth and power.

It was not a part of the Civic Revivalists' program to punish men either because they had succeeded or failed under the existing system. They hoped instead to establish in their cities a new privilege-free system, in which the granting to all of equal access to the natural opportunities of the community would end involuntary poverty; in which the values created by the mere presence of large numbers of people in a limited area would be taken by the city and used for the benefit of all its citizens; and in which each individual, corrupted neither by privilege nor poverty, would be able to devote his best and sincerest efforts to the development of his own and his city's personality.

How the Civic Revivalists tried to take down the prize of privilege and what they did toward the realization of the new system in Cleveland

and Toledo is the subject of later studies in this investigation. The concept of privilege links the Cleveland and the Toledo movements.¹ The fact that the Civic Revival was a conscious battle against privilege is what makes this segment of local history important. The idea of privilege is perhaps the most important recent American contribution to political philosophy. If for no other reason, it has significance to the student as an example of an economic interpretation of politics developed independently of Marxian influences. The concept has a practical as well as an academic interest today since it offers rational explanation of social problems at a time of world crisis.

V

IN SETTING DOWN the story of the Civic Revival, the writer did not seek to draw up a balance sheet of the virtues and deficiencies of the movement. His aim has been objective in the sense that a sincere effort has been made to comprehend what the Civic Revivalists were thinking and trying to do and to write understandingly of their program. The approach cannot claim to be dispassionate, for from the start the writer liked the men he was writing about, found their ideas stimulating, and sought to recapture something of this optimism and enthusiasm.

Study of a ten-year period in the political history of two middle-western cities normally might not produce absorbing material. Yet this conscious effort to make democracy work in an urban, industrialized society excited great hopes and visions among those who were engaged in it. They were aware of the importance of their work and proud of their responsibility. The leaders of the movement liked to think that out of their efforts on behalf of the people, and even more out of the efforts of the

¹The idea of privilege determines the organization of the studies which the present paper introduces. The first section describes the personalities of the leaders of the movement and attempts to show how four of them came to understand privilege. The second presents the philosophy of the Civic Revival. Its purpose is to define the term "privilege," to explore the influence of the single tax theories of Henry George on the movement, and to explain the attitude of the Civic Revivalists toward home rule, direct legislation, and municipal ownership of public utilities. The central and most significant portion of the investigation contains several examples of how the Civic Revivalists fought privilege. This has been done not by emphasizing electoral campaigns, but by discussing the street railway controversy in Cleveland, Tom Johnson's fight for tax equality, and the gas and ice monopoly cases in Toledo. In this section the writer has also placed a discussion of the political techniques of the Civic Revival and of those of its opponents. The last section describes some of the results of the movement. Its most important results were admittedly intangible in nature: civic enthusiasm, humanitarianism, and the development of an enlightened social curiosity. Nevertheless an attempt has been made to present these results in a graphic way through a discussion of the park popularization policy in Cleveland, the Civic Center movement, Cooley Farms, and other efforts undertaken by the Civic Revivalists to make their cities human.

people themselves in uniting against the enemies to their sovereignty, Cleveland and Toledo had emerged as real cities where before there had been only a lot of people living around factories. To those who took part in the Civic Revival, it was a tremendous experience. Years afterward Brand Whitlock, loaded with honors for his work as American Minister to Belgium during the first World War would recall his career as mayor of Toledo as the most satisfying period of his life. In the midst of a lifetime devoted to liberal causes, Frederic C. Howe would remember his participation in the Civic Revival as the crusade of his youth.

Besides Whitlock, Howe, Jones and Johnson, important contributions were made to the civic revival by Newton D. Baker, Peter Witt, Edward W. Bemis, Harris R. Cooley, and Herbert S. Bigelow. Jones and Johnson were business men; Howe, Whitlock and Baker were lawyers; Cooley and Bigelow were ministers. Thus the leaders of the Civic Revival were drawn from classes which do not ordinarily support radical programs for the improvement of society. These men differed from each other in important respects, but they were alike in possessing one quality not often found in municipal reformers: each one of them had a conscious philosophy of life and government. Furthermore, as a group, their social beliefs were harmonious; they were in general agreement both as to the cause of municipal corruption and as to its cure.²

Jones apparently derived his philosophy from a kind of social (as contrasted to a religious) experience. Johnson and Bigelow got theirs primarily from Henry George. Whitlock obtained his from his association with men like Altgeld and Jones, from his experiences as a lawyer and reporter, and from the wide reading which encouraged his native compassion. Howe, Baker, and the other figures in the Cleveland movement got their inspiration primarily from Johnson. Witt had been a Populist; Cooley put into action the teaching of the Social Gospel. The presence of a life concept gave these men the vision, idealism and courage they needed to sustain them in their long fight. Most of all it gave them purpose: they knew what they wanted to do. The possession of an underlying philosophy did not make them dogmatic. Instead it provided them with a foundation which made their experiences meaningful to them and which made them all the more receptive to new ideas.

What makes a radical? Why are some men dissatisfied with the comfortable assumptions their fellows accept? Why did Whitlock seek four

² It is for this reason, as much as because they occurred at approximately the same time and in the same state, that we are justified in considering the Cleveland and Toledo movement as parts of a larger one to which we have given the name, the Civic Revival.

terms as Mayor when, to put it mildly, politics distressed him? How did it happen that Newton D. Baker, a scholarly and fastidious practitioner of the most conservative of the professions, became, for a time, a dogged battler against the interests most lawyers defend? Something happens to some men which makes them feel the injustice of existing conditions more keenly than others. Something gives them a clue to what is wrong. Something else gives them an idea of what society should be like. And something makes them feel most at peace with themselves when they are fighting hardest to make this vision come true. We propose later to examine the personal history of a few of the leaders of our movement in an attempt to discover what it was that made them radicals, or, as the single taxers used to say, how they came to "see the cat."

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