

The Progressive as Single Taxer:

Mark Fagan and the Jersey City Experience, 1900–1917

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IN RECENT YEARS there has been a resurgence of interest in the cooperative, pluralistic underpinnings of the Progressive Era. Instead of continuing to carve out separate Progressive niches for special interest groups like the Yankee-Protestant businessman, the predominantly immigrant organized labor movement, or a status conscious middle class, historians have sought to emphasize the shared experience of Progressives as "consumers, taxpayers, and citizens" (1). "The basic riddle in Progressivism," writes Professor David Thelen, "is not what drove groups apart, but what made them seek common cause" (2).

One result of this pursuit of a shared Progressive experience has been the rediscovery of Henry George's widespread influence on leading 20th century urban reformers. Writing in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* almost a quarter of a century ago, Ransom E. Noble Jr. observed that George's influence in the "Progressive Movement" had long been recognized, though inadequately stressed (3). Since then it has become almost commonplace to point to the select group of single tax mayors and their advisors who dominated early 20th century municipal reform (4). But if historians have finally acknowledged Henry George's immense impact on urban Progressivism, they have yet to explain why many reformers failed to pursue the implementation of the single tax until the advanced stages of their public careers.

This essay will attempt to deal with the question of Progressive failure by examining the career of Mark Fagan, reform mayor of Jersey City (1901–1907, 1913–1917). Although municipal reformers like Fagan, Tom Johnson, and Hazen Pingree were sincere advocates of the single tax, they initially shared an equally optimistic confidence in the power of Protestant morality, environmentalism, and social engineering to solve the problems of their cities. And it was only later, after successive electoral defeats, disillusionment with state legislatures or frustration with conservative state courts, that these men resorted to the single tax as the only fundamental, effective, albeit, "radical" solution for the ills of urban America.

I

BETWEEN 1901 AND 1907 Mark Fagan served as the Progressive Republican mayor of Jersey City. During those six embattled years, Fagan, with the advice and encouragement of City Corporation Counsel George Record, often had to push, pull and shove his city into the mainstream of municipal reform. The goals of the Fagan administration paralleled those of Progressive contemporaries but were, of course, dictated by Jersey City's special needs. Plagued by economic dependency upon the railroads and utilities, local Progressives sought to end corporate arrogance, tax dodging, and special privilege through equal taxation of railroads, utility regulation and home rule (5).

Mayor Fagan discovered, as had other Progressives before him, that reformers could not compete effectively with disciplined party machines without developing an equally competitive political organization. Jersey City's reformers responded to this challenge with the creation of the Progressive Republican "New Idea" party. But at the same time, a "reform boss" like Fagan could only attract mass-based, public support through a broad program which steered clear of controversial, divisive issues. Thus like other social reformers, the Mayor also advanced a social justice program including the introduction of free medical care, milk dispensaries, public baths, evening concerts in the parks, playgrounds, and support of the local juvenile court movement (6).

Fagan was 38 years old at the time of his defeat for a fourth term in 1907. Hence few observers expected him to retire quietly to private life. The ex-mayor, himself, probably realized that equal taxation and the regulation of public franchises could not in themselves solve the numerous problems plaguing Jersey City. During the next decade his growing dissatisfaction with conventional political processes and his pursuit of fundamental economic reform led to his development as an instrumental Progressive and ultimately a single taxer.

Free of the responsibilities and restraints inherent in the daily operation of a municipal bureaucracy, he was able to devote his attention to more sophisticated and creative remedies for urban ills. Though active in Progressive circles throughout 1908, Fagan had been neither a participant nor supporter. But in keeping with his growing concern for new methods of political action, he participated as a Progressive lobbyist for the People's Lobby, a nonpartisan public interest agency. The ex-mayor joined with other reformers in questioning prospective legislative candidates on such pressing, grass-roots issues as home rule, jury reform, utility regulation,

and local liquor option. Although the People's Lobby was impartial in its endorsements, it supported those candidates whose responses indicated a position most closely associated with the New Idea Republicans and Progressive Democrats.

Despite election reverses in 1907 and a politically disastrous attempt at fusion with regular Republicans in 1908, the local New Idea movement began to show signs of resurgence early in 1909. The passage of a new primary law, designed to eliminate machine control, no doubt contributed to Progressive optimism. Assessing the state-wide political situation for Lincoln Steffens in July, New Idea tactician George Record was convinced that "our plan of fighting at the primaries for certain definite principles . . . is the plan that ought to be pursued all over the country." He hoped that Steffens might see his way clear to urge "our friends in different parts of the country . . . to adopt our plan. It is the best plan for a long fight" (7).

The general election in November soon destroyed Record's confidence in the electoral process as both Fagan and the entire Progressive ticket were once again repudiated at the polls. The defeat of the local New Idea in 1909 marked the culmination of Jersey City's experience with Progressive politics. But it also reflected one aspect of a nation-wide retreat from urban reform. In a letter to Mayor Brand Whitlock of Toledo, three weeks after the election defeats of such prominent reformers as Tom Johnson in Cleveland, Francis J. Heney in San Francisco, and Fagan in Jersey City, Lincoln Steffens wrote, "I don't understand Mark's defeat, but I think Heney's means that we can't reform the world by waiting till the crime is done and then putting [*sic*] the criminal in jail . . . and when I said so to Mark's mentor, George L. Record, [he] said, 'yes, and we have made some mistakes in Jersey City. I don't know what it is, but there's something we don't know' " (8).

It is likely, however, that Record had already begun to doubt the efficacy of institutional reform. He had been of the opinion for some time that "the old political lines were blotted out . . ." and that there was a need for "some new party or some new issue" to stimulate efforts for basic economic reform (9). The progressives' defeat proved to be an equally sobering experience for Mark Fagan. But instead of dampening his enthusiasm for New Idea goals, defeat actually accelerated his already active interest in instrumental as opposed to more conventional solutions for urban problems. In view of the New Idea's electoral deficiencies both Fagan and Record directed their attention back to issues of local and immediate concern such as the equal taxation of railroads.

One of the most prominent and long-standing problems facing equal tax advocates revolved around the hated county tax boards which discriminated unfairly in behalf of the railroads at the expense of local property owners (10). Realizing the futility of further structural reform, and faced with a recalcitrant legislature, the only alternative available for equal tax advocates was to place men on the county boards who would be amenable to ending the preferential railroad treatment. It was not coincidental therefore that in April 1910, the moderately Progressive Governor, Franklin Fort, appointed Mark Fagan to the Hudson County Tax Commission (11).

Although tax commissioner was a new role for the ex-mayor, his willingness to accept the appointment, and the zeal with which he performed his duties suggests a realistic appreciation for the application of Progressive principles at the local level. Furthermore, it accurately reflected the instrumental development of his thinking as had his grass-roots participation in the People's Lobby two years earlier. While on the tax commission Fagan pressured both his colleagues and the State Board of Assessors to make themselves more accessible to the public and more responsive to the principle of equal taxation (12). As a gadfly for tax reform, the ex-mayor reflected the Progressive belief that all activities concerning the public welfare should be conducted in the open where people can see what is happening and can learn who is responsible for specific results.

II

MARK FAGAN'S TENURE on the county tax board (1910-1913) coincided with a total rearrangement of Hudson County's political patterns. The Republican party, ravaged by internal turmoil, deprived of state patronage by Woodrow Wilson's election as Governor in 1910, and repudiated at the polls, degenerated into harmless splinter groups composed of embittered regulars and disillusioned Progressives. The New Idea, which had arisen as the protest of a few urban reformers against the inherent inequalities in railroad taxation and the absence of utility regulation, met the fate of most effective pressure groups when its program was absorbed by the liberal wing of the Democratic party.

In Jersey City, where the New Idea had never been more than an extension of the personalities of Fagan and Record, the Progressive cause suffered as its leaders struck out in new directions. Record emerged as the conscience and ideologue of the Wilson administration and later as a leader in the national Progressive movement; while Fagan in his pursuit of viable alternatives to urban problems, continued his grass-roots struggle for fundamental economic and political reform.

Although Jersey City's urban Progressives were continually preoccupied with maintaining a following, they were frequently guilty of surpassing the public's ability to absorb the ideology of reform. Thus at a time when local Progressives had already rejected the panacea of institutional reform, Jersey City residents found themselves swept along by the infectious enthusiasm generated for just such a reform—the Commission Government movement. Advocates of Commission Government commended the centralization of authority and responsibility among five men rather than among dozens of department heads, as was the case under the major-council system. Commission Government was heralded as a reform that would bring government closer to the people, destroy the political machine and end municipal corruption. Seduced by promises of economy, stability, and rationalization of local government, Jersey City's voters approved the adoption of a five man City Commission in April 1913 (13).

While never an advocate of structural reform, Mark Fagan along with other Progressives reluctantly supported adoption of Commission Government. Nevertheless, an impatience with conventional political and economic methods continued to characterize the ex-mayor's activities. He had lost both faith and patience with a political system which continued to condone corporate arrogance and the callous disregard of the public welfare. Now in the twilight of his public career Fagan returned to the hope of his youth—the single tax—as the most effective, immediate solution for fundamental reform (14).

Realizing the direct relationship between the single tax and such progressive issues as home rule, equal taxation, and franchise limitation, the ex-mayor easily made the transition from a conventional to a more instrumental Progressivism. As one historian has aptly observed, "the single tax was a typically urban philosophy, for it was in the city that social values were most clearly revealed" (15).

Although Fagan's fondness for the single tax was well known, he had rarely recommended its adoption while in office. But, as one of the newly elected members of the first City Commission and its honorary Mayor, he believed that the results of structural reform would prove to be a disappointment "unless the new Commissioners shall adopt and put in force a new and radical policy. It is my judgment," he observed in an address before the Chamber of Commerce, "that so-called good government, meaning the honest enforcement of the law, the economical expenditure of the taxes, and the running of the government upon business principles, will not produce the results which many people seem to expect" (16).

The Mayor noted with approval his colleagues' demands for clean streets, extensive parks, playgrounds, and better gas and trolley service. But he questioned whether existing municipal resources were adequate to provide for such improvements. When confronted with a similar dilemma ten years earlier, Progressives had secured an additional source of revenue from the equal taxation of railroads. Mayor Fagan was thinking along those same lines in 1913. He proposed four basic reforms including the exemption of buildings and improvements from taxation; the reduction of gas and electric rates; the taxation of gas and trolley franchises; and lastly the municipal ownership of public utilities. The last three proposals were not new for both the Mayor and Record had continually advocated each of them beginning with the unsuccessful 1907 mayoralty campaign. As for municipal ownership, it was not foreign to Jersey City since the city had been operating its own water works since 1905 (17). But the modified version of the single tax was a far different matter.

Like other followers of Henry George, Mark Fagan believed that the value of land grew in direct proportion to the increase of population and depended upon the growth of the neighborhood in which it was located, rather than upon the labors of the individual land owner. By exempting buildings and personal improvements from taxation, the Mayor expected to increase municipal revenue by increasing the tax on land. He hoped that this step would encourage building by making construction a profitable investment, thus lowering rents as new apartments became available (18). "The greatest lesson I learned as Mayor," he observed, "was that . . . a reduction in tax burdens, or in electric rates, does not benefit the rentpayer, but is absorbed entirely by the property owners . . . who are only 20 per cent of our citizens" (19).

Fagan believed that if his proposals were enacted the railroads would finally be compelled to submit to equal taxation. He argued that if the city taxed only land the railroads would be forced to pay at a rate of five per cent on their total earnings rather than at the then current 2.2 per cent. Such an increase would net the city an additional \$600,000 annually. "Hereafter," concluded the Mayor, "I propose . . . to work for the 80 per cent . . . of our people who own no real estate . . . that is the only way we can ever secure the benefits of good government to the great majority of our people" (20). It remained to be seen whether Fagan's colleagues would approve of what one contemporary historian called the "community use of community values for community purposes," which is what the Mayor had suggested in his four proposals (21).

In view of Mark Fagan's continuing concern for fundamental political and economic reform, his espousal of a modified single tax in June 1913 was not unexpected. Its significance lies, however, in its reflection of the Mayor's impatience, frustration, and disillusionment with the superficiality of Progressive thought. In many respects, the single tax represented the epitome of the instrumental panacea for such urban ills as poverty, slums, and unemployment (22). This was particularly true of Jersey City where the absence of energetic land use, the parochialism of party politics, and the city's cultural paucity had effectively frustrated advocates of a more conventional national Progressivism.

A further consideration of Fagan's identification with the single tax reveals that he seriously misjudged its effect on the fragile, Progressive coalition of citizens, taxpayers, and consumers. Despite his conscious attempt to connect the single tax with the respectable equal tax movement, the Mayor was unable to avert the alienation of Jersey City's "20 per cent"—its taxpaying minority. It is doubtful whether even the most diluted version of the single tax would have been acceptable to these middle class, normally conservative Republican home owners and businessmen. As voters they had twice previously indicated their displeasure with Progressive programs in 1907 and 1909; and in 1913 their support of Commission Government was not predicated on any expectation of fundamental economic or political reform, but only upon anticipated economy and order.

The defection of the community's taxpayers, though serious, could have been overcome had Mayor Fagan received the support of the city's non-taxpaying majority. But the renters of Jersey City's tenement slums and the consumers of its impure water and adulterated milk chose to reject rather than embrace a more radical solution to local problems. "What possible chance is there," asked George Record, "to appeal to these men as voters and as citizens . . . [when they live] under these horrible conditions of poverty?" (23) After a decade of such Progressive achievements as election and civil service reform, and equal tax and utility regulation, most residents could point to few material improvements which might have united them as citizens, taxpayers, or consumers. Disillusioned with Progressive rhetoric, they were reluctant to place their faith in an apparently ephemeral reform like the single tax.

III

A MODIFIED VERSION of the single tax was never adopted in Jersey City despite the repeated efforts of both Fagan and Record (24). Good government reformers warned that even a "business" administration required a stable source of revenue. Civic do-gooders feared that an increased land

tax would contribute to decreasing land values and a steadily diminishing return to the city treasury. The most significant consequence of the Mayor's identification with the single tax was to completely isolate him from his fellow commissioners. Fagan was accused of destroying the city's tax base and of encouraging anarchy and confiscation. The single tax was condemned as "the first step toward socialism, or paternalism in government . . ." (25). In a community as resistant to change and new ideas as Jersey City, the Mayor's enthusiastic call for fundamental economic reform represented the height of political inexpedience.

The extent to which Mark Fagan's political development had progressed was evident in his plans for a possible third party movement in 1916, if one was needed to "make politics turn upon fundamental questions instead of makeshifts and surface reforms" (26). The Mayor sensed that the time was ripe for new issues; the most important in his opinion were the land question and the municipal ownership of public utilities. But his call for a third party failed to generate more than minimal support. Jersey City residents refused to respond to proposals for fundamental reforms which did not comply with preconceived municipal notions of political propriety. Thus the city which had proven to be a graveyard for advocates of national progressivism also thwarted exponents of local level urban reform.

In retrospect, the progressive coalition of citizens, taxpayers, and consumers failed to overcome Jersey City's ethnic divisions, cultural paucity, narrow-mindedness, and lack of foresight for future needs. Residents suffered from the absence of positive governmental leadership. Citizens were forced to depend upon piecemeal, politically motivated reforms which only reinforced ethnic, class, and cultural cleavages within the city. Just as the principles of urban Progressivism had fallen victim to the parochialism of the city's political parties, the single tax succumbed to the overwhelming tawdriness of municipal life, and the public's fundamental distrust of progress.

The bitterness of this realization affected no one more than Mark Fagan. Facing re-election to the City Commission in 1917, the Mayor, then 48 years old, no longer had the enthusiasm for another political campaign. Even more significant was his public abandonment of such long-standing concerns as equal taxation, utility regulation, and home rule as well as his more recent public involvement with the single tax and woman's suffrage (27). Instead he quietly conducted this last campaign, content to allow other members of his ticket to stress the corporate aspects of commission government (28).

Shorn of executive authority by the Walsh-Leavitt Commission Government Act, and upstaged by his fellow Commissioner, Frank Hague, Mark Fagan waged a campaign in 1917 which represented little more than a final gesture to the politics of urban reform. Recognizing that the dream of an organic city based on self-sacrifice had failed to overcome the self-interest in human nature, the Mayor suffered a lapse in ardor, his concerns became more limited and his goals more immediate (29). His career had thus come full circle, evolving from a regular Republican to a reform mayor, into an insurgent single taxer, and ending as a disillusioned Progressive (30). After two decades in public life Mark Fagan disbanded his activities at City Hall. For his services he received the thanks of the City Commission, an ebony gavel, and he was gone.

It should be noted that the "reforms" which Mayor Hague and the commission government represented were totally foreign to the city's earlier experiment with political and economic Progressivism. Unwilling to support fundamental reforms, Jersey City's voters more readily identified with the institutional panacea of commission government, and with Hague's use of the law and order issue in "reforming" their community. Disillusioned by the failure of urban Progressivism to bring about the millennium, Jersey City residents found satisfaction and contentment in the more immediately gratifying and less demanding "reforms" of the political boss. Unable to capitalize upon its unequaled advantages as a transportation and industrial center, Jersey City emerged as a symbol of municipal indifference, local political corruption and urban failure.

Historians have naturally gravitated toward Progressive success; but in doing so they have failed to account for the failure of urban reform in other cities with similar problems and needs. What has been lacking has been an examination of the careers of the less successful, but perhaps no less significant Progressives of early 20th century America. The real meaning of the Progressive Era lies not only in the enduring achievements of men like Tom Johnson and Hazen Pingree, but in the disappointment, frustration, and bitterness of equally dedicated reformers like Fagan and Record. Though a sordid and often disheartening chronicle of Progressive failure, the Jersey City experience suggests some important insights into the limitations of attaining social change through fundamental reform.

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1. For an excellent survey of Progressive historiography see Otis A. Pease, "Urban Reformers in the Progressive Era: A Reassessment," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 62

(April 1971), pp. 49–58. The emphasis upon shared values can be found in David P. Thelen, *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin 1885–1900* (University of Missouri, 1972).

2. David P. Thelen, "Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism," *Journal of American History*, 56 (September 1969), p. 341.

3. Ransom E. Noble, Jr., "Henry George and the Progressive Movement," *Am. J. Econ. Sociol.*, 8 (April 1949), p. 259.

4. Such a list would include: Tom L. Johnson, Frederic C. Howe, and Newton D. Baker in Cleveland; Samuel M. Jones and Brand Whitlock in Toledo; Hazen S. Pingree in Detroit; and Mark M. Fagan and George L. Record in Jersey City.

5. See Ransom E. Noble Jr., *New Jersey Progressivism Before Wilson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1946), pp. 12–42; and Eugene M. Tobin, "Mark Fagan and the Politics of Urban Reform: Jersey City 1900–1917," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1972) for a more recent and complete study of the Jersey City Progressive experience.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 286–348.

7. Letter, George L. Record to Lincoln Steffens, July 23, 1909, Columbia University, Special Collections, Steffens Papers.

8. Ella Winter and Granville Hicks, *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1938), p. 231.

9. Letter, Record to Steffens, July 23, 1909.

10. By raising valuations on personal property to their true value rather than at the previous rate of 60 per cent of actual value, county tax boards discriminated unfairly against local property owners. Thus while private property was substantially increased in the rate of valuation, the average tax rate decreased from approximately \$22 per thousand ratables to \$17. But because the railroads were assessed separately, they saved the \$5 per thousand on several hundred million dollars annually.

11. Governor Fort had supported numerous bills for the abolition of these boards but the legislature had defeated four such attempts dating back to 1906.

12. The State Board of Assessors was a five member body appointed by the Governor. It possessed over-all supervisions for railroad taxation. In October 1910 State Supreme Court Justice Charles Garrison paid tribute to the public spirit of the ex-mayor. "As a citizen and a taxpayer," wrote Garrison, [Mark Fagan] "has that abiding interest in the administration of his government . . . that marks the difference between a citizen and a subject." *Jersey Journal*, October 27, 1910, p. 1. See also *The State ex rel., Mark M. Fagan v. State Board of Assessors*, 80 N.J.L. 516 (Sup. Ct. 1910).

13. A similar referendum had been defeated in 1911, but by 1913 the city's machine politicians had joined the coalition for Commission Government. For the implications of that change see Tobin, "Mark Fagan and the Politics of Urban Reform," *op. cit.*, pp. 155–60, 177–81.

14. As a youth in New York City, Fagan had been a member of the short-lived Anti-Poverty Society, a single tax organization organized by Father Edward McGlynn. See Charles A. Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 491–93, 500, 514; and Stephen Bell, *Rebel Priest and Prophet* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1968), *passim*.

15. Robert H. Bremner, "The Single Tax Philosophy in Cleveland and Toledo," *Am. J. Econ. Sociol.*, 9 (April 1950), p. 371.

16. *Jersey Journal*, June 25, 1913, p. 4.

17. It should be noted, of course, as David Thelen points out in *The New Citizenship*, p. 240, that the phrase, "municipal ownership" would be considered inappropriate whether applied to a waterworks or public school.

18. Mayor Fagan reasoned that buildings in Jersey City's downtown wards were overassessed. Thus a 15 per cent tax reduction upon buildings would not only place the property much nearer its actual value, but would also increase taxes paid by both railroads and owners of vacant lots.

19. *Jersey Journal*, June 25, 1913, pp. 4, 14.

20. *Ibid.*, in view of the absence quality of Jersey City's land ownership, the single tax was peculiarly suited to its needs.

21. Benjamin Parke DeWitt, *The Progressive Movement: A Non-Partisan, Comprehensive Discussion of Current Tendencies in American Politics* (New York, 1915), pp. 357–59.
22. Hoyt L. Warner, *Progressivism in Ohio, 1897–1917* (Ohio State University Press, 1964), p. 88.
23. Ransom E. Noble Jr., “Henry George and the Progressive Movement,” *op. cit.*, p. 267.
24. See *Minutes* of the Board of Commissioners of Jersey City, April 2, 1914, pp. 10–13 for Fagan’s plea for the single tax. Both the Mayor and George Record lobbied extensively for the Hennessey-Fisk Home Rule Tax Bill at Trenton. But the measure was defeated because it contained a modified version of the single tax. It should also be noted that it was through Fagan’s efforts that Edward W. Bemis, onetime economics professor at the University of Chicago, was retained by Jersey City as a consultant in tax and utility matters.
25. *Minutes* of the Board of Commissioners, April 2, 1914, pp. 14–17.
26. *Jersey Journal*, August 18, 1915, p. 8.
27. In 1915 Mayor Fagan had been one of several New Jersey Progressives who believed that woman’s suffrage would drive the bosses out of politics. See Joseph F. Mahoney, “Woman Suffrage and the Urban Masses,” *New Jersey History*, 87 (Autumn 1969), pp. 151–72.
28. Fagan had ironically run on a similar platform twenty-one years earlier in his first bid for public office. See Eugene M. Tobin, “Mark Fagan and the Politics of Urban Reform,” pp. 23–25.
29. The concept of the “organic” city can be found in Roy Lubove, “The Twentieth Century City: The Progressive as Municipal Reformer,” *Mid-America*, 41 (October 1959), pp. 195–209.
30. Mark Fagan finished seventh in the race for the City Commission, over 9,000 votes behind the new Mayor-designate Frank Hague. Though prominently mentioned as a possible candidate against the Hague machine in 1928, the ex-mayor would never again be a candidate for public office. He died in Jersey City on July 16, 1955, three months short of his 86th birthday.

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