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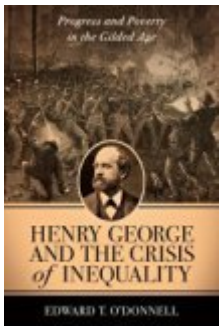

Edward O'Donnell. *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 376 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-12000-5.

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As a politically active undergraduate back in the 1960s I would now and then come across what struck me as a piece of left-wing exotica, a leaflet or pamphlet about something called the "single tax." They appeared as yellowing relics of some bygone time, curiosities, faintly amusing. That such literature was still around, that there were still small, cultic circles of people handing it out nearly a century after the notion of a single tax on land rent first appeared as a panacea for all that ailed Gilded Age America is in its own way evidence of how potent that idea once was. Millions in cities and small towns across the country were electrified by its vision of economic and social justice. If you want to understand why something that seems at best quaint in late industrial America aroused passions that bridged class, ethnic, religious, and gender divisions when industrialization was something new under the sun, there is no better place to start than with Edward O'Connell's *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age*.

George's life as an itinerant printer and journalist, a career of typical ups and downs, is well known to historians. So too is his rearing in a righteous Protestant household (his father was a publisher of religious books, and George grew up a child of the Second Great Awakening) which was committed to the reform-minded free labor ideology of the antebellum North. And of course students of the Gilded Age are even more familiar with what made George famous here in the United States and throughout the Western world. That began with the publication of ***Progress and Poverty*** in 1879, whose analysis of why industrial progress not only was accompanied by poverty but more damnably caused it (George described this puzzle "the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization," p. 9) made the book a best-seller. In turn, George became for nearly a decade the magnetic center of a movement embracing working and middle classes afflicted by the injustice, exploitation, and systemic political corruption and disenfranchisement associated with laissez-faire, Darwinian capitalism. That up-

rising culminated in George's astonishing and nearly successful campaign to become mayor of New York City in 1886. That was a year of such chronic confrontation between labor and capital giving rise to over two hundred similar independent labor-backed political campaigns around the country, all loosely organized around the demand for the eight-hour day, that it became known as the Great Upheaval.

O'Connell goes over this ground thoroughly. Although some of it is familiar territory, he is a sure-handed guide to the social and economic context in which this ascent from obscurity to global renown unfolded. O'Connell provides vivid accounts of the way industrialization disrupted the lives of millions of rural and city people, in particular of the spectacular growth of New York City and its rapid division into an abrasive world of the haves and have-nots. The book makes it clear why something as apparently foreign to urban life as a land tax could appeal to city dwellers suffering high rents, frequent evictions, dangerously crowded living quarters, and a judicial system patently biased in favor of landlords. The reader learns as well about the political dynamics set in motion by a city and country that increasingly was compelled to deal with or to avoid dealing with the confounding inequality that stood as a refutation of the country's democratic heritage. It was a liquefied political universe which allowed for the heterodox mixing together of conventional trade unionists, the Knights of Labor, Irish nationalists, land reformers, skilled artisans and deskilled proletarians, Catholics and Protestants, women and African Americans, socialists, and anarchists to form a miscible United Labor Party of all the outcast, the outraged, the invisible, and the morally appalled. Indeed, a cultural Grand Canyon opened up and separated classes and communities into warring camps--as profoundly at odds if not perhaps more so than today's combatants of the "culture wars." Again, O'Connell helps us stare into that abyss.

These are all notable accomplishments and should make ***Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality*** the last word on these matters for some time to come. But I want to spend a few words on how O'Connell understands the nature of the Henry George phenomenon, why the man and his panacea aroused such socially diverse sympathy, and its longer-term significance in American history. O'Donnell notes, as many have of late, that the Gilded Age of George's day was like our own second Gilded Age. In many respects it was troubled by the same economic and political dilemmas. Yet the reaction to those multiple injustices drastically distinguishes these two gilded ages. The movements that gravitated around George made the whole nineteenth-century Gilded Age one of chronic resistances of the most varied types, encompassing rural as well as urban America. Nothing remotely like that happened to disturb the peace of the Gilded Age of the late twentieth century. Noting this does not diminish in any way what O'Connell has described and analyzed. But it does lead to other questions about precisely how he views what happened back then.

Today, finally, the country has become conscious of the unprecedented inequality in the distribution of wealth and income which actually has been increasingly true for several decades. By calling his book ***The Crisis of Inequality***, O'Donnell, perhaps deliberately, suggests our ancestors lived through and were responding in the George campaign and in dozens of other ways to the same central dilemma. There is no doubt, as the title of George's book makes clear, that inequality was at issue. However, I wonder, was it the central question and did it mean what we take for granted it means nowadays? I think a case can be made that it was not.

Inequality is an indictment which charges a capitalist economy with an unfair distribution of wealth, one whose effects may spill over into the political arena and undermine its democratic institutions. It is not an indictment of capitalism

tout court. O'Donnell makes clear throughout his book that not only George himself but his many and varied allies (perhaps excepting the socialists and anarchists among them) were not anti-capitalist. They were instead, at least for the most part, caught up in a culture and politics that O'Donnell and others have characterized as working-class republicanism. That persuasion was committed to a society of roughly equal self-employed and petty property holders, combined a vigorous individualism with an equally compelling sense of communal solidarity, was devoted to a version of democracy and republicanism which placed the commonwealth above self-interest, and cherished an indigenous yearning for upward mobility or at least the equal opportunity to rise. (George himself hailed from such a background as his grandfather was a master engraver).

The deep desire to preserve and extend equality of opportunity cannot be underestimated. Land reform, either in the specific way George proposed, or as a more widely articulated demand that the nation's territorial vastness be kept from engorgement by private interests and rather used to keep alive the hope of a society of small freeholders, infused many of the era's mass movements. Moreover, as O'Donnell notes, the "Land Question" was bound, for this reason, to the "Labor Question." Not only did it hold open an escape route from the looming prospect of proletarianization, but as a more practical matter would relieve some of the downward pressure on wages by diminishing the number seeking work in the cities and factories. This was a society experiencing the rapid spread of wage labor and the frightening dependencies it entailed. Thus the Irish Land Leagues gave rise to their equivalent here in the United States and made up an important part of the Henry George phenomenon.

O'Donnell tries to distinguish this "working-class republicanism" from its entrepreneurial or competitive capitalist equivalent, what he calls "laissez-faire republicanism" (p. 39). There were of course substantial and widening differences about the role of the state, about social obligations, about who should really carry weight in political affairs, and of course about the apportionment of the economy's wealth. Nonetheless, they overlap as equal opportunity, independence, and social ambition were valued in both versions of republicanism. And why wouldn't they display kindred characteristics, as they shared a genotype?

Might it not be useful then to ask whether, as the Gilded Age evolved, or rather as industrial and finance capitalism invaded social territory once outside its reach, it might have generated a kind of resistance, in the case not only of the George campaign but in numerous other forms of resistance, from mass strikes to the antimonopoly movement and including Populism, which reached beyond "working-class republicanism?" Did the new system of production and distribution then taking shape ignite a broad culture of anticapitalism that mixed with and transformed older forms of opposition that conformed more closely to O'Donnell's model? Petty production of the sort that underlay "working-class republicanism" is tethered to the market, but not to processes of wage labor and capital accumulation. That world was threatened with severe material deprivations and also with social extinction. So too were the gathering armies of wage labor, experiencing for the first time a new "slavery."

Mass strikes, which O'Donnell describes, were ecumenical in their social reach because they enlisted all sorts of people outraged not only by the new system's glaring inequalities but at some more profound level its basal inhumanity and violation of immemorial moral strictures and social codes. This may help account for the incendiary, even sometimes revolutionary rhetoric that colored these insurgencies, including those Populist risings in the countryside. While George himself may indeed have "remained a firm believer in the

essential beneficence of the capitalist marketplace," as O'Donnell puts it, that allegiance did not necessarily characterize the legions of others enlisted in his and kindred movements (pp. 29-30). Moreover, O'Donnell himself provides a lucid explanation of how George's own proposals leapt beyond the boundaries of private property held sacrosanct by "laissez-faire republicanism," at least with respect to public ownership of basic means of communication and transportation. And with regard to land monopolies his single tax could amount to public confiscation.

Still, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* veers away from treating all this as a form of anticapitalism. It continues to lodge the social roots of these movements in an earlier kind of resistance that remained within the basic capitalist framework of assumptions and aspirations. No doubt this was a world in flux and there is perhaps an inherent ambiguity in just what people were most agitated about and what they most wanted fixed or replaced. Certainly many, including George, had resort to a language of indictment that feels antique, referencing "aristocrats" and "moneycrats" and "devil fish" and "factory lords," as metaphors for a new ruling elite. But it is hardly unusual for popular insurgencies at fundamental odds with existing power and economic relations to call upon such ancestral vocabulary to justify such audacity.

O' Donnell sometimes seems himself to be caught up in this ambiguity. So on the one hand, congruent with his view of the George movement as one firmly anchored in some form of capitalism, he steps back and sees it as lineal forerunner of Progressivism. But Progressivism, whatever its linkages to these earlier calls for state intervention and more equal distribution, does not sound much like the risings that powered the Gilded Age; it had given up much of their religiously inflected denunciations of "mammon worship" in favor a secular language of bureaucratic expertise; it roots were in the middle class; its relationship to radical working-class uprisings was far more distanced in many cases, while closer in others; its desires focused largely on how to stabilize rather than transform economic and social relations, and so on. I think here O'Donnell may be prey to a fallacy all historians are prone to: namely, prolepsis, or an interpretation of past events in terms of an implicitly inevitable future, in this case the "natural" evolution of a crisis-prone Darwinian capitalism into some more civilized subspecies. Perhaps this is also why O'Donnell marks George's electoral defeat and the subsequent and very rapid fissuring and dissolution of the movement as a kind of end point, leaving behind only a promissory note later made good, in part, by Progressive-era reforms. Yet if one allows for the presence of anticapitalist impulses, then this age of resistance continues well beyond 1886 through the great strikes of the 1890s and well into the new century: the Nationalist Clubs that sprang up all over the country after the publication of ***Looking Backward*** (Edward Bellamy, 1888); the creation of the American Railway Union; the continued vibrancy, social expansiveness, and programmatic ambition of the antimonopoly movement; the founding of the Socialist Party; the explosive anticapitalism of the IWW, not to mention Populism's heyday.

So too, O'Donnell notes here and there the radical elements of the labor reform world that collaborated and championed George without quite reckoning with how this squares with his view of the movements' impulses and trajectories. The Central Labor Union in New York City, which was the foundation of George's mayoral run, was born out of this fusion of radical land reform, mass strikes, calls for nationalization, and most emphatically a view that labor and capital were irreconcilable. This was a freedom movement first of all that unblushingly talked about the "emancipation of the working class" (p. 120). If equality is certainly to be considered a component of that emancipation, the freedom desired reached far beyond that. References to "industrial

slavery," as O'Donnell duly notes, show up frequently in speeches, pamphlets, and broadsides, and are hard to completely reconcile with a view that nonetheless is reluctant to acknowledge them as expressions of anticapitalism, appropriate to that peculiar, formative moment in the history of American society (pp. 204, 209). "Inequality" and "industrial slavery" suggest a categorical difference, one invoking reform, the other revolution, however much they may also be born from the same family language. "Labor Shall Rule" was a slogan emblazoned on a banner during a CLU march in New York City in 1882 (p. 132).

At one point, O'Donnell quotes some of the testimony of a machinist before a congressional committee investigating relations between labor and capital. He notes that nowhere in this testimony or those like it is there evidence of anticapitalism. However, later on in his remarks this machinist says his fellows are generally discontented, "far beyond" trade union matters and that they are looking for relief at the ballot box, or "revolution, a forcible revolution." This same man then goes on to talk about a new kind of government where "all the means of production, of public transport, and of exchange and also the land should become the public property of the people and be under the administration of the Government" (p. 760).

By itself this proves nothing. Nor do I in any way mean to suggest that O'Donnell deliberately edited out these remarks. He is far too meticulous and scrupulous a historian to do that. What I do think is that there was enough behavior and language afoot during the long Gilded Age to open up the possibility that, for historically specific reasons, anticapitalism lived vigorously then and largely died out later, hence the dissimilarity of the two gilded ages. To be perfectly honest, I think the case is ambiguous because ***Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality*** is a persuasive piece of history.

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