

Foreshadowing Alvin S. Johnson's Activism in His Early Neoclassical Economic Writings

Alvin Saunders Johnson (1874-1971), humanitarian and scholar, is best known as the co-founder and director of the New School for Social Research, and creator of its famed "University in Exile." However, "[d]uring the first 15 years of his career he taught economics at seven colleges and universities [Bryn Mawr, Columbia, Nebraska, Texas, Chicago, Stanford, Cornell] and won the respect of his colleagues as an original theorist."¹ Johnson earned a doctorate in economics from Columbia University in 1902 (PhD diss., *Rent in Modern Economic Theory*), with John Bates Clark as his advisor, a leading thinker in neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics was a revival of classical economics espoused by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Neoclassicism utilized more mathematical and scientific data to support its theories. A strict neoclassicist advocated a *laissez-faire* policy, with little or no governmental regulation. Johnson was a devout disciple of Clark, but not solely regarding his economic beliefs. In his 1952 autobiography, Johnson describes his respect for Clark,

He was ... ethical in all his instincts. He was a convinced pacifist, rejecting utterly the doctrines of the superior racialists. All men were created equal, in his eyes, not only with equal rights but with equal claims upon the sympathy and help of their fellow men. He abhorred the idea of violent revolution but looked to gradual adjustments to solve the problems of dependent countries like India. He rejected Marxism and the idea of social revolution, believing that sound economic progress would in the end elevate labor to a condition so satisfactory as to leave no place for envy of the possessing classes.²

Like Clark, Johnson favored human progress through the basic economic theories of capitalism. He believed that capitalism would lead to fraternity, liberty, and toleration within society. However, capitalism still lacked a mature formation of social equality, but Johnson believed that as capitalism matured it would develop universal egalitarianism, too. He admitted that capitalism created a division of two distinct economic classes, employers and workers. But,

¹ Lissner, "In Memoriam," 375.

² Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 123-124.

he believed that only through capitalism could “solidarity of labor” (fraternity) exist among the working class, and that “social toleration” would manifest in the class of employers.³

In *The Origins of American Social Science*, Dorothy Ross highlights Johnson’s admiration for Clark, with Johnson sharing Clark’s views that capitalism was a valid system to usher in universal progress. Perhaps motivated by Clark’s humanitarian views of equality, Johnson became a reformer and champion of equality and universal liberty. In 1909, Johnson wrote a textbook for undergraduate students titled, *Introduction to Economics*, originally intended for an adult correspondence course with the title, *Introductory Economics*, but the correspondence school went out of business.⁴ Joseph Dorfman said of Johnson and his textbook, it “presented the reigning orthodoxy so well that teachers complained that it left nothing for them to discuss. His faith in traditional principles never wavered so far as textbook presentation was concerned. [However,] in his articles ... he often developed variants.”⁵ Unlike Clark, Johnson was welcomed limited government regulation to control potentially harmful economic and social outcomes of a free-market system. In this sense, Johnson was not a strict neoclassicist. In spite of Johnson’s neoclassical economic orthodoxy revealed in the textbook, he “did not forget his populist sympathies,” writes Ross.

He became an ardent Roosevelt Progressive and an ardent antisocialist. He found ... in the imperfect functioning of the market ample grounds for proposing government regulation and some welfare provision without vitiating the basic mechanisms of competition or the basic structure of inequality that undergirded the market system. As Johnson’s experience suggests, the neoclassical paradigm made a widening allowance for Progressive reform and had its own universalist appeal to upwardly mobile ethnic Americans.⁶

Ross interprets Johnson’s economic orthodox views and his future reformist activities as consistent to his personal character, perhaps influenced by Clark’s academic scholarship and personal life. Alternatively, Jerry Petr, in an essay describing Johnson’s reform activities,

³ Johnson, “Soul of Capitalism,” 237, 240.

⁴ Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, 152.

⁵ Dorfman, *Economic Mind*, 3:421.

⁶ Ross, *Origins*, 408.

describes Johnson as an enigma. Petr understands Johnson's economic views as "mainstream" neoclassicism, but Johnson was, "[d]efiant of any disciplinary dogma that relied on the logical beauty of hypothesized market outcomes to achieve a social optimum, Johnson stands as an intriguing intellectual puzzle. He was both a master of the disciplinary core of equilibrium analysis, and a servant to humanitarian values."⁷

In most descriptions of Johnson's career, his activism is thought to have begun with the creation of the New School for Social Research in 1919, reaching its apex with the rescuing of European intellectuals from Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s. Some scholars attribute his 1914 essay, "The Soul of Capitalism," his apology for capitalism, as the starting point of his ideas of economic reform. Ross, in her seminal work, mentions only two of Johnson's early publications: "The Soul of Capitalism," and scant reference to his 1909 textbook. The earliest publication mentioned by Petr is Johnson's essay, "The Farmer's Indemnity," published in 1927 in a collection of essays contributed in honor of John Bates Clark.

This paper demonstrates that Johnson's ideas of economic reform were evident in earlier writings, in the form of book reviews, written in the first decade of the 20th century for the journal, *Political Science Quarterly*, of which Johnson was assistant editor from 1902-1906. From a close reading of these publications, this paper reveals evidence of Johnson's reformist ideas, foreshadowing his future, and more visible, social activism of the 1930s and 1940s. This paper begins with Johnson's major professional accomplishments from 1914 through the mid-1940s, highlighting his social and economic reformist action and thought.

By the second decade of the 20th century, Johnson wanted to "influence the popular mind" with progressive ideas, but he was finding a limited audience in scholarly journals. He began submitting articles to middle- and high-brow cultural magazines, sharing his progressive

⁷ Petr, "Social Conscience," 258.

ideas to a wider audience. He published in *The Unpopular Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's Weekly*. For example, Johnson wrote an article for the March 1914 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, titled, "War and the Interests of Labor," almost prophesying the coming European conflict, where "Germans and French would meet death unromantically, at long range" and "men who enlist may be destined to be mowed down ingloriously by machine guns." Johnson believed that capitalism would remove "struggles for land and goods from the field of international conflict."⁸ Under socialism, labor would stand to lose using revolution and war as a means to their desired objectives of equality for the masses. Under capitalism, it would be in the workers best interests to strive for peace, and patiently let the process of change progress through negotiations between labor unions and capitalist employers.

Johnson attracted the attention of Herbert Croley, editor of the *New Republic*, with his essay, "The Soul of Capitalism," published in the April-June 1914 issue of *The Unpopular Review*. Croley invited Johnson to contribute articles to the *New Republic*. In 1915, Croley invited Johnson to join him, Walter Lippmann, and Walter E. Weyl as a full-time employee for the *New Republic*. Johnson, teaching at Cornell at the time, obtained a one-year leave of absence to fulfill Croley's request. At the end of that year, Johnson resigned from Cornell, accepting a professorate at Stanford. He left in the middle of his second semester, returning to the *New Republic*, in the spring of 1917. Croley asked Johnson to return to the *New Republic* because they needed Johnson's help writing articles and opinion pieces, since it was inevitable that the U.S. would enter the war in Europe. In August 1914, the staff of the *New Republic*, like President Wilson and most Americans, advocated a neutral stance in the war. However, as the war progressed, and as fears that Germany would not be defeated without the intervention of the U.S., the opinion of Wilson and the *New Republic* turned from neutrality to allying itself with

⁸ Johnson, "War and the Interests of Labor," 346, 349.

Britain and France. As a pacifist, this was a difficult decision for Johnson, but he felt that a German victory would be a worse alternative. However, the *New Republic* was clear in its view that it “was ardent for war against German imperialism, but not for war to promote Allied imperialism.”⁹

After the war ended, the *New Republic* urged President Wilson and the Allied victors to handle Germany judiciously, but not with the intent of destroying its economy and morale by making impossible demands at the Treaty of Versailles. The *New Republic* advocated reparations from Germany, but only what it could “possibly pay,” not what it ought to pay. Crippling Germany’s economy beyond recovery, would not only destroy Germany’s morale, it would not be healthy for the world’s economy.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the Treaty of Versailles demanded from Germany more than it could deliver. After the war, Johnson did not return to Stanford, but pledged to stay with the *New Republic* as long as they needed him. His transition from the classroom to journalism was complete, Johnson would not return to full-time teaching for the rest of his career.

During the “Great War,” before U.S. military involvement, the trustees of the Carnegie Corporation asked Johnson to conduct a study of the funds Carnegie had given for the building of hundreds of public library buildings. In 1915, “[a]fter an extended study tour, Johnson presented a report emphasizing the primary importance of professional staffing in any successful library endeavor. ... [S]uperior library service was ultimately a function of personnel, not architecture.”¹¹ As a result of Johnson’s report, the Carnegie Corporation did not issue any more building grants after 1917. However, in 1925, the Carnegie Corporation shifted its mission to aid libraries by supporting professional activities through the American Library Association and to

⁹ Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, 248.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 264-268.

¹¹ Van Slyck, *Free to All*, 217.

library training schools, equipping libraries with well-trained staff. Similarly, Johnson published a report for the American Association for Adult Education in 1936, influenced by his tour of U.S. public libraries, advocating the use of public libraries as places and its resources for adult education programs.¹²

In 1919, Johnson co-founded the New School for Social Research with a core group comprised mostly of the staff of the *New Republic* and faculty members from Columbia University. These included Charles A. Beard, Herbert Croly, Wesley C. Mitchell, and James Harvey Robinson. Earliest faculty members included John Dewey and Thorstein Veblen. Johnson served on the school's original board and faculty, later becoming the director in 1922, a position held until his retirement in 1945. He remained actively involved with the school as president emeritus until 1964. Johnson guided the New School through early financial difficulties, expanding its curriculum "from a social science core and shifted from research-based, graduate level education toward a more popular approach to adult education."¹³ Johnson's goal was "continued education for the educated," bucking the adult education trend by offering serious courses addressing contemporary intellectual and international concerns, instead of courses on educational basics or technological and professional training. Johnson wrote, "To my mind, the educated, particularly college graduates, bore a heavy social responsibility. Nearly every one of them was in a position to influence the social and political action of a number of persons not privileged in education."¹⁴

In 1926, Edwin R. A. Seligman, Johnson's major professor in graduate school, approached him to be the associate editor of a new multi-volume reference work, the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, directing the work of the editorial staff. This work was

¹² Johnson, *The Public Library*, v-vii.

¹³ Ehrlich, *Transformative Adult Education*, 4.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Pioneer's Progress*, 274.

international in scope, introducing readers to “those mental or cultural sciences which deal with the activities of the individual as a member of a group.”¹⁵ In a biographical sketch of Johnson, Irving Dillard wrote that the *Encyclopedia* was “the United States’ most distinguished contribution to international scholarship,” with the help and vision of Johnson.¹⁶

As a result of Johnson’s work on the *Encyclopedia*, he was introduced to and corresponded with many European social scientists. After Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, Johnson “sensed earlier than others that Nazism was a threat not only to individuals but also to the values of European academic life.”¹⁷ In April 1933, Hitler expelled Jewish and Socialist scholars who held positions in German universities. Johnson immediately made plans to secure positions in the United States for many of these European scholars. Within six months, and with enormous financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, Johnson secured a dozen positions at the New School for its newly created “University in Exile,” later renamed the New School Graduate Faculty in Political and Social Science. Before the war was over, the New School employed 178 European refugee scholars who otherwise might have been imprisoned or killed.¹⁸

A smaller venture that Johnson attempted for the aid of European Jewish refugees during the 1930s was the establishment of a one-hundred-acre agricultural cooperative in North Carolina. The land could support ten families, farming ten acres each, with a small house on each plot. All but one family were European urbanites, with little to no farming experience, who came to the U.S. through New York City. As a farm it was not very successful, but Johnson did not consider the project a failure. “The losses did not weigh us down seriously. After all, there were

¹⁵ Seligman, *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1:3.

¹⁶ Dillard, “Portrait,” 93.

¹⁷ “Johnson, Alvin,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 8:261.

¹⁸ Rutkoff and Scott, *New School*, 84-86.

some fifty souls for whom we had provided a refuge though the period of unemployment.”¹⁹ The “Alvin Corporation,” as the farming cooperative was named, was modest, unsuccessful, and short-lived, but “it reinforces the image of [Johnson as] the ‘scholar/activist.’”²⁰

In 1943, New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey asked Johnson to chair the state’s “War Council Committee Against Discrimination in Employment.” Johnson led the committee, seeking to ban discrimination, not just in war-related industry, but promoted nondiscrimination practices in all industries. The committee’s work led to the passage of the Ives-Quinn Bill, “whose enactment in 1945 gave New York the distinction of being the first state to pass FEP [fair employment practices] legislation. The statute banned discrimination in employment and established the New York State Commission against Discrimination (SCAD) as the enforcement agency.”²¹ In 1946, Johnson similarly worked to end discrimination in New York’s public higher education system by chairing the “Committee for Equality in Education” and serving on the “Temporary Commission on a State University.”²²

This sampling of Johnson’s career reveals a life of social reform and activism through journalism, administration, and legislation. Johnson’s spirit of humanitarianism was evident in his earliest publications for the *Political Science Quarterly* (*PSQ*), the journal of the Academy of Political Science. Between the years, 1902-1906, when he was assistant editor, Johnson wrote no less than twelve book reviews for *PSQ*. This paper analyzes book reviews written for *PSQ* by Johnson during these five years as a sampling of his earliest writings. Possibly, as assistant editor, Johnson had some freedom about which books he reviewed, and the review format allowed him to make more candid statements about economic or social issues, revealing his reformist views. Because they are beyond the limit and scope of this paper, this study neglects

¹⁹ Johnson, *Pioneer’s Progress*, 365.

²⁰ Petr, “Social Conscience,” 267.

²¹ Chen, “Rhetoric of Racial Backlash,” 5.

²² Petr, “Social Conscience,” 268.

the three articles that Johnson wrote for *PSQ* between the years, 1902-1908, and the textbook written in 1909. Another study analyzing these early works would be of value, revealing the evolution of his formal scholarship, and possibly reinforcing the argument that Johnson's earliest publications foreshadowed his later activist career.

Johnson's review in the March 1902 issue was of a book written by the Italian political economist, Achille Loria, *Il Capitalismo e la Scienza*. Johnson's command of several languages compelled him to review works that may have been overlooked by English-only readers, or those with limited foreign language skills. He possibly chose this particular work, because Loria challenges the neoclassical assumptions of Johnson's mentor, John Bates Clark's work, *The Distribution of Wealth: A Theory of Wages, Interest and Profits*. Loria criticizes it on several points, also criticizing the works of Bohm-Bawer, Marx, and Henry George. Loria charged these four thinkers and found them "guilty of unlimited absurdities and contradictions." Loria stated that his system of economics would be implemented successfully only when these competing systems are eliminated. Loria believed that "the fundamental weakness ... in each is the failure to recognize that the appropriation of land must be the central point in any form of capitalistic economy." Johnson predictably defends Clark, and criticizes Loria's narrow-minded, if not naïve, economic ideas. "[O]f the critics who have undertaken to dispose of the *Distribution of Wealth* without understanding it, Loria displays the highest originality." However, Johnson recommends Loria's work, stating that the "greater part of the volume ... is constructive." Direct evidence of Johnson's reformist ideas are not visible, but the fact that he chose to review a work of political economy of a more radical nature, and even recommends it, indicates his commitment to open-mindedness and encourages a liberal approach to the study of international political economics.²³

²³ Johnson, *Il Capitalismo e la Scienza*, 173-174.

Next, Johnson reviewed an eighty-eight page “pamphlet” by William M. Coleman, *Economics as a Foundation for a Theory of Government*, in the September 1902 issue. Johnson had little positive to write about Coleman’s piece. He begins by pointing out that Coleman frequently states “as we proved,” but when Johnson looks for the proof, all he finds is “merely a statement, and that hardly clear.” Coleman reduces capital to labor, which Johnson criticizes, saying that all other economists would divide it into “labor and capital.” When Coleman addresses the issue of marginal land and the idea of rent, paying for the use of that land, he states that one should “ignore it except as a qualifying influence.” Johnson sarcastically replies, “This should bring great relief to other economists who stumble upon contradictions that utterly destroy their labored systems. ... [I]gnore the obstacles as qualifying circumstances.” Johnson finishes by criticizing Coleman’s practical application of economics to the theory of government. Johnson writes, [T]he gist of it is that government would best let underlying tendencies alone, employing its efforts to do away with the more superficial evils—sweatshops and the like. With this, of course, every one [sic] will agree.” Johnson is disappointed with Coleman’s lack of originality. He perhaps is disappointed also that there was nothing else on which to comment regarding the role economics plays with politics, and how they may act with one another, improving society.²⁴

Johnson had a second review in the same issue. He also reviewed *Principles of Political Economy, Vol. III*, a collection of essays by J. Shield Nicholson. Perhaps Johnson needed positive statements to balance the negative, almost cynical, ones of the Coleman review. Instead of addressing a specific problem within political economics, Nicholson paints broad brushstrokes on the political and economic canvases, basing much of the work on part of John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*. Nicholson discusses the “nature and measure of economic

²⁴ Johnson, *Economics as a Foundation*, 538-540.

progress” and “the economic functions of government.” Johnson notes that Nicholson confuses mere history as progress, in the first half of the book. “[Nicholson] is too conservative ... to present a clear definition for progress ... he is inclined to mistake history for progress.”

Johnson’s concerns for social progress through economics are clear, “As a discussion of progress, the book is unsatisfactory.” But, Johnson recommends the first half of the book as a valuable collection of “historical material.” In the later half, Nicholson addresses social concerns beyond their political and economic boundaries. Nicholson writes about the pros and cons of individualism, taxation and public expenditure, the question of free trade and protectionism, British colonial policy, and an essay on political economy and Christianity. Johnson seems pleasantly surprised to discover an essay addressing the question, “May a Christian become a soldier?” Johnson comments,

It is ... somewhat surprising to find in a work on economics a discussion of [this] venerable question, ... [b]ut perhaps economists are shirking their duty when they leave to others the entire border land [sic] between economics and practical ethics. The general reader desires a commonsense discussion of all problems into which wealth enters, and this Professor Nicholson has succeeded [sic] in giving.²⁵

These statements reveal Johnson’s breadth of knowledge and interests. Here is evidence of Johnson’s idea of the economist a broadly educated scholar. These statements were written when the social science disciplines (economics, political science, sociology) were beginning to separate into specialized branches of knowledge. Johnson seems retain the idea of the social scientist as generalist, and one who holds a larger view of society, concerned for its welfare beyond the ever-increasingly popular, yet objectively detached, mathematical and scientific formulas of contemporary economics.

In the March 1903 issue, Johnson reviews *Western Civilization in its Economic Aspect in Modern Times* by the British economic historian and clergyman, William Cunningham. It is an

²⁵ Johnson, *Principles of Political Economy*, 545-546.

outline of “the chief forces and tendencies disclosed by an historical review of European civilization.” In Cunningham’s previous book, he traces the history of Western Civilization up to the medieval period. This continues the history to the present day. Cunningham does not interpret all historical events in economic terms, but gives as much or more credit to the influence of Christianity on the progress of Europe. Foreshadowing Johnson’s ideas in the 1914 essay, “The Soul of Capitalism,” he comments on Cunningham’s chapter, “Rise of Capital,” saying that it is “well worth reading. It would be hard to find a better presentation of the familiar idea that it was the rise of capital in the modern sense of the term that freed the serf and brought with it the possibility of economic freedom.” Interestingly, Johnson comments on Cunningham’s imperialist views. Johnson summarizes Cunningham, “it is not out of narrow and selfish grounds that he favors the policy of subduing the lower races. Civilized nations should extend their power over the barbarous races ...to promote the amelioration of native races and to protect them from the ‘energy’ of the pioneers of civilization. The general tone of this, as of all of Dr. Cunningham’s works, is a healthy Anglo-Saxon optimism.”²⁶ One might take from this that Johnson agrees with Cunningham’s traditional and paternalistic imperialist apology.

Johnson turns to German scholarship in the June 1903 issue, reviewing the first two volumes of economist and sociologist Werner Sombart’s six-volume *magnum opus*, *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*. Johnson writes that “the work is one of the most valuable of recent contributions to economic history.” Johnson’s primary criticisms are that it is too wordy, “even for a German work, and its spirit is often irritatingly egotistical.” Sombart’s thesis is that capitalism displaced the economy of the craftsman, where it was “the aim of the craftsman merely to secure a ‘fair living.’” Conversely, capitalism, controlled by the “capitalist-undertaker,” seeks “by purchase and re-sale of commodities or services to reproduce with a

²⁶ Johnson, *Western Civilization II*, 151-152.

profit an original fund of wealth.” Sombart disagreed with the notion that capitalism evolved from the medieval trade “and the gradual subjection of the producer to the trader.” Sombart hypothesized that great accumulations of wealth were needed for capitalism to arise, but while the Church and feudal barons had great wealth, they were not the origins of capitalism. Sombart thought that the introduction of money payments created a “class of burgher parasites – usurers, farmers of revenues—arose, and rapidly attained great wealth,” and that it was from this wealth, from events such as the Crusades and the exploitation of European colonies, the capital came that was needed to begin modern capitalism. Johnson comments, “Whatever fault economic historians may find with this account of the genesis of capitalism, no one can criticise [sic] adversely Sombart’s description of its slow progress during the last century.” While Johnson praises the work as a valuable work in the history of economics, and he thinks that it will be more valuable in the future, he criticizes the work for not being particularly relevant to contemporary American economics because it does not address topics such as the “problems of industrial concentration and monopoly.” This statement reveals Johnson’s attitude toward the current state of industry and monopolies, seeing them as “problems” that need to be addressed in new works of political economic literature.²⁷

The March 1904 issue includes a review on *The Rise and Progress of the Standard Oil Company* by Gilbert Holland Montague. Johnson is critical of this book because of its obvious pro-Standard Oil Company bias. Johnson does give the work credit for situating the success of Standard Oil with the preferential treatment it received from the railroad companies. However, Montague calls this unfair treatment simple “business.” Johnson goes further, “Mr. Montague appears to regard it as economically and ethically justifiable as well.” Johnson later writes,

²⁷ Johnson, *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*, 354-356.

It would perhaps be unjust to say that Mr. Montague deliberately sets out to apologize for the Standard Oil Company. Yet it is difficult to account for the mental attitude of a student of economics who fails to discover anything contrary to public policy in the practice of wholesale discriminations, and who regards the success of a company built up largely through such discriminations as the result of economic superiority alone. A more serious fault, is the author's failure to verify statements taken doubtless from untrustworthy sources.²⁸

Johnson is critical of monopolies and suspect of their role in the health of a national economy, not to mention their ill-gotten rise to dominance. This will be a topic of Johnson in future book reviews, as well.

In the June 1904 issue, Johnson reviews *The Truth about the Trusts: A Description and Analysis of the American Trust Movement* by John Moody. "Mr. Moody believes thoroughly in the trust," Johnson writes in the first sentence of the review. Moody claims that consolidation is a natural stage in the progress of industrial conditions, a "familiar claim of the trust apologist." Moody states that monopoly is "a social product which exists with the consent of society," and to tamper with that consent is "socialistic meddling." Moody believes that only the highest ethical standards are realized through "a tacit recognition of the legitimacy of the monopoly factor." However, Moody is forced to admit that in order to eliminate competition, a producer may have to acquire and dominate the "sources of supply and raw material," causing these producers "to break through the lines of abstract justice." Moody goes on to say that because the end justifies the means, society endorses these methods, excusing the practices. Johnson criticizes Moody, He apparently lives in a world inhabited exclusively by promoters, underwriters, brokers, and occasional investors. Whatever [they] desire, [Moody] regards as their natural right; whatever furthers their interests makes for the general welfare. To strike at their privilege of exploiting the public is 'to war against all mankind.'"

In spite of this harsh criticism, Johnson does not dispute the factual data compiled by Moody.

Moreover, Johnson recommends this work to anyone interested in the "trust problem," saying

²⁸ Johnson, *Rise and Progress of the Standard Oil*, 142-144.

that the “book contains so much ‘truth about the trusts,’ ... this work may well be ranked among the most important contributions to the anti-trust literature.”²⁹

In the December 1904 issue, Johnson reviews six works, all dealing with protectionism, an international trade policy that limits imports and services through the use of tariffs, quotas, and other regulations. Protectionism is intended to guard businesses, labor, and domestic production within a nation’s borders from foreign competition. Johnson favored limited forms of protectionism. Johnson called the first of the six books, *The Return to Protection* by the British economist, William Smart “an elementary treatise on international trade.” Smart advocates a free trade economy for the United Kingdom, emphasizing “the fact that for a free trade country to go over to a protectionistic [sic] basis involves no less of painful readjustment than is involved in a change from protection to free trade.” Johnson has little to write about the second work, *Fifty Years of Progress and the New Fiscal Policy* by Lord Brassey, except that it “covers much the same ground and takes the same point of view” as Smart’s book. The next three works, *Protection in Germany* by W. Harbutt Dawson, *Protection in Canada and Australasia* by C. H. Chomley, and *Protection in the United States* by Maurice Low emphasize protectionism in its various forms in four countries, as their titles suggest. Of *Protection in Germany*, Johnson comments that Germany’s protectionist policies have “degenerated into a mere vulgar protection of selfish interests.” Johnson goes on to point out several editorial and factual errors. In *Protection in Canada and Australasia*, Chomley, a free trade advocate, “admits that Canada is now committed to the policy of protection to infant industries... In his discussion on Australasia Mr. Chomley comes to similar conclusions.” However, Chomley questions the advantages of protectionism, except for “the accidental fact that the advocates of free trade have been largely conservatives and hence have failed to secure the support of the powerful laboring class.”

²⁹ Johnson, *The Truth about the Trusts*, 305-307.

In *Protection in the United States*, Low, “an avowed protectionist,” begins with a brief history of the American economy. Low then writes a basic apology for protection policies in the U. S. Johnson, a limited protectionist, states “a need for a clear and simple restatement of the case for protection; but one who seeks to find it in Mr. Low’s book will be disappointed. The author has collected all the arguments he can find for protection ... and he adopts them uncritically.” While Johnson believes in free trade with limits, he also believes in protectionism with restraint. He is not an ideologue, but believes that a nation’s economy is complex; therefore, its problems must be handled with sophisticated solutions. If Johnson were accused of extremism, it would be on the ideas of liberty, toleration, and equality.

In the final book, *Die Eisenbahntarife in ihren Beziehungen zur Handelspolitik*, Ernst Seidler and Alexander Freud “bring home to us the truth that American protectionists are raw apprentices in the art of customs exactions, as compared with the protectionists of the continent of Europe.” Johnson recommends the book for those deeply interested in protectionism, and those who do read it will obtain a deeper understanding of protectionism as it relates primarily with the countries of Europe, some of United States’ most important trading partners.³⁰

In the September 1905 issue, Johnson reviews *The History of the Standard Oil Company* by Ida M. Tarbell, one of the leading muckrakers of the early 20th century. Johnson believes that in the history of trusts, “special importance attaches to the history of the oil trust.” He then declares, “From the outset the trust has been controlled by far-sighted men whose policy may be correctly interpreted in terms of enlightened self-interest.” Of Tarbell’s book, Johnson writes, “[She] has rendered an inestimable service to the economist and historian through her collection of material ... she has weighed her facts with extraordinary judgment ... which must commend itself to every reader as a model of impartial and scholarly historical exposition.” Johnson has a

³⁰ *The Return to Protection*, et al., 704-708.

more positive reception of Tarbell's treatment of Standard Oil than he did of Montague's.

Tarbell reveals that Rockefeller and Standard Oil would not have progressed as quickly as it did had the railroad industry not given him preferential treatment. "But decades would have been required where years sufficed for Mr. Rockefeller under existing conditions," writes Johnson. He continues, "Apologists for trusts have been accustomed to second the business man's claim, that competition becomes so keen that business is carried on at a loss; consolidation therefore is justified as a means of self-preservation." But, "[n]o one who reads Miss Tarbell's work can hold longer to the view that concentration in this case was necessary for the good of the industry."

Tarbell's conclusion is to abolish the land rebate policy that Rockefeller used to greedily obtain property at will. Johnson, not disagreeing, says that more needs to be done, because the rebate does not get to the core of the problem needing reform. He writes,

A radical change in our business ethics is recommended. What we need most to recognize is that when a business has attained a predominant position in an industry, it assumes a quasi-public nature. Its policy is no longer to be judged from the view-point of private business. If the corner grocer secures rebates, or cuts prices to take a customer away from a competitor, he does not greatly enrich himself thereby, nor does he ruin his competitor. The social effects of the policy are negligible. But a great corporation which pursues the same policy vastly profits itself and utterly destroys its competitors, thereby attaining incalculable power for evil. What we need, then, is rather a special code, not of ethics, but of law, which shall scrutinize closely the acts of the great corporation and approve them or condemn them, not with regard to their kinship with similar acts in the small business, but with regard solely to their general social effects.

Johnson's statement reveals his reformist ideas, challenging his neoclassical economic foundation of *laissez-faire* practices.³¹

Next, Johnson reviews *Lynch Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching* by James Elbert Cutler in the March 1906 issue. While it may seem unusual for an economist to review a book on lynching in the U.S. in a political science journal, it clearly reveals Johnson's idea that to in order to be a well-rounded scholar; one must have broad interest, believing that

³¹ Johnson, *History of the Standard Oil*, 559-562.

they are interconnected socially. Here Johnson foreshadows his commitment to social justice.

Johnson begins by stating that the total number of lynchings in the U.S., between the years 1882 and 1903, outpaced the total number of legal executions in all but four years. He follows this fact with the opinion, “It is natural that all sober-minded citizens should regard such a state of affairs as a national disgrace, and that the causes and cures of lynching should be widely discussed.”

Johnson thought that lynching persons was a national social illness. However, he said that whatever discussions that have occurred have not bore much fruit toward ending the horrible practice. “In Dr. Cutler’s study we have at last a thoroughly scientific piece of work,” Johnson wrote. However, he goes on to state that Cutler is not optimistic about the abolition of lynching practices. Johnson ends the review with these interesting statements,

The fundamental reason for its existence, in the South at any rate, is the general feeling that a system of criminal law which was evolved under the conditions of Northern Europe is not adapted to the task of checking criminal tendencies in an inferior race. A legal system which should differentiate between races, would, however, accord very ill with the spirit of our institutions. Dr. Cutler points out the need of such differentiation, but does not commit himself upon the question of its practicality.

In the June 1906 issue, Johnson reviews *The City: The Hope of Democracy* by Frederic C. Howe, an Ohio politician and reformer. Howe offers the current state of urban life, with predictions of its future. “In Dr. Howe’s view, the modern city offers on the whole better opportunities for satisfactory existence than man has ever before enjoyed.” Although, the downside of urban life includes “frightful costs” such as slums, jails, unemployment, and “the merciless elimination of the weak.” His solution to keep these costs to a minimum, include city municipality ownership and the operation of “all enterprises which are based upon public franchises.” Also, to keep urban poverty to a minimum, the city would have a policy of “quasi-private” enterprises of tenements, lodging houses, crèches, and workshops. To fund this reform, Howe espouses Henry George’s idea of a single tax. Johnson sees this as idealistic. Johnson, an

expert on land economics (see dissertation), uses economic theory to refute Howe's proposal. "What Dr. Howe fails to see is that the probable increase in the value of land is capitalized in its selling price. It is not possible for a landowner to obtain the ordinary cash return on his investment, plus a constant increase in capital value." Johnson goes on to show that the idea of a single tax has long been held as "untenable." While Johnson disagrees with Howe's proposed policies to address the apparent problems of America's exponentially growing cities, he applauds Howe's reformist ideas and his "evident sincerity of purpose." This review again reveals Johnson's sympathy of addressing social needs balanced against his realistic approach to solving those needs. His economic training moderates and guides his desire for social improvement.³²

Johnson's last reviews of 1906, in the December issue, are *The Wisdom of the Wise* by William Cunningham and *British Imperialism and Commercial Supremacy* by Victor Berard. Both authors offer a "chiefly passionate reiteration of personal conviction. Dr. Cunningham ... holds firmly to his belief in the beneficence of an imperial *Zollverein* [German Customs Union] and in its ultimate realization. M. Berard, a French liberal, is no less positive in his view that the scheme of a Pan-Britannic commercial union must encounter insuperable obstacles ... [and] could do little to check the decline of England." Johnson is not supportive of the ideas of either book, in fact, does not take them very seriously at all. He ends his review, "Both books are suggestive and entertaining; neither possesses any high degree of scientific value."³³

Although Johnson had nothing of reformist value to write in this last review, he revealed much in the previous eleven reviews for the *PSQ* from the years 1902-1906. Clearly, rhetorical evidence of his future social activism is foreseen in these reviews, especially in the areas of economic reform and social equality. His progressive ideas regarding a liberal education are less

³² Johnson, *The City the Hope of Democracy*, 341-344.

³³ Johnson, *The Wisdom of the Wise*, 718-720.

evident, yet exist nonetheless, by the fact that a neoclassical economist, with undergraduate training in Greek Classics, can be an assistant editor for a political science journal and adroitly discuss with aplomb issues relevant not only to academia, but to the average citizen. Future scholarship of Johnson's activist career should begin earlier than the opening of the New School, even earlier than his 1914 essay, "The Soul of Capitalism." Too much evidence exists in his earliest writing, suggesting that a life of social activism was inevitable for Alvin S. Johnson.

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