

Twenty Years at Hull-House: With Autobiographical Notes (1910)



JANE ADDAMS

Jane Addams was one of America's most outspoken advocates for the poor during the Progressive era. Settlement houses, like her Hull House in Chicago, were outreach organizations for the poor, especially immigrants and women. Settlement workers like Addams usually came from privileged backgrounds and have been criticized by historians for their attempts to "Americanize" immigrants and their often condescending attitudes toward the poor. While they clearly had assumptions about the causes of poverty that were rooted in a certain middle-class moralism of the period, Addams and her colleagues were exceptionally tolerant of cultural difference. Settlement house women were devoted advocates for those at the bottom of the society struggling to survive in an industrial economy. During the 1890s, they supported a pluralist vision of economic change, believing that some solution, rooted in Christian charity, to the inequities of industrialization would eventually be possible.

CHAPTER VI: Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements

Other motives which I believe make toward the Settlement are the result of a certain renaissance going forward in Christianity. The impulse to share the lives of the poor, the desire to make social service, irrespective of propaganda, express the spirit of Christ, is as old as Christianity itself. We have no proof from the records themselves that the early Roman Christians, who strained their simple art to the point of grotesqueness in their eagerness to record a "good news" on the walls of the catacombs, considered this good news a religion. Jesus had no set of truths labeled Religious. On the contrary, his doctrine was that all truth is one, that the appropriation of it is freedom. I believe that there is a distinct turning among many young men and women toward this simple acceptance of Christ's message. They resent the assumption that Christianity is a set of ideas which belong to the religious consciousness, whatever that may be. They insist that it cannot be proclaimed and instituted apart from the social life of the community and that it must seek a simple and natural expression in the social organism itself. The Settlement movement is only one manifestation of that wider humanitarian movement which throughout Christendom, but preeminently in England, is endeavoring to embody itself, not in a sect, but in society itself. I believe that this turning, this renaissance of the early Christian humanitarianism, is going on in America, in Chicago, if you please, without leaders who write or philosophize, without much speaking, but with a bent to express in social service and in terms of action the spirit of Christ. There must be the overmastering belief that all that is noblest in life is common to men as men, in order to accentuate the likenesses and ignore the differences which are found among the people whom the Settlement constantly brings into juxtaposition.

The Settlement then, is an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city. It insists that these problems are not confined to any one portion of a city. It is an attempt to relieve, at the same time, the overaccumulation at one end of society and the destitution at the other; but it assumes that this overaccumulation and destitution is most sorely felt in the things that pertain to social and educational privileges. From its very nature it can stand for no political or social propaganda. It must, in a sense, give the warm welcome of an inn to all such propaganda, if perchance one of them be found an angel. The only thing to be dreaded in the Settlement is that it lose its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation, its readiness to change its methods as its environment may demand. It must be open to conviction and must have a deep and abiding sense of tolerance. It must be hospitable and ready for experiment. It should demand from its residents a scientific patience in the accumulation of facts and

the steady holding of their sympathies as one of the best instruments for that accumulation. It must be grounded in a philosophy whose foundation is on the solidarity of the human race, a philosophy which will not waver when the race happens to be represented by a drunken woman or an idiot boy. . . . Their neighbors are held apart by differences of race and language which the residents can more easily overcome. They are bound to see the needs of their neighborhood as a whole, to furnish data for legislation, and to use their influence to secure it. In short, residents are pledged to devote themselves to the duties of good citizenship and to the arousing of the social energies which too largely lie dormant in every neighborhood given over to industrialism. They are bound to regard the entire life of their city as organic, to make an effort to unify it, and to protest against its over-differentiation.

CHAPTER VIII: Problems of Poverty

This piteous dependence of the poor upon the good will of public officials was made clear to us in an early experience with a peasant woman straight from the fields of Germany, whom we met during our first six months at Hull-House. Her four years in America had been spent in patiently carrying water up and down two flights of stairs, and in washing the heavy flannel suits of iron foundry workers. For this her pay had averaged thirty-five cents a day. Three of her daughters had fallen victims to the vice of the city.

We early found ourselves spending many hours in efforts to secure support for deserted women, insurance for bewildered widows, damages for injured operators, furniture from the clutches of the installment store. The Settlement is valuable as an information and interpretation bureau. It constantly acts between the various institutions of the city and the people for whose benefit these institutions were erected. The hospitals, the county agencies, and State asylums are often but vague rumors to the people who need them most. Another function of the Settlement to its neighborhood resembles that of the big brother whose mere presence on the playground protects the little one from bullies.

I recall a similar case of a woman who had supported her three children for five years, during which time her dissolute husband constantly demanded money for drink and kept her perpetually worried and intimidated. One Saturday, before the "blessed Easter," he came back from a long debauch, ragged and filthy, but in a state of lachrymose repentance. The poor wife received him as a returned prodigal, believed that his remorse would prove lasting, and felt sure that if she and the children went to church with him on Easter Sunday and he could be induced to take the pledge before the priest, all their troubles would be ended. After hours of vigorous effort and the expenditure of all her savings, he finally sat on the front doorstep the morning of Easter Sunday, bathed, shaved and arrayed in a fine new suit of clothes. She left him sitting there in the reluctant spring sunshine while she finished washing and dressing the children. When she finally opened the front door with the three shining children that they might all set forth together, the returned prodigal had disappeared, and was not seen again until midnight, when he came back in a glorious state of intoxication from the proceeds of his pawned clothes and clad once more in the dingiest attire. She took him in without comment, only to begin again the wretched cycle.

CHAPTER IX: A Decade of Economic Discussion

Fanaticism is engendered only when men, finding no contradiction to their theories, at last believe that the very universe lends itself as an exemplification of one point of view. "The Working People's Social Science Club" was organized at Hull-House in the spring of 1890 by an English workingman, and for seven years it held a weekly meeting. At eight o'clock every Wednesday night the secretary called to order from forty to one hundred people; a chairman for the evening was elected, a speaker was introduced who was allowed to talk until nine o'clock; his subject was then thrown open to discussion and a lively debate ensued until ten o'clock, at which hour the meeting was declared adjourned.

The enthusiasm of this club seldom lagged. Its zest for discussion was unceasing, and any attempt to turn it into a study or reading club always met with the strong disapprobation of the members. In these weekly discussions in the Hull-House drawing room everything was thrown back upon general principles and all discussion save that which "went to the root of things," was impatiently discarded as an unworthy, halfway measure.

I recall one evening in this club when an exasperated member had thrown out the statement that "Mr. B.

believes that socialism will cure the toothache.” Mr. B. promptly rose to his feet and said that it certainly would, that when every child’s teeth were systematically cared for from the beginning, toothaches would disappear from the face of the earth, belonging, as it did, to the extinct competitive order, as the black plague had disappeared from the earth with the ill-regulated feudal regime of the Middle Ages. “But,” he added, “why do we spend time discussing trifles like the toothache when great social changes are to be considered which will of themselves reform these minor ills?” Even the man who had been humorous fell into the solemn tone of the gathering.

It was, perhaps, here that the socialist surpassed everyone else in the fervor of economic discussion. He was usually a German or a Russian, with a turn for logical presentation, who saw in the concentration of capital and the growth of monopolies an inevitable transition to the socialist state. He pointed out that the concentration of capital in fewer hands but increased the mass of those whose interests were opposed to a maintenance of its power, and vastly simplified its final absorption by the community; that monopoly “when it is finished doth bring forth socialism.” Opposite to him, springing up in every discussion was the individualist, or, as the socialist called him, the anarchist, who insisted that we shall never secure just human relations until we have equality of opportunity; that the sole function of the state is to maintain the freedom of each, guarded by the like freedom of all, in order that each man may be able to work out the problems of his own existence.

I recall a brilliant Frenchwoman who was filled with amazement because one of the shabbiest men reflected a reading of Schopenhauer. She considered the statement of another member most remarkable—that when he saw a carriage driving through the streets occupied by a capitalist who was no longer even an entrepreneur, he felt quite as sure that his days were numbered and that his very lack of function to society would speedily bring him to extinction, as he did when he saw a drunkard reeling along the same street.

It was doubtless owing largely to this club that Hull-House contracted its early reputation for radicalism. Visitors refused to distinguish between the sentiments expressed by its members in the heat of discussion and the opinions held by the residents themselves. At that moment in Chicago the radical of every shade of opinion was vigorous and dogmatic; of the sort that could not resign himself to the slow march of human improvement; of the type who knew exactly “in what part of the world Utopia standeth.”

This decade of discussion between 1890 and 1900 already seems remote from the spirit of Chicago of *today*. So far as I have been able to reproduce this earlier period, it must reflect the essential provisionality of everything.

Questions

1. Jane Addams emphasizes the experimental nature of Hull House in an era of “provisionality.” What were some of the political and economic contradictions evident in the programs of Hull House?
2. What do you think Addams would have said was the cause of poverty?
3. Why did Addams permit “radical” social gatherings at Hull House? What do you think she thought the relationship was between the evening “The Working People’s Social Science Club” and daytime support for deserted women?
4. What do you think Andrew Carnegie would have thought about the long-term effects of Hull House? What do you think Jane Addams would have thought about the long-term effects of Carnegie Steel?