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A Return to Hull House: Reflections on Jane Addams

From a standpoint of jaded modern sophistication, the story of Jane Addams at first seems a tale of old-fashioned do-goodism fired by the charitable impulses of a “lady” who wound up fashioning an overpersonalized approach to social problems. Such naive forms of social intervention, the sophisticate might continue, inevitably gave way to professionalism, social workers who neither require nor need even be aware of the complex inner wellsprings of their own motivation but who act, instead, from the realization that there is a job to be done. The primary question is how most efficiently to do it—to “manage” a “client” population. To see Hull House and Jane Addams simply as an instance of noblesse oblige suited, perhaps, to its day but quickly eclipsed by the welfare state and the abstract demands of justice is not so much to oversimplify—though it is to do that—but to pretty much miss the boat altogether. For Jane Addams was up to something else.

A second layer of distortion that partially obscures Jane Addams’s life and work reflects our changing constructions of American womanhood. The chaste and the maternal intermingled in Addams, always Miss Addams, sometimes Queen Jane. Hers was a symbol overtaken in epochs that witnessed, successively, flappers, WACS, and Rosie the Riveters, the feminine mystique, feminist protest, sexual liberation, rampant consumerism, demands for “self-actualization” and the (apparent) final triumph of secular and technological world views. A life of unforced chastity infused with a deeply felt maternalism is a combination that we find difficult to understand, even more difficult to respond to. We no longer see the world, as Addams did, through the prism of duty and compassion, social responsibility and witness-bearing: life as a Pilgrim’s Progress. Perhaps this as much as
anything else dates her and fixes her in our eyes as a remote figure. Having said all this, I shall try, nevertheless, to see her once again, rethinking her as both a theorist and symbol.

Briefly, however, it is worth surveying the received wisdom of Addams as a social thinker. Views of her long ago congealed nearly all commentators, with few exceptions, find her work derivative. Allen F. Davis, her most recent biographer, endorses the view that Addams is “more important as a publicist and popularizer” than as an original thinker.¹ Daniel Levine, author of Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition, concurs: Addams is “not an original thinker”; rather, she was a “publicist” alive “to the currents of the day.”² Addams fares little better in a number of influential social and cultural histories. Henry Steele Commager, in The American Mind, mentions her in no capacity.³ Ralph Henry Gabriel’s classic standard, The Course of American Democratic Thought, contains one scanty reference to Addams. In his discussion of progressivism, Gabriel gives the progressive kudos for transcending both the agrarian parochialism of the populists and “the humanitarianism of such urban reformers as Jacob Riis and Jane Addams” in the name of a more cosmopolitan, less personally humanitarian stance.⁴ In Age of Reform, Richard Hofstadter characterizes “the Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” an early and important Addams essay, as “fine and penetrating” and Addams herself, he declares, embodies “the most decent stream” in the Progressive movement given her keen awareness of the deracination attendant upon industrialization.⁵

One important exception to cursory notices on Addams is Christopher Lasch’s introduction to The Social Thought of Jane Addams and his chapter devoted to Addams in The New Radicalism in America. Lasch sees Addams as “a theorist and intellectual—a thinker of originality and daring.”⁶ Though he is critical of the antiintellectualism he finds in some of her work, particularly in those discussions of education that extolled “applied knowledge,” Lasch’s serious consideration of Addams as a social theorist of continuing importance is instructive, and it is one on which I shall build.⁷ I do so in all effort to recover and restore Addams’s commitment to an interpretive social theory that bears within it the seeds of cultural and political criticism.

Jane Addams was forty-six years old when she began Twenty Years at Hull House, the first volume of her autobiography. Published in 1910, it was to be her most successful book; eighty thousand copies were published during her lifetime. Twenty Years stands out among her nearly dozen books and her many essays and occasional pieces as, perhaps, her finest sustained effort.⁸ Her gifts as a thinker of rare insight and a writer of unusual descriptive powers are here abundantly displayed. Already a celebrated public figure when she penned her own story, her