

The Conscience of a Nation: The Social Work of Jane Addams
In Chicago's Immigrant Communities

Susanne Watts

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

These well-known lines of Emma Lazarus' poem on the Statue of Liberty served as an invitation to millions of immigrants during the Gilded Age, hoping to find a better life for themselves and their families. Immigration to the United States during the last four decades of the nineteenth century numbered over thirteen million, with more than eighty percent coming from Europe.¹ The majority of these immigrants settled in urban areas that promised abundant work in factories. These jobs were indicative of America's industrial expansion, and most immigrants "came into the very bottom of American urban industrial society."² Settling in overcrowding city neighborhoods, living conditions were appalling. Thus, Emma Lazarus' words came to describe immigrants' actual working as well as living conditions in their new home country more so than the allure of the Promised Land. The plight of working-class immigrants soon caught the attention of middle-class social reformers. Social visionaries like Jane Addams sought to use social reform to improve the lives of poor working-class immigrants. Jane Addams believed in an individual's obligation to help the community. Through her visionary pioneer work, she provided invaluable social services to the immigrant poor, and brought their plight onto the public stage. Her work at Hull House was influential in advocating social reform and

extending social services at the local and state level, and would eventually influence federal legislation. Hull House also facilitated an exchange not only between the social classes but also between different ethnicities. The services Hull House provided helped immigrants assimilate into American culture and society.

Jane Addams was born on September 6, 1860 in Cedarville, Illinois. Her father, John Huy Addams, was a man of strong moral convictions, and committed to the principles of social justice. This clearly had an impact on Jane and her future work. She acknowledged, "It was this cord which not only held fast my supreme affections, but also first drew me into the moral concerns of life."³ While her father supported women's suffrage, and "respected his daughter's ability to think and to make up her own mind," he was opposed to Jane's future educational plans of earning a Bachelor of Arts and attending medical school.⁴ Instead, Addams attended Rockford Female Seminary and graduated in 1881 with a collegiate certificate. In her senior essay, she stressed the importance of "the educated woman to apply her gift of intuition to seek social reforms and to not restrict herself and her sympathies to the home and childrearing."⁵ Having been denied the opportunity to further her academic education, Addams set off with family members in 1883 to travel extensively in Europe. It was during this trip that she first experienced the poor neighborhoods of London. The sight of utter poverty and failure of society to provide a minimum amount of basic necessities as well as human dignity, left Addams very disturbed, feeling a deep sense of failure.⁶ This experience would provide the impetus for Addams to address the call for women's involvement in social reforms, and thus bring purpose and meaning to her senior essay.

While Jane Addams had a vague idea of what she wanted to do to not only give her life purpose but also do meaningful work for

society, she was “convinced that it would be a good thing to rent a house in a part of the city where many primitive and actual needs are found.”⁷⁷ Realizing that other educated middle-class women experienced a similar sense of disconnect, she envisioned to establish a community that would immerse itself into the life of the working class. The idea of establishing a settlement house where young women like her would live among the working-class poor was shaped after her encounter with the poor in London during her first European trip. With a clearer picture and purpose, Jane set off for her second trip to Europe in 1887, this time with her longtime friend, Ellen Gates Starr. During this trip, they would visit Toynbee Hall in London, the world’s first settlement house, to gain insight into the daily operations and to experience what they could expect in starting a similar venture in the United States.

Toynbee Hall opened its doors in 1884 as a “University Settlement in East London, where a small community of ‘settlers’ could live and work amongst the local people.”⁷⁸ Its founder, Samuel Barnett, hoped to attract young college-educated men to live and work in the impoverished area of East London in order to improve the lives of its poor working-class citizens. Toynbee Hall offered a variety of services and classes to the community by addressing the basic educational needs of the poor. It offered classes in basic math, reading, and writing free of charge. What made Toynbee Hall revolutionary was its focus to develop “personal relationships between rich and poor in order to break down the class divisions.”⁷⁹ This emphasis on sharing mutual experiences between different social classes was another important aspect Jane Addams would incorporate into her settlement house philosophy. Toynbee Hall was supposed to function as a place that brought different social classes together through education. Barnett was a strong proponent of providing access to culture to everybody, stating, “everyone should have ac-

cess to art, music, literature and learning, not just a wealthy or University-educated elite.”¹⁰ While his ideas were certainly revolutionary and commendable, they also revealed a paternalistic attitude common of the affluent class at the time. In the eyes of most middle-class social reformers, the poor needed their work and expertise in order to improve their lives. However, the concept of the settlement house was groundbreaking as it exposed educated middle-class men and women to the harsh realities of living in poor neighborhoods.

Toynbee Hall represented what Jane Addams envisioned for her own settlement house idea. Addams wanted to implement the goal of the settlement movement by bringing the rich and poor to live more closely together in an interdependent community. In order to achieve that goal, she would establish her settlement house in a poor urban area to alleviate poverty by providing needed services, as well as help the working-class poor to improve their lives. In contrast to Toynbee Hall, Addams wanted her settlement house to focus on working with immigrants. She chose to settle in Chicago, as Ellen Gates Starr was already teaching at the Kirkland School.¹¹ One of the more difficult tasks was to find a suitable immigrant neighborhood and a suitable property in the community. After months of searching, Addams and Starr found a diverse immigrant neighborhood in Chicago’s West Side, in the Nineteenth Ward. The neighborhood was nearly all immigrants, with over eighteen nationalities represented.¹² Not only did the Nineteenth Ward consist of a very diverse working-class population, it was also home to a variety of manufacturing and business establishments. Thus, the neighborhood Addams and Starr chose was in its truest sense a working-class neighborhood, where its inhabitants lived and worked. It also meant that the more affluent classes, especially women, had very little to no contact with the immigrants. They were truly living in segregated and separated communities. Addams’ settlement house was to

change this by inviting middle-class women residents to “learn to know the people and understand them and their way of life.”¹³ Addams and Starr’s settlement house, named Hull House after the previous owner, Charles J. Hull, opened its doors on September 19, 1889 to begin its work creating a community that would benefit both its middle-class residents as well as the neighborhood’s working-class immigrants.

Aside from emphasizing the mutual benefits the work of Hull House aimed to achieve, Addams hoped that Hull House would be a place of mutual exchanges between the social classes, where everyone could learn from each other. Her mission was to not only offer immediate help to improve the immigrants’ lives but to also provide them with an opportunity of possible long-term economic advancement. Similar to Barnett, Addams also believed that educated middle-class women were best suited to facilitate this goal. However, Addams also realized that in order to achieve this goal Hull House workers had to meet their neighbors in their own homes. Striving to effectively help the neighborhood, Hull House needed to play an active part in the immigrants’ daily lives. Thus, Hull House’s mission was based on three ethical principles: “to teach by example, to practice cooperation, and to practice social democracy, that is, egalitarian, or democratic, social relations across class lines.”¹⁴ While there were other organizations that tried to ameliorate the living conditions of the working-class via private social reform movements, very few actually lived and worked directly in the neighborhoods of those they helped. Hull House in that regard was a groundbreaking establishment, as it was located within the community it aimed to serve, and its residents went into the neighborhood to work directly with its people. Applying Hull House’s principles, “Addams and Starr made getting to know people the first order of the day,” much to the confusion of their new neighbors. The neighborhood was

suspicious of the intentions of these two middle-class white women.¹⁵ In applying Hull House principles in their daily interactions, Addams and other residents slowly gained the confidence of the neighborhood. The so-called friendly visit to immigrants' homes provided invaluable information to Hull House in assessing the immediate needs of the neighborhood. Addams hoped these visits "also functioned to uplift and alleviate the sufferings of the poor through the ameliorative effects of class contact," which brought different social classes together.¹⁶ Again, there is an implied paternalistic attitude that the poor needed the middle-class as an uplifting example in order to overcome their economic poverty. It is no surprise then that Hull House's immigrant neighbors viewed its work at first with suspicion.

The neighborhood around Hull House was unique in that it consisted of a very diverse population. The Nineteenth Ward's inhabitants represented eighteen different nationalities. This was not surprising, as Chicago was attracting immigrants due to its importance as a major economic center during the late nineteenth century. Chicago's "meatpacking, liquor, steel and iron, clothing, railroad car, and agricultural machinery industries were thriving," as it concentrated a diverse selection of the new economy's industries.¹⁷ Chicago's thriving economy attracted immigrants, however the majority of these new economy jobs were in unskilled labor, which placed the great majority of immigrants at the bottom social class of the urban industrial society. In terms of population, the 1890 "United States Census revealed that of Chicago's 1.1 million people an astonishing 855,000 were either foreign born or their American-born children."¹⁸ Thus, Hull House established itself in one of the city's most ethnically diverse and economically depressed areas. Even though the neighborhood was distinctly diverse, immigrants kept to their own ethnic neighborhoods, segregating themselves.

Statistical information collected by Hull House residents confirmed that immigrants “are more or less intermingled, but a decided tendency to drift into little colonies is apparent.”¹⁹

Addams and Starr had wanted to focus on an immigrant neighborhood with mostly German and French inhabitants because they had spent considerable time in these countries during their travels to Europe, spoke the language, and were familiar with the peoples’ culture and customs. However, reality in the Nineteenth Ward neighborhood was different, as immigration during the later decades of the nineteenth century attracted mostly immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. According to *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, “The Italians, the Russian and Polish Jews, and the Bohemians lead in numbers and importance. The Irish control the polls; while the Germans, although they make up more than a third of Chicago’s population, are not very numerous in this neighborhood.”²⁰ However, within ten years of the first publication of the neighborhood’s ethnic composition, the *American Journal of Sociology* reported that Italians now composed seventy-two percent of the community, while the Greeks made up thirteen percent, and the rest “divided among twenty-seven different nationalities.”²¹ Thus, the neighborhood around Hull House was in constant flux, and Hull House residents had to be flexible in trying to assess the needs of the individual ethnic immigrant communities. It was not a “one size fits all” approach, as the immigrant communities perceived Jane Addams and Hull House in different ways, depending on the already established immigrant communities’ social organizations. Hull House succeeded in building and maintaining a positive relationship with the Greek community, which resulted in a concentration of “the Greek community’s social and cultural activities” in Hull House.²² However, due to the Catholic Church’s influence on the Italian community, Hull House was not able to connect with poor Italian immigrants.

In effect, Hull House was considered a “major competitor for the souls of Italian children.”²³ Nevertheless, the appalling living conditions in the Nineteenth Ward allowed Hull House to connect with all of its immigrant neighbors by working to improve their lives.

The overall conditions of the Nineteenth Ward did not discriminate or segregate by ethnicity. The neighborhood presented Hull House with problems that needed to be addressed immediately in order to create safer living conditions. As mentioned earlier, the Nineteenth Ward was a true working-class neighborhood where people lived and worked. People often worked in the same place they also lived. This created various hazards due to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and the lack of effective city services. Many of the tenement houses were in dilapidated conditions, lacking adequate sanitation, sufficient ventilation, and were generally not kept up by mostly absent landlords. The main problem in the neighborhood was overcrowding, which exacerbated the unsanitary conditions. City services were almost non-existent, as “the streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond description. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer.”²⁴ Addams realized that these conditions represented a great disadvantage for the immigrants’ advancement. The living conditions in the Nineteenth Ward made it nearly impossible for its inhabitants to live healthy, and avoid often-deadly diseases. The appalling conditions were also detrimental to the general welfare of the neighborhood, and adversely affected the immigrants’ assimilation into American society. Poor immigrants’ neighborhoods around the country were often considered a by-product of unrestrained immigration, and blamed on a foreign immigrant culture that was unwilling to be Americanized.

Through Hull House’s work, Jane Addams tried to convince the

middle-class and political leaders that the immigrants' living and working environment, and not his or her character were responsible for the economic and social plight. If immigrants were presented with favorable conditions in their environment then they would easier identify with their new country. Therefore, it was important to Hull House to offer services that would help immigrants to assimilate into American culture and society. In order for immigrants to be fully integrated into American society, they had to become a part of all aspects of American life and society. Hull House and its residents were there to guide and educate its immigrant neighbors without any preconceived notions and prejudices. The aspect of treating immigrants as equals was very important to Addams, as it was an important aspect of the principle of social democracy. For Addams, "social democracy meant eliminating social, national, and cultural barriers among newcomers and between them and native-born Americans."²⁵ Therefore, although the work at Hull House could be regarded as charity work to provide immediate support for the immigrants' plight, it would also serve as a long-term support system in order to bring the different social classes together. In that regard, the purpose of Hull House was not considered to simply relieve poverty "but rather an opportunity to realize the radically democratic potentials of its cross-cultural exchanges for both the middle-class settlement house workers and the community."²⁶ Hull House served as a place where people from all social classes and ethnic backgrounds could come together, and connect with each other to build a more just and a more social democracy.

The concept of assimilation also implied that immigrants could not stay segregated in their own ethnic communities within the Nineteenth Ward. Hull House intended to bring immigrants from different backgrounds together by offering a variety of classes and clubs, as well as opening its doors to ethnic associations. The educa-

tional aspects of Hull House, as well as its civic and social community engagements, were “but differing manifestations of the attempt to socialize democracy, as is the very existence of the Settlement itself.”²⁷ Hull House’s main purpose was still to serve its immediate community by providing services that would ameliorate the neighborhood’s most pressing needs. Over the years, Hull House extended its services, again showing flexibility in adapting to the changing needs of its neighbors. Some of the most practical services that had an immediate impact on the community were day care, kindergarten, after school care and clubs for children, a coffeehouse and kitchen to serve inexpensive meals, offices to assist people with employment, a medical clinic, and a lodging house for women.²⁸ In order to truly assimilate immigrants into American society, Hull House offered a variety of educational services, which were very popular. Hull House offered concerts, had its own orchestra and children’s choir, housed an art gallery to expose immigrants to fine culture, and offered college extension courses, which “introduced newcomers to Western-American culture and created opportunities for individual immigrants to gain higher education in the professions or to develop their intellectual talents to prepare them to gain higher education.”²⁹ While the educational classes helped realize Addams’ ideal of bringing different immigrant ethnicities together, the social clubs were often separated by ethnicity. However, the educational and cultural goals of Hull House at times clashed with the immigrants’ ideas and culture, and forced Hull House to adjust its activities. In the case of the Italians, Hull House “shifted the emphasis from educational and cultural programs to sports, dancing, playing, and crafts.”³⁰ Jane Addams realized that assimilation could not be forced on the immigrants. Instead of alienating a major part of the community, Hull House adjusted to their needs. By doing so, Addams acknowledged that in order to achieve a true sense of community

one had to understand each other's way of life and learn through mutual experiences. This experience would not have been possible outside of Hull House's environment and mission. Overall, Hull House helped the assimilation process by building a bridge between immigrants' past and present.

The work of Jane Addams and Hull House brought the plight of America's immigrant working-class onto the public stage. Middle-class reformers like Addams realized that the upper social classes had an obligation to work towards a more social and just democracy. This meant they had to experience the immigrants' life to a certain extent. By establishing a settlement house in a diverse immigrant neighborhood, Addams was able to directly ameliorate the most immediate needs of the community and also provided long-term studies that were used to enact much-needed social reforms. Hull House provided important services to the immigrant community by instituting "programs that would promote ethnic mixing and further the process of assimilation."³¹ In that regard, Jane Addams' mission to create an exchange between the social classes and different ethnicities served as a model to help immigrants assimilate into American society. By practicing cooperation, teaching by example, and trying to create egalitarian social relationships across class lines, Jane Addams not only gave hope to the "huddled masses" of Chicago's Nineteenth Ward but also provided them with educational and social opportunities to find the Promised Land in America.

Notes

¹ Roger Daniels, "The Immigrant Experience in the Gilded Age," in *The Gilded Age*, ed. by Charles W. Calhoun (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 78-79.

² *Ibid.*, 87.

³ Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York, 1910), 26 (Project Gutenberg, 1998), EPUB, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1325>.

⁴Louise W. Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 81, Ebrary Reader, accessed December 21, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10265951>.

⁵Ibid., 123.

⁶Ibid., 150.

⁷Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 117.

⁸Jo Till, "Icons of Toynbee Hall - Samuel Barnett," Toynbee Hall, accessed December 15, 2013, http://www.toynbeehall.org.uk/data/files/About_Toynebee_Hall/Barnett_low_res.pdf.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy*, 196.

¹²Ibid., 211.

¹³Ibid., 198.

¹⁴Ibid., 199.

¹⁵Ibid., 220.

¹⁶James B. Salazar, *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 222, Ebrary Reader, accessed December 21, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10420306>.

¹⁷Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy*, 203.

¹⁸Melvin G. Holli, "Hull House and the Immigrants," Immigrants, Illinois Periodicals Online, Northern Illinois University Libraries, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.lib.niu.edu/2003/iht1010323.html>.

¹⁹*Hull-House Maps and Papers, a Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a congested District of Chicago, together with Comments and Essays on Problems growing out of the Social Conditions* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1895), 39 (American Libraries), EPUB, accessed November 11, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/hullhousemapspap00newy>.

²⁰Ibid., 40.

²¹Natalie Walker, "Chicago Housing Conditions. X. Greeks and Italians in the Neighborhood of Hull House," *American Journal of Sociology* 21, no. 3 (November 1915): 290, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27638971>.

²²Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism & Progressives - Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 104.

²³Ibid., 100.

²⁴Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 131-132.

²⁵Lissak, *Pluralism & Progressives*, 25.

²⁶Salazar, *Bodies of Reform*, 229.

²⁷Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 518.

²⁸Dorothea Moore, "A Day at Hull House," *American Journal of Sociology* 2, no. 5 (March 1897): 631-634, accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2761647>.

²⁹Lissak, *Pluralism & Progressives*, 47.

³⁰Ibid., 120.

³¹Shelton Stromquist, *Re-inventing "The People"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 149.

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