Hull House: Feminist Pragmatism and the Chicago Women's School of Sociology

Chicago's winning bid for the Columbian Exposition of 1893, in celebration of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America, won international recognition for the city as attendance averaged over 150,000 people per day during the 179 day run. Indeed, the Exposition announced that despite the great fire of 1871, Chicago had risen from the ashes to become the model of a progressive city. Determined that the Exposition would not gloss over Chicago's problems, settlement workers such as Jane Addams took advantage of the event to educate the public about urban problems. They used speeches, lectures, and exhibits to contrast the ideal “white city”\(^1\) with the “real Chicago of slums, disease, and corrupt politics” (Davis 1984:187). And Ida B. Wells staged a protest when the city announced a “Colored People’s Day” promising 2000 free watermelons (Chicago Tribune May 1, 1893). In many ways Jane Addams, Hull House, and Chicago became synonymous with reform and during the Progressive Era the settlement served as a community-based school for the study of social problems and the practice of sociology. Hull House, founded in 1889, developed a distinctive school of women social scientists who practiced sociology with the leadership of Jane Addams. Fundamental to Addams’ sociological work was the belief that the privileged classes had a responsibility to the less fortunate.

The Hull House legacy is one of programmatic developments, sociological investigations, and reform activities, particularly during the peak period of sociological practice in the settlement movement from 1890 to World War I. By 1920, with the establishment of the graduate School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, sociology was formalized as an academic discipline, essentially sex-segregating sociology and social work and rendering “public sociology” as practiced by the social settlements obsolete (Deegan 1990, Lengermann and Niebrugge 2007, MacLean and Williams 2012). Prior to WW I, a strong pacifist stance emanating from the feminist pragmatism of many in the settlement community, most notably Jane Addams,

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\(^1\) The term “white city” originated as a derisive description of Exposition buildings, most erected in haste, a composite of plaster, cement, and jute fiber called staff. The buildings, most intended to be temporary, were painted white giving them an apparent gleam especially when lighted.
added to other emerging forces to mark the decline of settlement sociology and the institutionalization of early settlement activities as a form of social work. Deegan (1990, 2002a) describes the years prior to the 1920s, as the “golden era of women in sociology.” Subsequently, a dark era of patriarchal ascendency would marginalize, obscure, or entirely erase women’s early contributions to sociology until the 1960s social movements began to revive them.\(^2\) Similarly Lengermann and Niebrugge (2007) provide an insightful critical social history of the shared interests of sociology and social work in Progressive Era social reform activities and of their eventual separation as academic disciplines and fields of practice. They note that this process was part and parcel of a larger “politics of knowledge” encompassing political contests centered on both gender and social reform (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998:10–17).

**Jane Addams and Her Journey to Hull House**

Jane Addams, born prior to the Civil War in 1860, died on May 21, 1935 at the age of 74 from complications following intestinal surgery which revealed a growing cancer. The outpouring of love and affection demonstrated at her death is just a small indication of her legacy and life’s work of 46 years as the head resident of Hull House.\(^3\) News articles preserve the details of Addams’ memorial service

\(^2\) By the 1920s most of these women were no longer practicing in domains or with titles bearing the name sociology but were practicing in the gender-segregated fields of social work, household administration, education, and applied psychology. The archival records suggest that there were both “push and pull” factors involved in this process of disciplinary differentiation and segregation. While there is good evidence that what became the formal discipline of sociology was increasingly an unfriendly, if not hostile, environment for women at the University of Chicago, women also actively carved out their own domains for practice. At times they no doubt sought job security, at other times the freedom to seek solutions to social problems unencumbered by the professional agendas of their male colleagues and of university politics.

\(^3\) Jane Addams always hyphenated Hull House although the reason and significance of her doing so are seemingly lost to history. Most speculations are that it had to do with the hybridization of the classes and of the different ethnicities and nationalities in the Hull House neighborhood (Jackson 2001:59–60). Addams may have believed, as expressed later by John Dewey, that “the hyphen connects instead of separates” (Dewey 1916:185–186). Rachel Glass, education coordinator of the Hull House Museum, says the answer, or puzzle of the hyphen, is lost in “the mists of time.” In recent years most writers opt not to hyphenate Hull House, a practice traced back, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to Victor Weybright, editor-in-chief of New American Library when they began releasing some of Addams works in new editions (Tower 1961:39).