

BOOK REVIEW: TWENTY YEARS AT HULL HOUSE WITH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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Addams, Jane (1860-1935). 1912. *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*. New York: The MacMillan Company. www.digital.library.upenn.edu/women/addams/hullhouse/hullhouse.html accessed 08 January 2016.

Introduction

Jane Addams, together with Ellen Starr, was instrumental in the establishment of the Hull House Settlement in the midst of the slums of Chicago 1889. Jane Addams got the inspiration for building Hull House when she visited Toynbee Hall in London. The Hull House Settlement was originally meant to provide an opportunity for young educated women to be in solidarity with poor people. It later evolved into an open center where poor people in the area, particularly the poor immigrants, were welcome to engage in recreational activities and even just to rest. Hull House also pioneered the provision of day care centers to enable working mothers to leave their children in a safe place while working. Through the years, Hull House expanded and additional buildings were built. From day care centers for children, spaces for people in crisis – especially women – were also provided.

In addition, Hull House became the home for “The Working People’s Social Science Club.” This club attracted social activists, reformers and community members who were concerned about social issues and social realities. According to Jane Addams, “...All discussions, save that which went to the roots of things, was impatiently discarded as an unworthy, halfway measure.” Hull House also provided space for labor leaders’ meetings and for a women’s cooperative.

Style of Writing

The book has 28 chapters with 427 pages. Addams shunned the chronological narration of events. Instead, she wisely recounted personal experiences which contributed to her social consciousness, putting her involvement in the settlement movement in context. In writing this book, Jane Addams went beyond narrating her personal experiences; she also surfaced voices of poor immigrants and community members. She did not only write about her personal involvement but more so of the contributions of others, as she was conscious about collective efforts in social development.

Jane Addams' style of writing reveals the eloquence of a learned woman who was able to weave personal experiences with societal events and involvement. She could be personal at times as she narrated her firsthand involvement, but she was also able to connect personal experiences with the societal conditions.

As a document, *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*, can be classified as a research work, specifically as a “narrative social work” (Baldwin, 2013) and an “interpretive autoethnography” (Denzin, 2014). “Narrative social work” as a research methodology frames events and facts in the context of the micro, meso and macro environment. Interpretive autoethnography utilizes constructivism in the interweaving of autobiography with social relationships. Thus, “narrative social work” and “interpretive autoethnography” are now being recognized as research methodologies more relevant to social work practitioners. In *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*, Jane Addams employed these not only as methods to document her experiences but more so to theorize about poverty, activism, social engagement and social development.

Hull House Settlement: A Social Development Engagement

Jane Addams was one of the early social workers – if not the first one – to identify social development as an area of social work. Reflecting on the early years of the Settlement Movement she mused,

...some of us had numbered our years as far as thirty, and we all carefully avoided the extravagance of statement which characterizes youth, and yet I doubt if anywhere on the continent that summer could have been found

a group of people more genuinely interested in social development or more sincerely convinced that they had found a clue by which the conditions in crowded cities might be understood and the agencies for social betterment developed.” (p. 115)

Addams’ concept of social development was constructed as she lived in the midst of the poor immigrant settlers. As she stated, “(T)he 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.” (p. 126) In fact, key concepts of social development can be extracted from *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*.

a. Social democracy and participatory development

Jane Addams’ concept of participatory development was beyond tokenism. In this document, she clearly articulated the participation of the “masses of the people,” the poor and the marginalized. According to her,

“In a democratic country nothing can be permanently achieved save through the masses of the people. It will be impossible to establish a higher political life than the people themselves crave; that it is difficult to see how the notion of a higher civic life can be fostered save through common intercourse; that the blessings which we associate with a life of refinement and cultivation can be made universal and must be made universal if they are to be permanent. (p. 116)

Hull House was, for Addams, a place where everybody was welcome regardless of political or economic principles. (p. 453) Her firm belief in social democracy was affirmed when she wrote that “...the Settlement recognizes the need of cooperation, both with the radical and the conservative, and from the very nature of the case the Settlement cannot limit its friends to any one political party or economic school.” (p. 453) Social democracy as the foundation of Hull House was reiterated throughout the document. In truth, Hull House itself was the embodiment of social democracy. As Addams concluded, “(T)he educational activities of the settlement, as well as its philanthropic, civic, and social undertakings are but differing manifestations of the attempt to socialize democracy, as is the very existence of the Settlement itself.” (p. 454)

b. Scientific inquiry and the role of research

The role of research in social work practice was explicit as Addams recalled the demands of being a member of the Hull House Settlement, “It should demand from its residents a scientific patience in the accumulation of facts ...” (p. 127) One example of this was the community map that the Hull House produced. Although the output was finalized by a Hull House resident member, the community map (or profile) was actually produced collectively.

For the pioneering production of this community map, Jane Addams was hailed by some writers as one of the founding mothers of sociology. For Addams, the gathering of data should not be an end in itself but should be a means to empathize with the poor and the marginalized and therefore “must be grounded in a philosophy whose foundation is on the solidarity of the human race...” (p. 127) Social investigations could then be used to provide data to support advocacies for improved social services, such as better sanitation facilities, and for enactment of legislation addressing social conditions such as child labor, etc. Addams also held that social investigations about social conditions should be linked with studies done by other stakeholders. As she stated, “We find increasingly, however, that the best results are to be obtained in investigations as in other undertakings, by combining our researches with those of other public bodies or with the State itself.” (p. 303)

c. Spirituality beyond religion

In Chapter 6 of the book, Addams identified “Christian Humanitarianism” (p. 125) as a “spiritual force” behind the establishment of Hull House, although she herself was able to creatively navigate the tension between secular humanitarianism and religiosity. She articulated this tension aptly:

Occasionally I obscurely felt as if a demand were being made upon us for a ritual which should express and carry forward the hope of the social movement. I was constantly bewildered by the number of requests I received to officiate at funeral services and by the curious confessions made to me by total strangers. For a time I accepted the former and on one awful occasion furnished the ‘poetic part’ of a wedding ceremony really performed by a justice of peace, but I soon learned to steadfastly refuse such offices,

although I saw that, for many people without church affiliations, the vague humanitarianism the Settlement represented was the nearest approach they could find to an expression of their religious sentiments. (pp. 152-153)

Addams consider religiosity as one of social sentiments which “... are a difficult and cumulating product of human growth and which, like all higher aims, live only by communion and fellowship, are cultivated most easily in a fostering soil of a community life.” (p. 153)

d. Role of social theory and social movement

Addams recognized the role of social theory and social theorists. Hull House provided space for social theorists, including political ideologues, to discuss theories, opinions and analysis of the social realities. Hull House also supported and assisted social movements like trade unions. It was also instrumental in organizing the first successful Housing Cooperative of Working Women. Addams aptly described the Hull House creative engagement with social theorists and social movements in this way:

At any rate the residents of Hull House discovered that while their first impact with city poverty allied them to groups given over to discussion of social theories, their sober efforts to heal neighborhood ills allied them to general public movements which were without challenging creeds. But while we discovered that we most easily secured the smallest of much-needed improvements by attaching our efforts to those of organized bodies, nevertheless these very organizations would have been impossible had not the public conscience been aroused and the community sensibility quickened by these same ardent theorists. (p. 195)

e. Micro-Meso-Macro Engagement

Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes illustrated what it means to care for individuals in crisis, address family problems, organize a community to address community problems, lobby for labor legislations, and make a stand for world peace. Chapter 10 of the book describes how Hull House members got involved in lobbying for labor legislation against

child labor and providing for just working conditions. Wisely, Addams was quick to point out that legislation has to be sustained by organized labor. Quoting an unidentified English statesman, she wrote, “a common rule for the standard of life and the condition of labor may be secured by legislation, but it must be maintained by trades unionism.” (p. 209)

Gaps in *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*

Jane Addams exemplified an empowered woman. She plunged into public service, shunned marriage and got a government job as a garbage inspector, classified as unwomanly during her time. As a woman activist and one of the pioneers in social work and public administration, Jane Addams advocated for the human rights of immigrants, and the labor rights of men, women and children. She was disturbed about violence against women, their multiple burdens arising from reproductive and productive work, and prostitution. She promoted women’s human rights, but this writer noted that she mostly focused on issues regarding women’s participation in the public sphere. Discussions and the theorizing about the root causes of women’s issues were limited especially when considered vis-à-vis the treatment of other social issues in the book. She wrote about educating women on their labor rights, but no mention was made about attempts to educate women on their rights as women inside the domestic abode. Furthermore, there was seemingly hesitation on the part of Addams to discuss domestic violence in the community.

Thus, this writer opines that Jane Addams – although ahead of her time – was still a product of her time.

Final Word

Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes is recommended for social activists and social development practitioners, but more so for aspiring social workers. Social work practitioners are also encouraged to read this book – especially those who did not have the chance to look at the original document during their student days. The approach and style in which the document was written provide an excellent model on how to theorize from practice.

References :

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