“European Intellectuals and the Radicalization of Jane Addams”

Louise W. Knight

It is a pleasure to be here at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. As you know, its mission is to “provide a link between the world of ideas and the world of policy” and its method is to be a center for scholars to do research and discuss ideas. Another method by which ideas and policy can be brought into relationship is through the mind of a reformer.

In my talk I will explore a bit about how this works, with Jane Addams as my example. And because this is an international center, I thought I would talk about the ways that international reform ideas influenced her. In a word, they radicalized her. And that transformation, in turn, led her to advocate for all sorts of policies. Determined to take ideas seriously, she could not, in the end, avoid the policy implications they contained. That is, she could not help but become an activist.

Anyone familiar with Jane Addams’ work for peace in the twentieth century would agree that she was a reformer of international scope. She began working on issues of world peace in 1899. In 1915 she co-founded and led the Woman’s Peace Party; in 1919, the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom. These accomplishments were acknowledged in 1931 by the decision of the Nobel Committee to give her the globe’s most prestigious award – the Peace Prize.

Nor was peace the only international reform Addams addressed. In the years after World War I she supported other reforms overseas, including woman's suffrage, the World Court, the end to cultural practices – such as footbinding in China – that were physically damaging to women, and the international settlement house movement. Indeed, a fascinating book could be written on Jane Addams' remarkable career, after the age of 50, in international reform.

But before Jane Addams could be a force for reform, she had to be a reformer. An equally fascinating story involves the influence of international thinkers and reformers on her early development *into* a reformer. Most people are aware that she drew inspiration for starting her own settlement house from England, where, at 28, she visited the world's first settlement house, Toynbee Hall, but that fact is just the tip of a much larger iceberg. Addams's thinking during her childhood and twenties was transformed by her reading of the writings of some of the more brilliant intellects of Europe – people such as Guiseppe Mazzini, Robert Owen, George Sand, George Eliot, John Stuart Mill, Leo Tolstoy, and Karl Marx. I suspect she might never have taken an interest in the international settlement house movement if she had not first absorbed and made her own many of the ideas she encountered in those authors' books. And she continued to seek out European ideas during her first ten years at Hull House; it was under the influence of this reading, as well as the hard lessons she learned from her experiences in Chicago, that she completed what in retrospect we can only describe as her political radicalization.

Childhood

Addams grew up in the 1860s and 1870s in a small town in northern Illinois. Needless to say, although this may be hard for our modern minds to grasp, she could not learn about the world from TV, radio, internet or movies. The printed word and her father's interests, however, kept her childhood from being entirely provincial. John Addams was a state senator when she was young, took an active interest in world affairs and subscribed to the *New York Tribune*.

A conversation that he had with Jane, aged 11, launched her interest in European ideas and reforms. She came upon him reading the *Tribune* and looking "rather solemn," and asked him why. He explained that Guiseppe Mazzini, the "great Italian liberator," had died, and advised her that this news should make her feel sad. She did not appreciate his suggestion. Remembering the moment much later, she described her reaction as "argumentative." She told her father she did not see why she should care about the death of some foreigner. His answer was one she would remember: that people of many nationalities, not just Americans, had hopes and desires for improving their lives through political reform. Impressed, Jane decided her understanding of the idea of patriotism was "meager" and left the room "exhilarated" by the idea that international matters were real, and not just words.[1] More than anything she may have learned about Mazzini in this conversation, she took from it the larger point: that fine men with exciting ideas about improving the world lived on distant shores. A door had been opened in her mind.

A year later the ideas of British reformer Robert Owen caught her attention. Fascinatingly enough, although Owen had first tried out his factory reforms in Scotland, he had later tried them out in Indiana, a state that bordered Illinois. In 1825, Owen

founded a utopian community, New Harmony, in order to put into full practice his theory of cooperation and to prove that competitive individualism could be abandoned both as a guide to economic and social life.[2] Addams read all about New Harmony in a three-part series of articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a magazine to which her stepmother Anna Haldeman Addams, subscribed. Addams thought his ideas "thrilling."[3]

Jane's youthful fascination with Owen and his utopian New Harmony was a crucial event in her development as a reformer. Because Owen was rejecting individualist capitalism and because Addams's father was a highly successful agricultural-industrial-financial capitalist – that is, a man whose business career was grounded in the values of competition – this new enthusiasm of Jane's constituted a distinct break with her paternal heritage, even if she did not acknowledge it as such in *Twenty Years at Hull House*[4]. It would be many years before she engaged more centrally with capitalism's central premises and pursued more actively her interest in cooperation but Robert Owen was the thinker who launched her in that direction.

College

In college the most radical idea that Addams drew from European writers was that women could be powerful in the larger world. To be sure, she read and was influenced by American writer Margaret Fuller's widely popular book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*[5] in these years, but the author who truly embolded her in her nascent feminism was the French novelist George Sand. "This splendid woman," Addams wrote admiringly in her sophomore year, "declares the social independence and equality of woman [in] her relations to man, society and destiny." Like Sand, today's woman, Addams argued,

"wishes not to be a man or like a man but she claims the same right to independent thought and action."[6] Sand's liberated ideas about women had clearly touched Addams deeply.

Another female European novelist named George, George Eliot, instructed Addams in a more mystical aspect of women's power – her all-knowing intuition. The loving awe a man might feel in the presence of "noble womanhood," Eliot wrote in *Romola*, a novel which Addams also read, was "like the worship paid of old to a great nature goddess … whose life and power were something deeper and more primordial than knowledge."[7] Addams found the phrase "something deeper and more primordial than knowledge" profoundly compelling. She used it four times in her college papers and once in a letter to a friend.[8]

For Addams, as for many young women, the idea of women's power was not obviously radical because it was not usually presented in overtly political form. Eliot invoked the image and sense of a powerful woman on the page but she was not endorsing that woman have any particular kind of formal power. Thus Eliot's idea of woman as a modern nature goddess worked in a subterranean fashion on Addams – awakening her longing for public power without requiring her to challenge the conventional attitudes of the day that women's place was in the home. Addams herself gave two speeches in college on the kind of power women should have in public places and in each case she veiled her argument behind acceptable metaphors of domestic influence so as not to arouse the hostility of her audiences and/or her own conflicted feelings.[9]

Her Twenties

Jane Addams's twenties were in a certain sense her European years. Not only did she make two trips to Europe, one for two years and one for six months; she also read a steady supply of books by Europeans.

One of those authors, not surprisingly, was Guiseppe Mazzini. During the winter of 1885-1886, when Addams was 25 and living with her stepmother in Baltimore, she attended a public lecture series at Johns Hopkins on the United Italy movement that Mazzini had helped lead in the 1840s and 1850s. It was probably at this time that she read his classic work, *Duties of Man*[10] and his influential essay, "Thoughts upon Democracy in Europe."[11]

Caught at the time in the entrapping web of her sense of duty to her family, Addams was startled to find in Mazzini's book the bold claim that those men who limit morality's "obligations to duties towards family teach…a more or less narrow egoism."[12] Duty to humanity is the greatest duty, Mazzini argued. Although Mazzini intended his observation to apply only to men, Addams applied it to herself – certainly a radical move since she was a woman. Thus translated, Mazzini gave her the argument she needed to justify to herself that she should put her duty to humanity before her duty to her family and, therefore, that she should move to Chicago and start a settlement house.

Nonetheless, the issue Addams simply ignored when she thought Mazzini was speaking to her in *Duties to Man* – that *woman's* overriding duty was to family – remained to be addressed. Addams needed a rebuttal to the restrictions gender placed on her choices and she gained it that same winter or soon after by reading John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Woman*.[13] Mill wrote movingly of a prosperous woman's despair at her lack of needed work to do. In 1890 Addams would borrow a key sentence from the book,

without giving the source, to make that point in a speech. The sentence read: “There is nothing, after disease, indigence and guilt, so fatal to life itself as the want of a proper outlet for active faculties.” Mill argued that the idea that women were only fit to be wives and mothers was “an eminently artificial thing.”[14] He both invited Addams to live the life of “independent action” she had long aspired to and reassured her that the social rules about excessive duty to family she would therefore be breaking were unworthy of her respect.

Addams had one more major assumption to reject before she could feel free to move to Chicago and start a settlement house – the assumption that an upper-middle-class, educated woman could ignore the suffering of the poor. The European thinker whose book dismantled that assumption for her was Leo Tolstoy. The book was his widely influential, though hardly known today, *What To Do?*[15] Published in the United States in1887, it told of Tolstoy’s first encounter with urban poverty when he assisted with the Moscow Census of 1881. The experience, intersecting with his strengthening Christian faith, caused a revolution in his life. Aristocratic by birth, he became revulsed by his dependence on the work of others and decided to abandon comfort and to live the life of a peasant, working in the fields of his own estate and investing his wealth to improve the peasants’ education and healthcare. What Addams took from his book was not that she should take up a peasant life, but that persons of wealth ought indeed concern themselves with people in poverty. She took from it the lesson she most wanted to learn.[16]

In addition to needing help in rebutting assumptions she had long held that were blocking her ability to act, Addams needed positive ideas about what to do, why to do it,

and how. This is a large topic, which I explore more fully in my book. For purposes of today's talk, I'll set aside the most important influence on her plans – that of the British social Christian thinkers like T.H. Green and Samuel Barnett – and will focus here, again, on Leo Tolstoy.

In a second book, *My Religion*,[17] Tolstoy helped Addams formulate the central ideal that shaped the approach, or method – the ideal of nonviolence, or nonresistance. To be sure, Addams had been thoroughly trained as a child and young woman in the Christian message of love that was the source of Tolstoy's inspiration. But it was not until she read *My Religion*, published in the United States in 1885, the book in which Tolstoy writes at length about Jesus Christ's teaching "to resist not evil," that she understood the profound implications of that teaching. Tolstoy wrote that anger was "an abnormal, pernicious, and morbid state."[18] Taking that insight to heart, Addams set out in 1889, as she wrote a few years later, to "live with opposition to no man, with recognition of the good in every man, even the meanest."[19] This moral philosophy became her reform method of cooperation, and thereafter it permeated nearly everything she did as a friend, neighbor, settlement leader, and reformer. Addams felt profoundly grateful to Tolstoy for his positive influence on her. When she was 35, she made a pilgrimage to Tolstoy's home in Russia to pay the great man her respects. And throughout the later part of the 1890s, she gave speeches about Tolstoy and why his ideas mattered. Writing in her 70s, she described *My Religion* as the book that changed her life.

The Nineties

Addams liked to say when she moved to the industrial west side of Chicago in 1889 that her new hectic life forced her to give up her former habit of sitting by a fire reading a good book. No doubt her crowded days of participating in the life of the neighborhood, leading clubs and classes, and managing a rapidly growing organization allowed her less time for reading but, voracious reader that she was, she could not give up books altogether.

Figuring out just what books she was reading at any point of her life is one of the intriguing challenges for a biographer. The period of the 1880s is perhaps the easiest, as she often mentioned books she was reading in her correspondence. Later in life she mentioned books in letters less often. Other clues come from quotations from books that she used in speeches. One can at least be sure that she had read the book before she gave the speech. When that date is triangulated with the date of the publication of the book in its American edition, it is possible to arrive at an educated guess as to when she read it.

Happily, in some cases she gives a hand to the perplexed biographer by discussing books in her published writings. This makes it possible to identify several books by leading Europeans that were strong influences on her in the1890s, during her first ten years in Chicago. Today I will discuss just one – a famous book that is virtually synonymous with radicalism: German Karl Marx's *Capital*.[20]

Addams read the book for the first time in 1888, while she was in London visiting Toynbee Hall, and, not surprisingly, she tells us in *Twenty Years*, she disliked it. Marx's severely materialist, economic determinist understanding of history shocked and revolted

her deeply idealistic soul. She felt the book's real impact only later, in 1894, when she reread it at a time when she seriously doubted that capitalism was the best way to organize the economy.

In 1894 Chicago and the nation were immersed in the second year of a serious economic depression. More than 40 percent of the city's workforce was laid off. With Hull House swamped with hungry and homeless people seeking work, Addams found herself suddenly deeply perplexed by economic questions. Capitalism's failure to provide economic security was profoundly self-evident. Yet she had never studied economics and felt stymied by her ignorance. While serving on a citywide charity committee that was attempting to set wages for street cleaning jobs for the unemployed, she was forced her to confront her own lack of knowledge about market forces and wages. She subsequently undertook "the most serious economic reading I have ever done."[21] She wanted to understand the causes of poverty and the ways to prevent it in the future.

This time she approached Marx's *Capital* with a greater appreciation of the power of economic forces and a greater willingness to recognize the dark side of capitalism. She also brought to the book a great longing, she writes in *Twenty Years*, "for the comfort of a definite social creed" that could explain "the social chaos" all around her.[22] Equally important, she now had many friends who were Marxists, some of them European immigrants who lived in the neighborhood, and they were pressing her on every side to become a socialist. But the friend who was most influential in this regard was Florence Kelley, an American resident at Hull House who had become a Marxist socialist in Germany, knew Frederic Engels, and had been the first to translate into English his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. [23]

Addams did not become a Marxist socialist, of course. As she explains in *Twenty Years*, the strict economic determinism offended her since it was "so baldly dependent on the theory of class consciousness,"[24] which in turn argued that a woman like herself – a woman of wealth – could never go beyond her class perspective and understand the worker's point of view.[25] Addams understood this rejection of the revolutionary possibilities of human sympathy to amount to a rejection of her entire theory of social reform, and she could not agree.

But Marx's critical stance on capitalism did appeal to her. Jane Addams' 1895 interpretation of the 1894 Pullman Strike, "A Modern Lear," includes references to the "proletariat" and "the doctrine of emancipation."[26] She continued to argue in that speech and subsequent speeches for sympathy across class lines, but she no longer could deny the existence in the United States of a great divide between the classes, which she admitted was painfully obvious once the strike had erupted.

Conclusion

In this talk I have focused on some of the European authors whose writings were most influential on Addams during her early years. This leaves the impression that she was not also heavily influenced by American authors, which of course she was – most notably by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Perhaps the broader point is that in her formative years, and especially before she moved to Chicago, the authors of books from both sides of the Atlantic were her companions, friends, and sparring partners – they supplied the voices of insight that challenged her assumptions and, most importantly, reinforced her own doubts and hopes.

Addams was aware of her debt to the authors of books; her gratitude is captured in a tender passage she wrote when she was in her fifties. When a person "finds himself morally isolated among those hostile to his immediate aims," she observed, "his reading assures him that other people in the world have thought as he does….He has become conscious of a cloud of witnesses torn out of literature and warmed into living comradeship."[27] Like any reader looking back, what Addams remembered then was that the books confirmed her own thinking. But we can have no doubt that at the time she read them, they also stretched her mind to take in new ideas and make them her own.

But to return to the narrower case of books by Europeans. The ideas she drew from their writings – key ones of which I have outlined here – not only gave her comfort and challenge; they also, in time, shaped her reform career. Addams' entire life work embodied George Sand's belief in women's right to independent thought and action, George Eliot's confidence in women as powerful, and John Stuart Mill's belief that women should have a proper outlet for their active faculties; her reform agenda was derived from Leo Tolstoy's conviction that a person of wealth had a moral responsibility to engage actively with issues of poverty and Karl Marx's insight that capitalism oppressed the powerless; the three theories of reform method that dominated her thought and action after 1889 were her theory of cooperation, learned first from Robert Owen; her theory of the family and the social claims, which was based on what she learned from Mazzini; and her theory of nonviolence, learned from Tolstoy. Many other books and experiences, of course, influenced her willingness to enact these ideas, but she met them first in books by Europeans.

[1] Louise W. Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 57-58.
[2] Robert Dale Owen, "The Social Experiment at New Harmony," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1873, pp. 236-237.
[3] Knight, p. 65.
[4] Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), p. 143.
[5] Margaret Fuller, *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845; reprint, New York: Norton, 1971).
[6] Quoted in Knight, p. 87.
[7] George Eliot, *Romola* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1863; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 93.
[8] Quoted in Knight, p. 145.
[9] The two speeches were "Breadgivers" and "Cassandra." *See* Knight, *Citizen*, pp. 96-97, 106-08.
[10] Guiseppe Mazzini, *Duties of Man* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1862).
[11] Emilie Ashurt Venturi, *Joseph Mazzini: A Memoir by Emilie Ashurst Venturi with Two Essays by Mazzini*, 2nd ed. (London: King, 1875).
[12] Mazzini, *Duties of Man*, p. 41.
[13] John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women and On Liberty* (New York: Henry Holt & Sons, 1885).
[14] Mill, p. 12.
[15] Leo Tolstoy, *What to Do?* (trans. Isabel F. Hapgood) (New York: Crowell, 1887).
[16] Knight, p. 149.
[17] Leo Tolstoy, *My Religion, and The Gospel in Brief* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899).
[18] Tolstoy, op. cit., pp. 85, 263, 267.
[19] Quoted in Knight, p. 184.
[20] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (trans. from the 3d German ed. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling and ed. by Frederick Engels) (London: S. Sonnenschein, Lowrey, 1887).
[21] Quoted in Knight, p. 292.
[22] Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes*, (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p. 161.
[23] Knight, p. 294. Frederic Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (trans. Florence Kelly) (New York: John W. Lovell Company, 1887).
[24] Addams, op. cit., p. 187.
[25] Knight, p. 296.
[26] Jane Addams, "A Modern Lear," in *The Social Thought of Jane Addams* (ed. Christopher Lasch) (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 120-121.
[27] Knight, p. 156. The phrase "could of witnesses" comes from the Bible, Hebrews 12:1.