

BOOK REVIEW

## Jane Addams's Evolutionary Theorizing: Constructing "Democracy and Social Ethics."

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Scott L. Pratt

University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, USA; Email: [spratt@uoregon.edu](mailto:spratt@uoregon.edu)

Jane Addams, recognized now as both a significant feminist thinker and a co-founder of classical American pragmatism, was also a philosopher embedded in the intellectual life of her own day. Marilyn Fischer's book, *Jane Addams's Evolutionary Theorizing*, looks at Addams anew and through the very specific lens of Addams's first book, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902). Rather than reading Addams with present-day meanings in mind for key terms such as "democracy," "sympathy," "evolution," and "ethics," Fischer takes up Addams in relation to the intellectual context of the late nineteenth century. Her strategy is to search "through late nineteenth-century writings to decode the language with which Addams and her contemporaries exchanged ideas" in order to understand the ideas in light of what William James called their "penumbra" of associations. These associations then serve as the framework for the meaning of Addams's analysis and conclusions.

In *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams frequently relied on ideas developed in the context of the evolutionary theory of her day. As a result, when "[p]laced on a conceptual map of social evolutionary theorizing, Addams's conceptions of democracy and social ethics take on deeper meanings, while being transformed in sometimes jarring ways" (3). The result is a study that at once resituates Addams's conception of democracy and ethics outside the present world and raises concerns about the resulting view. "The historiography [that Addams's view] assumed and the science it relied on are now outdated. Most of the theorists who worked within the paradigm are ignored today and with good reason. The voices we remember most championed imperialism and white supremacy and used the discourse to justify unspeakable violence" (184). Fischer's reading of Addams's first book is compelling, and even though it raises the question of the value of the work in light of the resources used, it also serves as an excellent illustration of how a philosopher can engage both the science and social problems of her day and generate a transformative philosophy.

With the founding of Hull House in 1889 in an immigrant neighborhood on Halsted Street in Chicago, Addams took up both the need to better understand human communities and find ways of using that understanding to better the circumstances of the people who lived around her. Hull House, part of the "settlement movement" of the late nineteenth century, provided a wide variety of privately funded social services to the residents of the Halsted Street neighborhood. Staffed by resident workers (primarily young, white, college-educated women), Hull House quickly became a recognized

leader in the development and delivery of social services that included child care, health care, after-school programs for youth, food support, and citizenship and cooking classes, among many other programs. With the success of Hull House as a model “settlement,” Addams became one of the most visible and influential women in America. When World War I began in Europe, however, Addams’s antiwar activities led to her condemnation that culminated in claims that she was a communist and “the most dangerous woman in America.” She nevertheless continued to write and speak out on issues of justice, suffrage for women, the needs of the poor, and peace. She co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920 and, in 1935, was the first American woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

*Democracy and Social Ethics* was the product of a decade of experience at Hull House and relied on texts that Addams originally prepared as speeches and occasional publications. Fischer takes advantage of Addams’s compositional strategy to analyze both the final book and the addresses that served as draft chapters in order to identify her source material. Addams, like most authors of the time, often calls on the work of contemporary writers but rarely gives citations. “Identifying Addams’s sources and examining her seemingly odd syntax and turns of phrase,” Fischer writes, “does far more than supply the documentation she omitted. It opens the gateway to the intellectual world in which Addams lived, worked, and thought” (14). The result is that Fischer’s “method of textual analysis shifts Addams’s position from sole author of a text to that of a participant in a vast, international conversation about the day’s most pressing social problems” (15).

Over the course of seven chapters, Fischer examines key early texts by Addams and shows how they form the intellectual foundation for her project. The first two chapters establish Addams’s background in nineteenth-century evolutionary theory. Addams accepts and echoes the view that humans are organisms motivated by “instincts,” including the instinct of sympathy, and that these instincts are manifested as active emotions that give rise to imagination and intelligence in humans, which are the evolved means by which they adjust to their changing environments. Responding to environments is not, however, solely the task of individual humans but also requires social organization that, like individual organisms, also evolves. In order to analyze present social problems, Fischer’s study addresses both the history of the problem and the environment in which it occurs. Fischer describes these two aspects of Addams’s analyses as historical and geographical axes.

The geographical axis results in a “neighborhood point of view,” which Addams calls “propinquity,” emphasizing the near proximity of the things that matter in understanding and addressing a problem. The resulting perspective keeps the focus on both knowing and practice in the community at hand and serves as a ground for the emergence of norms in light of local practices, interests, and concerns. The resulting ethical guidelines that help direct solutions to present problems “emerge from within specifically located moral disturbances and change over time as the situation evolves and human intervention takes place” (48). The resulting guidelines are not universal but generally establish the values that make possible the growth of community as a whole.

The historical axis, discussed in Fischer’s third chapter, is the evolutionary history of the community at hand that converges with the geographical axis in the present situation. The historical axis is framed, Fischer argues, by Addams’s reading of the theory of social evolution as proposed by the Fabian Socialists, Sidney Webb, Beatrice Potter Webb, and Thomas Kirkup. For these theorists, social evolution is a process that moves from one social organization to another, in this case, from the steady state of feudalism to the new and better steady state of socialism. Feudalism in this theory is a

social organization defined by small, self-sufficient villages subject to aristocratic rule, and individuals are defined by relationships “hierarchical and patriarchal, but [also] ethical in that they carried reciprocal obligations” (72). For Addams, socialism is “the economic side of democracy” (81) where democracy “names the processes that lead to social health” (40). Socialism and democracy are elements of the next stage of human development that Addams calls the “age of association.” Both feudalism and socialism are means of adjusting to a changing environment, but feudalism’s static structure and small scale have become obsolete in the increasingly industrial and urban world of the late nineteenth century.

Capitalism, in Fabian theory, is not a stage to be reached but “a temporary phase of chaotic disequilibrium” (84) that includes elements of both the new stage and the old. “The highly integrated operations of industrial factories,” Fischer observes, “typify the age of association, while factory control by a single owner is a feudal practice” (85). In order to understand social problems in this evolutionary context, Addams analyzes problems by identifying aspects of the situation still tied to feudalism and other aspects that are part of the new age. One of the central examples of this approach is found in Addams’s 1894 address “A Modern Lear” analyzing the 1894 Pullman Strike. Although the Pullman Company (which produced and operated train cars for all of America’s railroads) was a modern industrial organization that included organized workers who helped to determine working conditions, it was run by George Pullman. As the CEO, Pullman could be generous and innovative (he constructed a town for the workers that included all the modern conveniences) but also arbitrary and capricious. When the value of Pullman stock fell, he raised the rent in his town but not the wages of his workers. The result was a catastrophic, nationwide rail strike. Addams analyzed the problem as the intersection of feudalism and the socialist character of a modern industry. The solution, in her view, was to convert the management of the company to a democratic structure in which workers played a key role. Fischer’s investigation of Addams’s sources makes this reading of “A Modern Lear” apparent and helps to explain both the reception of the address (it was rejected by many leading periodicals) and why Addams does not offer an analysis of the strike based on Marxism or labor economics.

Fischer’s fourth chapter introduces the “moral geology” of Wilhelm Wundt as the background for understanding Addams’s critique of municipal politics. Here Fabian social evolution and Wundt’s theory of moral evolution come together. For Wundt, morality first emerges as “concrete, tied to specific actions of specific individuals and encoded in customary practices” (105). Kings and princes, ancestors and mythological gods are admired and emulated in practices that become social habits. With the evolution of the age of association, particular and personal moral commitments that characterized feudalism are replaced by moral principles that are applicable to everyone in the community united around shared interests. The political corruption of Chicago politics marked a moment when both the old morality and the new vied for dominance.

In the fifth chapter, Fischer examines the background for Addams’s concept of education. Her source material in this case was the work of Patrick Geddes, founder of the “Outlook Tower” in Edinburgh that was part museum and part research institute. Following the model of Outlook Tower, Hull House developed its Labor Museum that, like Geddes’s project, was “designed to foster an awareness of people’s place in the social organism and a historically informed appreciation of their social value” (134). By making the collections and research available to the neighborhood, the Labor Museum itself became part of the evolutionary process. It illustrated the value of the immigrants’ own work and culture in order to foster a more democratic self-

understanding among the neighbors. Such efforts to promote evolutionary change, Addams held, were continuous with the work of science so that social reform itself was “within the penumbra of the term ‘science’” (147). The source material identified by Fischer in the sixth chapter is the effort, at the end of the nineteenth century, to establish sociology as a science. Following the lead of Lester F. Ward, Addams accepted the idea that “[t]he true test of science is the application of its principles to some useful purpose” (151) where the principles were both descriptive and prescriptive. Science is not simply a process of gathering data and producing explanatory accounts, but, as Albion Small said in 1894 of sociology (the new science of human communities), it is “merely a moral philosophy conscious of its task and systematically pursuing knowledge of cause and effect within this process of moral evolution” (154). Human evolution tends toward an all-inclusive harmonious state that Addams viewed as democratic equilibrium. It is the role of science not simply to study the process, but to foster its progress toward greater, more harmonious and democratic association.

The final chapter discusses the synthesis of disparate preparatory addresses and articles into the final manuscript for *Democracy and Social Ethics*. As Fischer observes, little of the book’s content is new apart from a brief introduction and a short coda. “What is new,” Fischer writes, “is Addams’s substitution of individual ethics (or individual morality) and social ethics (or social morality) for the particular historical axes she had used in the essays” (168). For Fischer, the result is that “Addams’s historicism is dampened and conceptual coherence is not achieved” (183). Although the resulting structure “imposed on the essays with minimal revision, fits awkwardly” (168), the new frame opens the analysis to a wider audience, less informed about the details of evolutionary theory but still part of a wider and growing dialogue about the individual and society in the context of industrialization.

This reframing of her earlier work enables Addams’s book to be more than a historical artifact tied to its intellectual time and place. “By allowing the book to be conceptually untidy,” Fischer concludes, “Addams produced a richer, more enduring text” (186). The evolutionary theory of the day becomes a means of interpreting a larger philosophical vision of human experience that James described as “an alternation of flights and perchings” (186). Each theory offers a different account of the stable moments, the “perching” in life and in human community, and accounts of change, the “flights” that lead from one moment to the next. Fabian socialism, Wundt’s moral “geology,” even Tolstoy’s discussion of art and Geddes’s Outlook Tower are, Fischer observes, captured in the same pattern. Addams’s philosophical work in *Democracy and Social Ethics* is an attempt to make that pattern of stability and change apparent to her readers so that they can contribute to the change and growth of individuals in community. Fischer’s book demonstrates that, by reading Addams in her intellectual context, readers can see the way that theory intersects with action and that, regardless of theory, there is a fundamental pattern of experience that requires attention. “Theorists today,” Fischer concludes, “give us new perchings, but the experiences of flight, of process, of being pulled askew are ones we encounter every day” (187).

To what extent is Fischer’s book a contribution to feminist philosophy? Despite a lack of explicit discussion, it is clear that Fischer’s work, like Addams’s, is at least committed to a wide conception of feminism, concerned about the status and treatment of women and promoting change that will directly affect women by giving them greater control of their lives and communities. Like many in the late nineteenth-century women’s-rights movement, Fischer observes that Addams “would devote a significant measure of her political activism to women’s full inclusion in public and political

affairs” (30). However, Addams’s feminism in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, and the addresses that preceded it, go beyond the analyses of the feminism of her day and propose a critical conception of intersectionality framed by Fabian evolutionary theory. “It may be that Addams’s understanding of ‘feudal’ covers much of the conceptual territory now accorded to ‘patriarchy’ and ‘intersectionality’” (98). Feudalism is the imposition of rigid hierarchies and a moral theory meant to preserve them. Such hierarchies are not simply gendered, raced, or classed but are framed by intersections of difference. Although Addams does not label her work this way, her approach leads to analyses that address the oppression of poor women in the Halsted Street neighborhood and the complicity of middle-class women in their practices of charity, while also recognizing that those same middle-class women are denied opportunities in the economic, social, and educational spheres open to men of their class. Fischer’s reading provides resources to see Addams as a feminist theorist with more in common with Patricia Hill Collins and Donna Haraway than with their second-wave antecedents. As Fischer’s study makes plain, Addams’s philosophy is at once of a model of method in her response to, and use of, the best science of her day and of the pursuit of an overt liberatory program committed to transforming society.

*Jane Addams’s Evolutionary Theorizing* is essential reading for those studying late nineteenth-century North American and British philosophers. Fischer’s model engagement with the intellectual context of the day changes how these thinkers are understood and enables readers to think again about the relevance and promise of past work in the face of a troubled future. The book will also be useful in courses in American Studies and the history of American philosophy, to be read alongside other works, including Charlene Haddock Seigfried’s *Feminism and Pragmatism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, Cornel West’s *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, and Trevor Pearce’s *Pragmatism’s Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy*. Finally, Fischer’s book is important for feminist scholars and activists who approach today’s problems as intersectional. Understanding Addams’s work as Fischer frames it gives her practical efforts at Hull House, in politics, and in peace activism new and even more relevant meaning in the present world.

**Scott L. Pratt** is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oregon. His research and teaching interests are in American philosophy (including pragmatism, feminism, philosophies of race, and Native American philosophy), philosophy of education, and the history of logic. In addition to numerous articles, he is coauthor of *American Philosophy from Wounded Knee to the Present* (Bloomsbury, 2015), a comprehensive history of philosophy in North America from 1890 to the present, and author of two books, including *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Indiana University Press, 2002), on the influence of Native American thought on European American philosophy.