

## **“European Intellectuals and the Radicalization of Jane Addams”**

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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.



## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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







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.”<sup>14</sup> 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,

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*,<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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."<sup>19</sup> 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 the 1890s, 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*.<sup>20</sup>

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."<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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*.<sup>23</sup>



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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.

