

## Jane Adams: an experience of multicultural education and social care. Chicago, 1889 – 1910

Ph. D. Silvana Panza

Department of Human, Philosophy and Education Sciences  
University of Salerno, Italy

### Abstract

The focus of this study concerns a deep analysis on the innovative educational method utilized by Jane Addams (1860-1935) at Hull House. She was a philosopher, but first of all we can consider this woman as a sociologist, because of her careful survey on society, Addams's activities also implied a new educational project based on the social care of poor workers and their families. She chose for her extraordinary experience one of the most slummy suburbs in Chicago, where with her friend Ellen Gates Starr founded in 1889 this settlement. The main intention of the sociologist was to give immigrants lots of opportunities to understand Chicago's social and political context. It was important to create a place where immigrant families could socialize, learning more about their rights and possibilities. For this reason Addams suggested that it needed to start from education, taking a particular care of children who lived in that area. It was necessary to promote a reform on the different culture learning to support immigrants in their integration, people who came there hoping to find a job into factories. In 1889 when the settlement was founded, there were about four hundred social houses around the States. Addams' s important social and political idea was to develop a democratic society, where each person could recognize himself/herself as a part of it, avoiding marginalization and segregation. The sociologist was a central figure at Hull House for about twenty years.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, democracy, social care, immigrant children, integration

### Introduction

By analysing at the end of the Nineteenth century (1889) Jane Addams's work at Hull House in Chicago, we can observe how her educational method has been as modern as innovative. In fact, in such a society, where education was above all considered as a mean to obtain a factory job in an industrial city, Addams was able to open a path towards a transformation.

Starting from the first decades of the Nineteenth century, industrialization and urbanization grew up so rapidly in the States that it was more and more necessary to have got a lot of labour force to increase the production.

As we know, cities were changing their own physical aspect. They were crowned by different people and it seemed the immigration flow, coming from Europe, was ongoing. People, trying to better their life, followed their own American dream and when they got down, after a dangerous travel, at Ellis Island, relaxed, trusted in their choose.

Of course, industrialization and urbanization began long before in the Us, but in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> it seemed they had a great evolution, and as these phenomena grew up, as the social problems got worse, spreading out all around the Us.

After all, the ethnic miscellaneous was not a new phenomenon for the Us which could be considered as a multi-ethnic nation in the Eighteenth century yet, before the Independence War. In fact, analysing this period, we can observe an extraordinary ethnic fragmentation around all the territory. Who lived in this country was used to share different religions and cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup>

In such a colourful context, Chicago appeared as one of the most important industrial city of the States and the largest one in the Midwest. Its slums were full of immigrants and countryside people, looking for a job in the manufacturing settings.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. D. Lacombe, (2003), *La crise de l'identité américaine*, Paris, Gallimard.

Most of them could not speak English and had a low level of education. So there was a high rate of analphabetism and lots were the different languages which crossed into the streets. Children, boys, girls, adults tried to survive, working hard in factories for more than twelve hours a day, earning some coins. In the worst cases, people begged on the street to help feeding their family. Women and girls often fell down into the darkness of the prostitution, while little boys and young men learnt quickly to steel everything they could with great ability.

The three phenomena: industrialization, urbanization and immigration created a chaos and required of course some politic actions to establish a new asset. One of them was realized at the beginning of the Twentieth century, as the famous policy called *melting pot*. Actually, this experience represented above all a theoretical thought, in fact it was just an action where immigrants always sacrificed their own identity, homologating themselves to the wasp pattern. Moreover, during the first period of this experimentation, people who came into the States, after a while, felt a discomfort derived from the different reality he had to face up with, as later stated Thomas and Znaniecki. In fact they made a deep survey, observing carefully letters by immigrants who came from the Polish countryside and now moved to Chicago's society. The Polish, in fact, felt like emarginated subjects. They lost the membership sense to their original nation, but at the same time they didn't feel to belong to American society, only perceived themselves as hybrid individuals. They just were marginal men and women.<sup>1</sup>

In this atmosphere of great changes, Jane Addams (1860 – 1935) worked, trying to solve the daily difficulties which afflicted the poor's life. First of all, she was interested in experimenting an adequate manner to integrate immigrants, as consequences she aimed at giving them other chances. The sociologist and reformer, as we can define her, with her friend Ellen Gates Starr founded in 1889 the settlement Hull House in Chicago, a place where all people would have learnt to make a democratic and peaceful society. She was also involved in reforming the child labour, whose law was approved in 1902. Hull House was her main job for about twenty years, from 1889 to 1910. After that, the sociologist dedicated her life not only to solve the social problems but started fighting for peace against World War I and all kind of conflict. All her life was based on the ideals of democracy and peace. So, Hull House became a centre of lots of meetings, where all people could take part. What the settlement offered were useful services, so it could be compared to a rudimental welfare state.

In the first decade of the new century she was firmly aligned against War World I, founding the *American Union against Militarism* under her effigy "no war is right". To sustain her fight, in 1915 she became the leader of the feminine association *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom*, obtaining the Nobel prize for peace in 1931, four years before she died. She, of course, was also involved in the feminine fight to obtain the vote and in the feminine labour. In fact, she was one of the most active supporters of the *Chicago Women's Trade Union League* (1903) and of the *National American Women Suffrage* (1911).

### **Jane Addams (1860 – 1935)**

Laura Jane Addams was born on September 6, 1860 in Cedarville, Illinois (Us). Her parents John Addams, a Quacker tendencies man, and Sarah Weber were very active people both in social and political issues. John Addams was for about sixteen years in the State Legislature and directed a bank as well as a railroad, while Sarah run the domestic questions and took care of her eight children. Unfortunately, when Jane was only three, her mother died and Martha, her eldest sister looked after of the family. From that moment, Jane developed a close relation with her father, who was not the only important figure in her life, as we read in her biography some years later:

"All of these are directly connected with my father, although of course I recall many experiences apart from him."<sup>2</sup>

She learnt from her father the moral and ethic behaviour. Anyway another change happened in her life, when her sister Martha died at sixteen. John Addams married Anna Haldeman (1868). Anna was a sophisticated woman who played the guitar and the piano, as well as a great reader. Jane learnt a lot from her, in fact she started to appreciate music and art. Moreover Addams learnt from Anna her elegant manners, utilizing them to face up with Chicago's society.

Addams and her sisters attended a female college of Rockford, a college where the female headmaster supported the equality in education between girls and boys. In this high school, Jane could elaborate an independent thought, developing her interest for feminist ideals.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr., W. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, (1920), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, Boston, Badger.

<sup>2</sup> J. Addams, (2008), *Twenty Years at Hull House*, New York, Dover Publications, p.1, (first published 1910)

After the degree, in 1881, and the unexpected death of her father in the same year, she attended for about one year the Women's Medical College that left because of a health trouble. In the same period, George Haldeman, Anna's son, asked her to marry him, but Jane refused, she considered George only a good friend. So she decided to travel throughout Europe (1883-1885). This was her first approach with European culture. In 1887, she returned to the old Continent, for the second time with Ellen Starr, her friend of Rockford with whom she kept on maintaining an epistolary relationship.

In London, Jane and Ellen visited the Toymbee Hall, a settlement house founded in 1884. It was there that Addams decided to create a place like this in Chicago to help the poor. The second visit to Europe represented an important step to define her life vocation. In fact, coming back to the States, Addams and Gates Starr moved to a residence called Hull House in 1889. The building was situated in a poor and crowded industrial district of Chicago (on Halstead and Polk Street), a slummy area full of immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

The residence was very large, with a playground and a camp near Lake Geneva. From that moment, other female social and political reformers settled at Hull House, helping Addams in her social work, as Julia Lathrop, who arrived in 1890<sup>2</sup>, and Florence Kelly who came a year later<sup>3</sup>.

These women already activists, contributed to transform Hull House not only in a place of education but also in a center of social research.

Among these women who moved to Hull House, there were some of them, as Ellen Gates Starr and Mary Rozet Smith who had an affective relation with Addams. Mary Rozet Smith was a wealthy woman who supported Hull House financially and who had an important emotional relation with Addams. Their couplehood in fact lasted up to 1934, when Mary died, a year before Jane's death.

In her stay to the residence, Addams better took consciousness of her interests and ideals, and transformed her philosophical thought in an empirical social experience.

Her critical observations and her sociological survey have been written by herself in two famous biographical works: *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910)<sup>4</sup> and *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House, September 1909 to September 1929*<sup>5</sup>, (1930).

Her research could be compared to that did by Charles Booth in a London slum on people's life and labour, published in London from 1891 to 1903.

At Hull House she invited many intellectuals of the time as John Dewey, William James and George Herbert Mead to give lectures, establishing with all of them a mutual exchange of ideas to better the condition of individuals and try solutions to social troubles.

According to Addams, knowledge became more efficient in the reciprocity, it meant that a good educational method should consider a mutual cultural exchange in learning. So immigrants could learn American culture but also teach their own experience. In the suburbs, where she worked, the change could come recognizing the value of each person. So American culture could take a great contribution from immigrants' traditions. It needed to rebuild the sense of a good neighbourhood that represented one of the ancient aspects of the community. The reformer observed and described in her writings that:

"the variety of impulses manifested by people of different ages – the impulse to imagine and play evident in young children, the impulse to make idealistic commitments so prevalent among young adults, and the impulse to nurture and teach so important for mature men and women."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr., E. Condlife Lagemann, *Introduction*, in J. Addams, (2006), *On Education*, New York – London, New Brunswick.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Clifford Lathrop, (born June 29, 1858, Rockford, U.S.-died April 15, 1932, Rockford), American social welfare worker who was the first director of the U.S. Children's Bureau, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Clifford-Lathrop>.

<sup>3</sup> Florence Kelley, in full Florence Molthrop Kelley (born Sept. 12, 1859, Philadelphia, Pa., U.S.-died Feb. 17, 1932, Philadelphia), social reformer who contributed to the development .

<sup>4</sup> J. Addams, (2008), *Twenty Years at Hull House*, quoted.

<sup>5</sup> J. Addams, (1930), *The Second Twenty Years at Hull House*, New York, The MacMillan Company.

<sup>6</sup> E. Condlife Lagemann, *Introduction*, in J. Addams, (2006), *On Education*, quoted, pp. 3-4.

Addams, in her activities, supported W. E. B. DuBois in the foundation of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* in 1909, one of the first important association for the American African people's rights.

During this period she dedicated most of her energy in supporting of peace against War World I, receiving in 1931 the Nobel Peace prize for her tireless efforts. Addams died of cancer on May 21 1935.<sup>1</sup>

Today Jane Addams is recognized for her important activism in social issues, as a reformer who left a large intellectual heritage, writings books and articles about her experience.

On December 2007, it was established the *Jane Addams Day* in Illinois, supported by the *Illinois Division of the American Association of University Women*.

In 2014 Addams received a bronze plaque by *San Francisco's Raimbow Honor Walk* as a *LGTB* heroine, and one year later she became one of the most important icon of *LGTB History Month*.

### **Hull House: a first approach to intercultural education**

When Hull House was open in Chicago in 1889, around the States started to spread out a real movement of social houses, and various types of social settlements rose, as it was a fashion. In the same year (1889), for example, it was founded the College Settlement in New York City, a network of women's colleges. All this was inspired by the experiment made at Toynbee Hall in a London slum in 1884, one of the early settlements. The main aim of the most social residences was to take care of people who lived in poverty. Moreover social houses tried to develop a workers consciousness, so all individuals could understand better their conditions. Giving assistance for each necessity, the social places, as already explained before, have been defined pre-welfare state systems.

These settlements became, after their foundation, an attraction for lots intellectuals and people who were involved with the poverty issues. The settlers organized education classes for children and adults, inserted evening classes for workers. Moreover it had to organize debates and discussions. They were centre to socialize and learn.

Hull House, as all the social settlement, followed Toynbee's example. Jane Addams, attracted by the re-birth of the ancient spirit of neighbourhood in London slum, tried to organize the same atmosphere in Chicago. Among all the activities she did at the residence, she was very good at raising easily funds for the settlement. In fact, thanks to her heritage, she had a strong influence on the wealthy people.

Addams aimed to integrate all the immigrants who lived into the slummy area around Hull House with American individuals who were in the same zone. Her idea of Americanization was not in favour of a melting pot, policy approved at the beginning of the Twenty century. So we can observe that her thought was forward, her mind was already crowded by the idea of a salad bowl, an idea affirmed after the *melting pot* failure, in the second half of the Twentieth.

Another important point of Addams' s theory concerned children education. She was worried for them who had not time to play or spend their leisure time because they worked. In fact, she emphasized the necessity to give importance to the game and the recreation time, destroyed by the industrial city.<sup>2</sup>

The development of industrial society in Us meant, for one side, also an improvement of the educational system. Nevertheless, at the second half of the Ninetieth century, public school was organized to support the industrial society. Students generally went out school at fourteen to work directly into the factory. From that instant, they started their dark daily routine, losing their dreams: they passed from infancy to adult life. In Europe, education thanks to many scholars, were slowly changing. Georg Simmel, for example, suggested an interesting approach to school. He moved up the postmodern image of education which had to represent the individual emancipation in the city. He emphasized that teachers must help students to develop the autonomy of their thought and the ability to join knowledge and existence.<sup>3</sup>

Addams 's method at Hull House, to improve people's knowledge and consciousness, was based on democracy and freedom concepts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr., Allen F. Davis, (2000), *American Heroines: The life and the Legend of Jane Addams*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee Publisher.

<sup>2</sup> J. Addams, *The Spirit of Youths and the City Streets*, Chicago, The McMillan Company, 2005 (First published 1909).

<sup>3</sup> Cfr., G. Simmel, (1998), *Sociologia*, Venezia, Ed. di Comunità, (first published 1909 in German).

"The democratic ideal demands of school that it shall give the child's own experience a social value, that it shall teach him to direct his own activities and adjust them to those of other people."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover she stated that in education in regard children it is necessary to start from their own experiences, using spontaneous activities. So it is the street to give him the first education.<sup>2</sup>

For the sociologist, society was a place where "all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, race or economic status, would have the opportunity fully to express and to develop their talents, interests and ambitions."<sup>3</sup>

So education at Hull House was used as a "practice of Freedom", as later suggested, supporting Addams' s vision, bell hooks, the Afro-American writer who keeps on fighting against all the types of discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

The first subjects to understand her educational philosophy were the children who followed her classes. Addams, as she wrote, considered Hull House as a bridge to build a new relation between immigrant children and their parents, who showed more difficulties to integrate themselves into the new asset. The same difficulty of disagreement seemed to characterize the relation between European experiences and American ones. So the residence had to become a place where immigrants could create relations, transferring their culture to Americans and vice versa.<sup>5</sup>

The day spent at the Chicago's social house was very intensive. The residents offered to the audience a myriad of educational projects, thank also to the structures Hull House had. For example, it was introduced a musical school with a theatre, were the neighbourhood residents learnt to play. Some plays were dedicated to the importance of women in history.

Moreover, it was added the Butler's Museum of Art, which the workers of the suburbs started visiting. Art was seen as a relaxing activity for immigrant workers who were stuck in factories all the day. The residence had also a kitchen, a library, a coffee house, a gymnasium, a swimming pool and all the comforts that could be necessary to create an harmonic community.

Addams dedicated a lot of time to immigrant children, to whom suggested to learn from their parents their original culture and heritage. So it was born the Hull House Museum which showed the parent's labour in their original countries, comparing it with the adolescents' s job in that industrial society. Children, according to her thought, had to acquire an important message: poverty did not mean pity. Thus it was necessary to overtake the old pedagogy, whose method was based on teachers' s coercion. The child was, in the most cases, obliged to follow pre-organized lessons and as result lots of children had the tendency to avoid school. The new pedagogy, on contrary, thought from child's instinct and curiosity. Children needed to discover their capacities acting in the world around them.

Addams organized her children' s classes with the narration of traditional stories told by the immigrant children who took part in. In this way, little boys and little girls, all coming from different countries, could learn and appreciated the various traditions, creating relations among them. The stories, object of the lesson, were then compared to the new reality they were living now, that is the industrial city.

This collaborative oral laboratory, is what the Brazilian pedagogue Paul Freire later would have suggested in his educational theory, that is a practice where people could learn to help each other, overtaking the different social status.

Another important aspect of Addams' s educational philosophy concerned the fact that each activity proposed at the residence must be satisfying for the working group, this constituted the main aspect of the work. In this way, who took part to the events had the pleasure to come back again.

"One thing seemed clear in regard the entertainment of immigrants, to preserve and keep whatever of value their past contained and to bring them in contact with a better type of Americans. For several years every Saturday evening the entire

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Addams, (2006), *On Education*, quoted, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr., *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr., E. Condliffe Lagemann, *Introduction*, in J. Addams, (2006), *On Education*, quoted.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr., bell hooks, (1994), *Teaching to transgress. Education as a Practice of Freedom*, London Routledge,.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr., J. Addams, (2008), *Twenty Years at Hull House*, quoted.

family of our Italian neighbours were our guests [...] during our first winters at Hull House. They came to us with [...] their incorrigible boys [...] with their need for an interpreter.”<sup>1</sup>

It was easy to perceive that the first necessity for immigrants was to understand and of course to learn English. Addams, following her educational theory, tried to use passages, read in English, about familiar subject for the various immigrants, something which remembered their own roots. For example, for Italians she read Mazzini, well known by them, and Tolstoj, she knew well, for Russian.

Joining feminism and social improvement, Addams wanted to create an educational method which could realize a good cooperation among slummy residents, showing the positive aspects of the poor workers to the other part of that society. She was not interested to the ghettoization of the slum. For this reason the audience at the meeting was variegated so as her writings could influence different subjects. She, in fact, affirmed that the occupational status could not determine a social status, thus education must give individual a dignified life and a civic consciousness. Only in this way, it was possible to obtain a social and political reform.

Addams' s education is often associated to John Dewey's pragmatism and educational method based on the democracy concept and student's experience. Dewey (1859 -1952) met Addams for the first time in 1892, when he moved to Chicago University for a lecture. In that occasion, he expressed the desire to visit Hull House. He was very surprised for the excellent work made at the residence, becoming a frequent guest of the ladies. From that moment, Addams cooperated with Dewey.

Jane Addams taught at the University of Chicago in lots of courses, always as a free teacher, refusing to be affiliated to it.

## Conclusion

This research is only one branch of a larger study about women who at the end of the Nineteenth to the first decades of the Twentieth century worked to better adults' and children's mental and physical condition through innovative educational methods. These heroines used not only practices based on democracy and freedom, but also developed empathy and compassion for different people often forgotten by their society.

They considered only philanthropists by the intellectuals of the their time, analysed their own society with attention and deepness, writing notes and biographical writings about their own observations and activities.

Today they are considered great reformers and sociologists who, thanks to a hard work, have affected their society from another point of view, in an era where the patriarchal supremacy was incontestable.

## References

- [1] J. Addams, (1930), *The Second Twenty Years at Hull House*, New York, The MacMillan Company
- [2] J. Addams, (2007), *New Ideals of Peace*, Chicago, University Press, (first published 1907)
- [3] J. Addams, (2006), *On Education*, New Brunswick, New York, London
- [4] J. Addams, (2008), *Twenty Years at Hull House*, New York, Dover Publications, (first published 1910)
- [5] Allen F. Davis, (2000), *American Heroines: The life and the Legend of Jane Addams*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee Publisher
- [6] bell hooks, (1994), *Teaching to transgress. Education as a Practice of Freedom*, London Routledge
- [7] D. Lacome, (2003), *La crise de l'identité américaine*, Paris, Gallimard
- [8] G. Simmel, (1998), *Sociologia*, Venezia, Ed. di Comunità 1998 (first published, 1909 in German).
- [9] L. Kerber, J. S. De Hart, (1995), *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, University Press, New York
- [10] W. Thomas, F. Znaniecki, (1920), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, Boston, Badger.
- [11] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Clifford-Lathrop>
- [12] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Florence-Kelley>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibidem, p.149.