

A Working Democracy: Progressivism and the Politics of Work

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Abstract

JOEL WINKELMAN: A Working Democracy Progressivism and the Politics of
Work.

(Under the direction of Michael Lienesch)

This study is an interpretation of the democratic thought of the Progressive-era United States, focusing on the role of work in the writings of Jane Addams, Herbert Croly, and John Dewey. Many other thinkers of the period turned their attention to questions of work, but Addams, Croly, and Dewey played public roles that made them uniquely influential. This study is a close reading of the work of these three Progressive thinkers. It focuses exclusively on their writings that bridge the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, identifying the period between the Pullman Strike of 1894 and World War I as a critical juncture in the development of their thought. Relying on a close reading of their academic writings, periodical pieces, public addresses and social commentary, the analysis critically examines themes of labor, occupation, and vocation, using the writers' own words to illustrate and interpret not only what they thought about work, but also how central it was to how they thought about democracy.

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1 Introduction: Progressivism and the Politics of Work

Political theorists have long-recognized the importance of work to political life. As far back as Plato, the appropriate division of labor was seen as central to the constitution of a just city. For John Locke, the purpose of government was to protect property, which he recognized as originating in labor. Analyzing the development of capitalist economies across Europe, Marx saw the distorting effects of the wage-labor system as the most significant problem of social relations in the modern era. Closer to our own time, theorists like Hannah Arendt have afforded work a central place in social life, while also concluding that the sphere of politics should be protected from its encroachments. Yet despite this tradition, recent theorists have paid too little attention to work. This study attempts to correct this oversight through an examination of the democratic thought of the Progressive-era American democratic thinkers Jane Addams, Herbert Croly, and John Dewey. It argues that, far from a distraction from politics, work is a fundamental concern of democratic life.

When political theorists have turned to work, they have often neglected to think about its meaning for democratic life. Although scholars of workplace democracy have recognized that work is indeed an important sphere of life, their primary concern is not with the character of work or its value, but with the extension of political ideals into the working world. Thus liberal political theorists led by Robert Dahl and Carole Pateman have debated whether or not the workplace should be organized as democratically as is the state.¹ Yet when these scholars have attempted to define the value

1. Robert Dahl, *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970); Carol Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Ian Shapiro, "Resources, Capacities, and Ownership: The Workmanship Ideal and Distributive Justice," *Political Theory* 19 (February 1991): 47–72; Paul Gomberg, *How to*

or meaning of work, they have tended to see it in individualistic rather than political terms. In the same way, neoconservative and conservative thinkers like Richard Sennett and Matthew Crawford have acknowledged the effects of particular forms of work on individual character, alluding to political consequences while leaving them largely unexamined.² Communitarians as well have considered how ideas about work have informed our political values, seeing the desire for personally fulfilling work as part of a larger understanding of a just society.³ Even so, thinkers like Russell Muirhead argue that the claims work makes on our politics should be more limited, that we should expect less from work, balancing its demands with our obligations to family and community. By contrast, this study argues that rather than expecting less from our work, we should expect more from it, demanding an expanded role for it in the debates that constitute our democratic politics.

One reason political theory has been reluctant to engage the claims of work is that it has given too little attention to the democratic thinkers of the Progressive-era United States. As this study shows, it was Progressive thinkers who were most concerned with meaning of work, devoting considerable attention to its changing role in an industrial society. Although some scholars see the thinkers of the period as accommodating society to the new large-scale industrial organizations, others have argued that Progressives attempted to mitigate the effects of competitive individualism

make Opportunity Equal (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008); Samuel Arnold, “The Difference Principle at Work,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20 (March 2012): 94–118.

2. Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998); Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

3. James B. Murphy, *The Moral Economy of Labor: Aristotelian Themes in Economic Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Russell Muirhead, *Just Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Beate Roessler, “Meaningful Work: Arguments from Autonomy,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 20 (March 2012): 71–93.

or foster cooperation and solidarity across class differences.⁴ Thus interpretations of Jane Addams have largely followed those of the period as a whole, divided between those who view her as a condescending middle-class moralist and those who see her as an activist committed to the cause of a diverse democracy.⁵ Herbert Croly's interpreters have sorted themselves into critics who see him as sacrificing individual rights to realize a vaguely defined national purpose, and supporters who see him as attempting to balance the power of large industrial organizations with an equally large democratic state.⁶ Since his own time, John Dewey has been dismissed by detractors who see him as

4. For interpretations that emphasize the role of Progressives in advancing the concerns of business elites, see Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967); R. Jeffrey Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: the Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890–1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982); Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991). For more sympathetic treatments, see Andrew Feffer, *The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Eldon J. Eisenach, *The Lost Promise of Progressivism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing “The People:” The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

5. For interpretations that are critical of Addams, see Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as Social Type* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965); Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890–1919* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For a view that lauds her Victorian moralism as evidence of her democratic sensibilities, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy: a Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002). More democratic interpreters include, Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885–1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Victoria Bissell Brown, review of *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* and *The Jane Addams Reader*, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 96 (Spring 2003): 101–109; Louise W. Knight, *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Maurice Hamington, *The Social Philosophy of Jane Addams* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009) and the essays collected in Wendy E. Chmielewski, Marilyn Fischer, and Carol Nackenoff, eds., *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

6. Croly's critics include John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972); David K. Nichols, “The Promise of Progressivism: Herbert Croly and the Rejection of Individual Rights,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 17 (Spring 1987): 27–39; Bob Pepperman Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt: the Legacy of Progressive Thought*

a technocratic theorist of social control, and defenders who emphasize a more populist strain in Dewey's thought that calls for robust citizen participation and deliberation.⁷ Yet throughout all of these interpretive debates, most studies of Progressive thought overlook the central role of work, particularly in the political thought in the period's most important thinkers.

The Progressive era in the United States can be seen as a time of radical rethinking about work and its relations to politics. The period marked the maturation of industrial capitalism, bringing unparalleled productivity alongside unprecedented fluctuations in employment. Proceeding through cycles of boom and bust, fortunes were made, lost, and remade again within the course of a decade. Amid the fluctuations, there also was a steady trend toward centralization in both business and government. At the same time, workers' organizations were beginning to adapt to changing conditions, transforming from craft guilds that protected the status and skill of the craft into industrial unions that sought to protect the well-being of the worker, including the unskilled, from the vicissitudes of industrial life. The concerns of the populist alliance between farmers and

(Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004). For more sympathetic interpretations, see Kevin C. O'Leary, "Herbert Croly and Progressive Democracy," *Polity* 26 (Summer 1994): 533–552; Claudio J. Katz, "Syndicalist Liberalism: The Normative Economics of Herbert Croly," *History of Political Thought* 22 (Summer 2001): 669–702; Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

7. Critical interpreters include Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1947); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffery Nowell (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971); Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism*; Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Stephen K. White, "The Very Idea of a Critical Social Science: A Pragmatist Turn," in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 310–335. Among Dewey's numerous recent defenders are James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Allan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997); Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion Morality and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009); R.W. Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37 (December 2009): 780–807; Harry Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work: Organizing the Literature," *Political Theory* 39 (October 2011): 630–660.

workers created electoral realignment, while the immigrants who fled political upheaval in Europe or chased the promises of industrial prosperity to American shores became a factor in urban politics at the state and local level. Each of these political changes was connected to the changing meaning of work.

In response to what was popularly called “the labor question,” thinkers of the period turned their attention specifically to questions of work. Social scientists and economists like Richard Ely and E.A. Ross considered the ubiquity of wage labor to be a major shift in the industrial economy, arguing that the new conditions required a new relationship between wage-earners and employers. Thinkers as diverse as Thorstein Veblen, Mary Parker Follett, and Frederick Winslow Taylor sought a new organization of labor that not only maximized the efficiency of the workforce but also created an authoritative role for the corporate managers charged with overseeing it. By contrast, union leaders and labor radicals like Eugene V. Debs emphasized workers’ autonomy, arguing that shared governance at work would usher in an industrial democracy. In short, work was at the center of political and intellectual life, reverberating throughout the period’s many debates.

Although many other thinkers of the period turned their attention to questions of work, Addams, Croly, and Dewey played public roles that made them each uniquely influential. In Chicago, Addams’s Hull-House settlement was at the forefront of a national network of settlement houses, where college-educated activists and reformers became directly involved in issues like child labor and poor working conditions, especially among the immigrant poor. In New York, Croly was acting as advisor to Theodore Roosevelt, while also setting out his own views on work in the pages of *The New Republic* magazine, which he founded and where he served as editor. Back in Chicago, Dewey was using his chair in Philosophy at the University of Chicago to

develop democratic ideas of work and a radically new conception of vocational education. This study is a close reading of the published writings of these three important Progressive thinkers. It focuses exclusively on those works that bridge the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, identifying the period between the Pullman Strike of 1894 and World War I as a critical juncture in the development of their thought. These were the years in which Addams's influence was at her peak, in which Croly was becoming a leading voice in early Progressive politics, and in which Dewey solidified the philosophical concerns that would mark all his later writing. Relying on a close reading of their academic writings, periodical pieces, public addresses, and social commentary, the study critically examines themes of labor, occupation, and vocation, using the writers' own words to illustrate and interpret not only what they thought about work, but also how central it was to how they thought about democracy.

In addition to considering these thinkers critically, the study also comments on what they have to say to us today. When the Progressives are remembered at all, they are often recalled for their efforts to constrain corporate power through trust-busting legislation and muckraking journalism. Some reflect nostalgically on them as public intellectuals, seeing in figures like Addams, Croly, and Dewey a model of civic engagement and professional responsibility. Others reject their views, alarmed by the role of the state in balancing the interests of business with larger public purposes. Yet few have seriously attempted to understand how these three thinkers thought about the place of work in democratic politics. This study takes up the question, not only to better understand how these writers sought to solve the problems of their time, but also to help us deal with those of our own. For as unemployment continues to trouble the economy, they remind us that a democracy worthy of the name depends on the availability of work for all who want it. As fewer and fewer workers experience job security, they highlight the need for work that can provide a sense of personal identity

and an understanding of one's place in society. And as we have become apparently unashamed of having no desire beyond making money, they challenge us to create opportunities for labor motivated by more than self-interest. Taken together, they provide us with a vision of what can be done today to create a real working democracy.

2 A Working Democracy: Jane Addams on the Meaning of Work

From Aristotle to Arendt, a long line of political theorists has afforded work and the working life a central place in political theory. Yet given the amount of time human beings spend working, it is somewhat surprising that contemporary political thinkers have not paid more attention to the concept of work. Although liberal political theory is premised on a labor theory of value, it tends to view work as somehow pre-political, taking property and its distribution to be more salient political questions. An equally strong tradition of civic republicanism also pushes work to the margins of political thought, consigning it to a sphere properly associated with commerce rather than public life. And while many democratic theorists have seen work as a central political concern, contemporary democratic theory has treated the topic too little, leaving largely unexamined the meaning and political potential of work itself.¹ Today, as an alarming number of American citizens scramble to find a satisfying occupation, or any work at all, exploring the political implications of this activity are all the more imperative.

One reason that work has been of marginal concern to political theorists is that they have not been attentive enough to writers like Jane Addams, who responded to the debates of her time on the meaning of work with her own uniquely democratic vision. For years, scholars ignored Addams, arguing that while she should be remembered as an activist, a reformer, and a political radical, she could not be considered a serious thinker.

1. Dahl, *After the Revolution?*; Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*; Edward S. Greenberg, *Workplace Democracy: The Political Effects of Participation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Robert Mayer, "Robert Dahl and the Right to Workplace Democracy," *The Review of Politics* 63 (Spring 2001): 221–47; Robert Dahl, "A Right to Workplace Democracy? A Response to Robert Mayer," *The Review of Politics* 63 (Spring 2001): 249–53. On the workplace as a central site of democratic deliberation, see Diana C. Mutz and Jeffrey J. Mondak, "The Workplace as a Context for Cross-Cutting Political Discourse," *The Journal of Politics* 68 (February 2006): 140–55.

Among those who even acknowledged that Addams had political ideas, most averred that they were far from original, describing them as a footnote in the development of the American liberal tradition.² More recently, however, a number of political theorists have placed Addams at the center of the development of American pragmatism and Progressive political thought, emphasizing her distrust of political dogmatism and her own preference for consensus over antagonism.³ Moreover, Jean Bethke Elshtain's recent study of Addams has sparked a renewed interest in her thought, serving as a kind of lightning rod for critics who have charged Elshtain with being an overly sentimental and credulous reader who deliberately ignored certain of Addams's views about the role of the state in order to construct a depoliticized narrative of her public life.⁴ Yet despite the renewed interest, and for all the contention that has recently arisen, scholars have failed to arrive at any clear understanding—let alone agreement—about the core components of Addams's democratic theory.

This chapter attempts to build on and extend contemporary interpretations of Addams by emphasizing the conceptual centrality of work to her life and political thinking. It argues that Addams's political thought is best understood as an extended engagement with the meaning of work. Using her major writings, it explores three themes central to them—identity, community, and democratic politics—and demonstrates how reforming the experience of work was essential to each. For Addams, work was the foundation of not only a personal sense of identity, but also a collective democratic

2. Daniel Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1971).

3. Eisenach, *Lost Promise*; Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt*.

4. Elshtain, *Jane Addams*. For a particularly contentious exchange, see Bissell Brown, review of *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* and *The Jane Addams Reader* and Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Author Response: A Response to the Review of *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 97 (Winter 2004/2005): 342–52.

character. The workplace could be considered the model of a cooperative community, providing a venue for developing social solidarity and civic reciprocity. Above all, it was in working together that Americans would be able to develop a more inclusive democratic politics. In short, the chapter argues that Addams's political thought was an attempt to revitalize democracy by giving a more democratic meaning to work. It concludes by suggesting that her arguments can be applied to many contemporary political problems, and that democratic theory and practice would be enlivened by a renewed attention to work.

“Bread labor” and the search for vocation: Addams’s lifelong preoccupation with work

“In labor alone is happiness.”⁵ A young Jane Addams, priggish and self-serious, delivered these words in her first public speech while a junior at Rockford (Illinois) Women’s Seminary. With its echoes of Thomas Carlyle, Addams’s 1880 oration was steeped in the Victorian ideals of her education. The title itself, “Bread Givers,” is taken from one of the towering intellectuals of the Victorian period, John Ruskin, who in an influential essay called on women of his day to act as a moral force in society, providing bread not only for their own households, but distributing it “among the multitude.”⁶ In many ways, the speech is unremarkable, typical of the time and

5. Jane Addams, “20 Apr. 1880, introductory speech at the Junior Exhibition,” in *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams: Preparing to Lead, 1860–81*, ed. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, Barbara Bair, and Maree de Augury, vol. 1 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 350–51. Unlike Hannah Arendt, Addams never recognized a conceptual distinction between “labor,” human activity that meets the biological needs of life, and “work,” the realm of human creativity and fabrication. At times Addams describes labor as “toilsome,” suggesting Arendt’s distinction, but more often she uses the terms interchangeably. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 102–110.

6. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 89.

place. Yet the cliches of a school valedictory address belie a preoccupation with work that would plague Addams in her early life and shape the career that grounded her democratic thought, ultimately bringing her international renown and influence that continued beyond her death in 1935.

Even before her days at Rockford Seminary, Addams longed for a life of work. Her father, John Huy Addams, cast a long shadow in the small town of Cedarville, Illinois, where he had begun his career as a miller, helped negotiate a railroad route through the rural town, and by middle age had risen to prominence as a banker and public servant. As a child, Addams was enamored of her father's "self-made" status, and attempted to emulate it. Writing in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), she describes sitting contentedly for hours rubbing the freshly ground wheat from the millstones between her thumb and fingers in a consuming ambition to possess her father's "miller's thumb." Addams even went so far as to spread her hands near the millstone "in the hope that the little hard flints flying from the miller's chisel would light upon" the backs of her hands "and make the longed for marks" she saw on her father's work-speckled hands.⁷ Her education was fraught with a frustrating tension between her own desire to find a meaningful vocation and the expectations of her teachers that she take up the kind of calling—in her case, medical missionary—commonly afforded to women of her status. On a European voyage after graduation, Addams caught her first glimpse of modern urban poverty, in the face of which she recalls her realization that she and other women like her had received a liberal education that had obscured the social problems of her time in a tangle of literary allusions and abstractions, what Tolstoy called the "snare of preparation."⁸ What Addams sought instead was a kind of work that arose from "that

7. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House: with Autobiographical Notes* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1910), 12.

8. *Ibid.*, 88.

simple and almost automatic response to the human appeal, that old healthful reaction resulting in activity from the mere presence of suffering or of helplessness.”⁹ The childish imitation of the father’s labor gave way to an adolescent vocational struggle, and a search for meaningful work which both culminated and commenced with the foundation of Hull-House in 1889.

However lonely her vocational anxieties made her, Addams came of age among a cohort of intellectual fellow travelers who were wrestling with the question of how to preserve the meaning of work in a rapidly industrializing society. Victorian aesthetes like Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, whose fulminations against industrialization’s perversion of creativity, obligation, and stewardship were among her earliest influences, emphasized the importance of work to personal integrity and individual identity. A variety of socialist thinkers, from British Fabians and European Marxists to American guild socialists and trades unionists, honed their understanding of work into a class-based political program. Religious and secular reformers from Tolstoy to John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hill Green promised to alleviate the unsavory conditions of the industrial working class through various programs of Christian charity, community outreach, and liberal self-help. A voracious reader and avid correspondent, Addams drew from many of these thinkers in fashioning her own democratic theory of work. By and large, however, her articles and books were based upon her everyday experience in the manufacturing quarters of Chicago, where she saw first hand not only the soul-crushing conditions of industrial life, but also the potential power of work in developing political identity, creating forms of community that bridged ethnic, cultural, and economic differences, and ensuring that the best features of society were “secured for all of us and

9. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 71.

incorporated into our common life.”¹⁰

Work and identity

In one way or another, most accounts of Addams’s life and thought construe her as a Victorian moral reformer rather than a serious political thinker. Early biographies like John Farrell’s *Beloved Lady* and Allen Davis’s *American Heroine* offer a sentimental version of Addams’s activism, emphasizing her involvement in moral crusades for peace, children’s causes, and the reform of prostitution laws.¹¹ More recent intellectual histories have challenged these sentimental portrayals of Addams, emphasizing her political involvement in labor disputes, organizing women’s suffrage, and municipal administrative reform. Nevertheless, scholars like T.J. Jackson Lears, Daniel Rodgers, and Paul Boyer have maintained that however well-intentioned, her Hull-House reform experiments were quaint examples of Victorian middle-class morality ill-suited to an urban, industrial society defined by class antagonisms and glaring economic inequality.¹² Lears in particular has criticized her industrial experiments as a kind of bourgeois affectation, providing therapy for middle-class reformers rather than achieving any meaningful social change. By contrast, Jean Elshtain’s *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (2002) celebrates the Victorian morality that the historians have derided,

10. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 116. For more on the political and social thought of the settlement movement, see Carson, *Settlement Folk* and Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890–1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

11. John C. Farrell, *Beloved Lady: A History of Jane Addams’s Ideas on Reform and Peace* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967); Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973).

12. Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 81–90; Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 79–80; Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 155–56, 221–24.

lauding Addams's role as an Americanizer struggling to improve the character of recently arrived immigrants and their children. According to Elshtain's account, Addams used Hull-House to deliver "identity and dignity" to immigrant lives, to "heal the yawning chasm between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters."¹³ Yet Addams's primary concerns were not the moral issues dear to Victorian moralists, nor even the assimilation of immigrants and their families to American life, but rather the cultivation of a common political character. And it was only by reforming work that Addams believed that reformers and immigrants alike would be able to produce for themselves a political identity as working people, both individually and collectively.

Although she was predisposed to view labor in connection with older ideals of craftsmanship, Addams did not understand it to be simply production, let alone heroic, manly production. The self-directed work of pre-industrial life might have offered a more diverse group of tasks throughout the workday, but it was industrial labor that could provide workers with a larger view of life, engaging their intelligence, educating them about their world, offering what she would call "the power to see life as a whole."¹⁴ By the same token, a commercial occupation might result in higher status or require more varied and less physically demanding tasks, but it was likely to become toilsome if it was an "effort" the worker "is not fitted for." In any case, industrial labor could provide the worker with the same benefits that had previously been associated with both craft labor and commercial occupations, namely a sense of self that would strengthen the worker's feelings of individual efficacy, allowing him to become "a man on his own feet."¹⁵ Nor did the rewards of industrial work accrue only to men. In fact, one of the principal reasons Addams lauded industrialization was because it made women's work

13. Elshtain, *Jane Addams*, 146.

14. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 236.

15. *Ibid.*, 376.

public, bringing the traditional domestic occupations, and with them many women, out of the home and into the workplace. Thus it was industrial labor that would give women as well as men “larger interests,” a stake, as she put it, in “the affairs lying quite outside personal and family claims.”¹⁶

Addams believed that labor was the source not only of a stable identity, but also of a morally upright one. As Lears, Boyer, and Rodgers have noted in their interpretations of Addams, she worried over the moral decay in the industrial city. Addams argued that the source of this disarray, at least among the working-class, was an occupational life dominated by toilsome labor. In *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) she argues that the drudgery of most industrial work made life less wholesome because in the absence of fulfilling or challenging work “recreation must become more exciting and stimulating.”¹⁷ In *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909) she reiterated the point, writing that those whose work demands neither “mental effort, or even muscular skill” tend to seek nothing more than sensual pleasures “depending upon sight, sound, and taste.”¹⁸ By contrast, labor that calls upon the mental or physical capacities of workers develops individuals whose pleasure-seeking rises above the base and appetitive. If work could be made more mentally fulfilling, she wrote, “lifted from drudgery” into “self-conscious activity,” workers might be able to resist the destructive temptation of the dance hall and the saloon.¹⁹ Thus, Addams’s work at Hull-House primarily intervened in order to reconstruct the moral experience of labor. She believed that this reconstruction would help develop what she called “a life of upright purpose, encouraging “those more engaging qualities which in the experience of the neighborhood are too often connected

16. Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1902), 74.

17. *Ibid.*, 189.

18. Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1909), 54.

19. *Ibid.*, 122.

with dubious aims.”²⁰ Put simply, she believed in the ability of “a long-established occupation” to “form the very foundations of the moral life.”²¹

If an expanded concept of labor could uplift the inhabitants of the city’s working neighborhoods, so too would active occupation cultivate virtue among those members of society for whom there were no obligations of daily employment. In other words, the middle-class also needed the salve of work. As a young reformer in Chicago, Addams recognized that many of her class and education had no outlet for the the capacities which they had developed, and as a result were merely “cultivated into unnourished, oversensitive lives.” To her, the cure for this problem was to find an active occupation and thereby reconnect with “the common labor by which they live” and from which “they have been shut off.”²² As a project of social reform, Hull-House existed as much to provide useful employment for women of the privileged classes as to uplift the poor.²³ For Addams a surfeit of education tragically isolated one from “the stream of laboring people,” from “hard workingmen lifting great burdens” (as she put it in “a more poetic prayer”) from “the great mother breasts of our common humanity, with its labor and suffering.”²⁴ To have no work was to be shut off from this vital nourishment. Addams knew from her personal (and often bed-ridden) vocational struggle that a life without occupation made one “suffer and grow sensibly lowered in vitality.” Middle-class life without work was no less threatening to one’s moral health than working-class industrial drudgery. To have no work was to make of oneself an “apparent waste.”²⁵ Whether rich

20. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 448.

21. *Ibid.*, 247.

22. *Ibid.*, 115.

23. On this point, the life of Florence Kelley is particularly illustrative; see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 171–205.

24. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 117.

25. *Ibid.*, 118.

or poor, Addams believed that work “is a great source of moral and physical health.”²⁶

In addition to forming the foundation of the moral life, work also provided an outlet for self-expression that contributed to both individual development and social purpose. Addams believed that labor that required no intelligence or permitted no self-expression deprived the entire community. In an 1899 essay, “A Function of the Social Settlement,” she notes that factory labor affords workers “no opportunity of expressing their own thoughts to their fellows by means of that labor.”²⁷ Without opportunities for self-expression at work, “society perpetually extinguishes that variety and promise, that bloom of life,” by which social life is constantly revitalized.²⁸ By contrast, labor that provided an opportunity for self-expression actually cultivated individuality. If a sweating seamstress, Addams writes, “is informed concerning the material she is manipulating and the processes to which it is subject; if she understands the design she is elaborating in its historic relation to art and decoration, her daily life is lifted from drudgery to one of self-conscious activity, and her pleasure and intelligence is registered in her product.”²⁹ To that end, Hull-House very early began a craft school in which visitors cultivated skills in metalwork, bookbinding, and various practices of textile production, allowing “those who have been carefully trained and taught” a place “to express the best they may in wood or metal.”³⁰ Through such educational activities, Addams sought to provide a model for the experience of work outside the Hull-House craft studio, developing aptitudes and dispositions that workers could use in their daily occupations.

26. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 115.

27. Jane Addams, “A Function of the Social Settlement,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 13 (May 1899): 41–42.

28. Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 121.

29. *Ibid.*, 122.

30. Addams, “A Function of the Social Settlement,” 44.

Work not only produced individual identity, but also knit connections within and between families. Addams hoped that an understanding of labor's purpose might ease frequent intergenerational tensions between Old World parents and their more Americanized children. As a result, many of the activities of Hull-House were designed, in her words, "to reveal the humbler immigrant parents to their own children."³¹ Thus she described the experience of Angelina, a young neighborhood girl whose embarrassment at her mother's peasant traditions was transformed when she witnessed the older woman's demonstration of spindle-stick weaving prowess. Witnessing her mother's skill, the daughter came also to see the life she had left behind in her native Italy, and the suddenness with which it had completely changed when she entered the world of the cramped tenement. The previously embarrassed girl, Addams observed, not only "allowed her mother to pull out of the big box under the bed the beautiful homespun garments which had been previously hidden away as uncouth," but also proceeded to come to Hull-House "by the same door as did her mother, proud at least of [her mother's] mastery of the craft."³² To Addams, this incident poignantly illustrated the power of work to provide a ground from which children could understand their parents—and consequently come to understand themselves and their heritage. It was an understanding of work that was essential to an understanding of the world beyond the home.

Work could give one a sense of place in society. Addams believed that every person, regardless of occupation, made a useful and unique contribution to society through their labor. The failure to recognize that every person has "a function to perform which can be fulfilled by no one else" impoverishes society.³³ Work should make people feel useful, and provide an opportunity for people to recognize its social contribution.

31. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 235.

32. *Ibid.*, 245.

33. Addams, *Democracy*, 178.

Addams compares the industrial economy to a game of baseball, writing that it was quite impossible to imagine a successful game in which each player “should be drilled only in his own part, and should know nothing of the relation of that part to the whole game.”³⁴ In the same way, workers were encouraged to develop an enlarged understanding of the place of their work in society, as well as their individual place in the industrial organization. Addams believed that this expanded view of work would give individual workers an identity, preventing them from being swallowed into an undifferentiated mass, or reduced to a specialized automaton. Writing specifically of women’s labor, she notes that it gives each woman a sense of how her life fit into the wider social experience. In her poignant reflection on the women of her neighborhood and their stories, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory* (1916), she suggests that the power of work to “integrate the individual experience into a sense of relation” with a larger social fabric was one of its most significant attributes.³⁵ Work would help people not only understand themselves as individuals, but also make visible, however briefly, “the subtle and impalpable filaments that secretly bind” the experiences of human beings together, expanding a sense of their relationship to others around them.³⁶ In short, work makes sense of society, and of one’s contribution to it.

Work could also give workers an understanding of their place in history. One of the most successful educational experiments at Hull-House was the Labor Musuem, a working demonstration that traced the development from individual workshops to industrial machines, while also noting the contributions of the various cultures represented in the Chicago neighborhood to the production process. However important or transformative the other accomplishments in the neighborhood, to Addams’s mind it was the

34. Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 127.

35. Jane Addams, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1916), 85.

36. *Ibid.*, 112.

centerpiece of Hull-House.³⁷ In the Labor Museum, Addams reconstructed human social history as the history of work. Through its demonstrations and exhibitions, she hoped the worker would gain a “conception of historic continuity” which would reveal “the purpose and utility of his work,” while providing a feeling of connection not only to present society, but also to past and future ones.³⁸ Thus this living museum stressed historical and cultural continuity in the practices of work in an attempt to demonstrate what was obvious to her, that “industry develops similarly and peacefully year by year among the workers of each nation.”³⁹ Similarly, in the craft shop and other educational initiatives at Hull-House, Addams hoped to instill pride in the skills of pre-industrial labor, along with an understanding of the relation of these craft traditions to industrial work. By understanding industrial labor in this way, she believed that working people might be able to view their own labor as part of a larger story of progress. All of the education offered at Hull-House was intended, she wrote, to give the worker a “chance to realize life through his vocation” by giving him “a sense of his individual relation” to the very progress of human society.⁴⁰

In short, Addams viewed work as the foundation of a common political identity, one shared by immigrants and middle-class reformers alike. Her primary concern was neither the moral reform emphasized by the standard accounts of Farrell and Davis, nor the assimilation of immigrants to middle-class norms derided by Lears and Rodgers and more recently celebrated by Elshtain. Instead, Addams sought to reform work into an

37. Although the term “museum” was conscientiously chosen, it can mislead today’s readers. The labor museum was both an active workshop and a teaching center, educating students across class, generation, and ethnicity in traditional crafts and industrial arts. For a description of the labor museum, see Marion Foster Washburne, “A Labor Museum,” in *Eighty Years at Hull House*, ed. Allen F. Davis and Mary Lynn McCree (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 77–82.

38. Addams, *Democracy*, 206.

39. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 237.

40. Addams, *Democracy*, 209, 213.

experience that could integrate an American society in which all citizens were workers. Through labor, citizens would be provided an opportunity for self-discovery and self-expression, forming identities rooted in their work rather than in ascriptive categories. Working together, the native-born reformer and the immigrant worker would construct a common American identity.

Constructing community through work

One area on which all interpreters of Addams can agree is her insistence that democratic life could not be sustained without structures of community that encouraged people to consider the needs of others. Yet scholars disagree on the character of community she sought to construct. Thus those like Maurice Hamington find in Addams's Hull-House a model community of care that insistently affirms that "choosing an insular life is somehow shirking our social ethical responsibility."⁴¹ For her part, Elshtain, while having little in common with Hamington, concurs that Addams was unwavering in her faith in the possibility of community, of what she calls a "fundamental human solidarity" grounded in experiences "shared on a deep level by all human beings."⁴² According to Bob Pepperman Taylor, she viewed community attachments as the wellspring of a democratic humility, an egalitarian disposition in which citizens "recognize and resist their own selfishness and self-satisfaction" and develop a "healthier civic life"⁴³ For each of these diverse theorists, Addams's conception of community was mostly associated with the private, even domestic life of the neighborhood. Yet each fails to see what

41. Maurice Hamington, "Jane Addams and a Politics of Embodied Care," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 15 (2001): 109.

42. Elshtain, *Jane Addams*, 122.

43. Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt*, 71.

Addams herself recognized, that community attachments were developed primarily in the workplace. Although none of these scholars seriously considers it, it was work, and its reconstruction, that was essential to combatting insularity, building solidarity, and creating an egalitarian ethic.

For Addams, individual benefits were dependent upon transforming work into a cooperative community effort. She believed that one of the primary problems of industrial life was isolation within the workplace. For most workers, the crowded industrial factory or urban sweatshop ironically provided no sense of fellowship or sociality. When workers are required to stand in place all day, “steadily bending their energies to loveless and mechanical labor,” they do not receive the “direct and personal renewal” that comes from the company of others.⁴⁴ To Addams it was sadly ironic that so many of her neighbors were starved for genuine social contact and simple human friendship despite living and working in overcrowded conditions. Such isolation “deadens the sympathies and shrivels the power of enjoyment,” not just among the working classes but across all classes. Widespread isolation in turn created a fractured society, consigning all members to “live out but half the humanity to which we have been born heir.”⁴⁵ The threat of isolation was particularly acute for women who were employed as domestic help. Addams finds domestic labor problematic because household employees have no regular opportunity for meeting or socializing with other workers in the same trade, thus precluding the opportunity “of attaining with them the dignity of a corporate body.”⁴⁶ Even the worthy intentions of employers who attempt to share some social life with their domestic employees end up with merely “a simulacrum of companionship.”⁴⁷

44. Addams, *Long Road*, 97.

45. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 117.

46. Addams, *Democracy*, 116.

47. *Ibid.*, 121.

When a housekeeper quits, Addams notes, the employer often feels resentful and condescending, assuming the girl “wishes to get away from the work and back to her dances and giddy life.” Yet after a day of invisible servitude it should not be surprising that housekeepers desire an opportunity to see and be seen by their peers, even in the saloon dances that were for them “the only organized form of social life.”⁴⁸

Addams argued that the workplace should be reconstituted as a social space. Rather than being isolated through toilsome labor, workers should experience community and fellowship in their work. “The individual from whom the industrial order demands ever larger drafts of time and energy,” she wrote, “should be nourished and enriched from social sources, in proportion as he is drained.”⁴⁹ Innovations at workplaces such as the model factory of the National Cash Register Company of Dayton, Ohio, where factory workers, salesmen, and company officers came together to listen to lectures on the state of the company and its product, might provide some of this social rejuvenation. Even so, Addams saw this innovation as at best “a crude example of what might be done.”⁵⁰ Instead, she envisioned a workplace that offset industrial atomization and overspecialization in a more systematic manner than an annual company picnic. A spirit of collectivity and cooperation should pervade daily practices of labor, whereby all tasks are given “the solace of collective art.”⁵¹ Collective and cooperative work was valuable to the whole community. Work performed in common with others “may represent a finer social quality and have a greater social value than the more effective individual action.”⁵² Not only did collective work provide more value to the community, it was

48. Addams, *Democracy*, 128.

49. *Ibid.*, 205–206.

50. *Ibid.*, 218. For a more complete description of this practice, see Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 87–88.

51. Addams, *Democracy*, 219.

52. *Ibid.*, 138.

more satisfying to the individual. Addams believed that with the proper education and preparation, working on one wheel of a watch as part of a larger group might give the modern worker's life more meaning than "the old watchmaker who made a watch from beginning to end."⁵³

The low status of manual labor created barriers to realizing a sense of community among middle and working classes. For Addams the division of labor formed the central fault line in society. Thus, she lamented the social tendency to "divide up into people who work with their hands and those who do not."⁵⁴ This tendency, she believed, had deep historical roots "apparently we have not yet recovered manual labor from the deep distrust which centuries of slavery and the feudal system have cast upon it."⁵⁵ Despite having progressed from both slavery and feudalism, social habits and customs made for clear distinctions between those whose hands were dirtied by labor and those whose leisured hands remained clean. The treatment of household employees dramatically illustrated the suspicion of hand labor among the middle classes. For the middle and upper classes, Addams's economic peers, even having servants with calloused or dirty hands was too close to actually performing labor with one's own hands. Recalling a passage from Tolstoy, she writes that "a serving man, in order that his hands may be immaculately clean, is kept from performing the heavier work of the household" and is made to carry a tray in order that "even his clean hands" would not touch the employer's teapot. Furthermore "his clean hands are covered with a pair of clean white gloves, which hold the tray."⁵⁶ The disdain heaped upon laboring hands insidiously divided society into two classes those who perform physical labor and those who do

53. Addams, *Spirit of Youth*, 126-27.

54. Addams, *Democracy*, 18.

55. *Ibid.*, 195.

56. *Ibid.*, 115-16.

not.

In contrast to the prevailing ideas of her class, Addams believed in the equality of labor. Indeed, efforts to recuperate the dignity of manual labor formed the foundation of her community-building activity. Her conception of cooperative work was premised on her belief that all work is noble, however seemingly humble the task. Addams believed, moreover, not only in the usefulness and necessity of all work, but in the equality of it, reserving a central status for hand labor. She reflected at some length on the significance of the hand, calling it the “oldest tool with which man has dug his way from savagery, and with which he is constantly groping forward.”⁵⁷ Moreover, the hand provided a metaphor for social unity. Each hand forms part of a great, collective labor, just as each voice in a chorus forms part of the whole. “The treble clapping of delicate hands” and “the bass notes from toughened palms” sound together to create the whole of a vast ovation, she wrote, just as each person contributes to the great composite labor of the whole. At Hull-House, Addams and the other middle-class settlement workers reached out their delicate hands to grasp the neighborhood’s thicker palms, and with them became “lost in the unity of purpose.”⁵⁸ A recovery of the dignity of the “toughened palms” was a crucial first step in building community across social barriers.

Addams believed that the lack of community generated much of the labor conflict of the period. She developed this viewpoint through her own experience with the 1894 Pullman Strike. While feeling a tremendous amount of sympathy for the striking workers and their cause, she also believed that the fundamental problem at the root of the conflict was a failure of both workers and management to understand their common

57. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 68.

58. *Ibid.*, 125.

social purpose.⁵⁹ For her, the events of 1894 illustrated the inevitable conflict that attends managing an industrial enterprise without the cooperation of the workers, “solely by the dictation of the individual owning the capital.”⁶⁰ In her essay “A Modern Lear,” written in response to the strike, Addams worried that workers were also susceptible to ignoring the larger community interest by preaching a “doctrine of emancipation” to “the wage-workers alone.”⁶¹ In her understanding, Pullman was Lear, generous but paternalistic, bullying and easily offended, ultimately representing a generation whose time has passed him by; the strikers were Cordelia, insouciant, stubborn, and unwilling to compromise in the face of escalating violence. Just as Lear was unable to comprehend Cordelia’s rebellion, so Pullman and other like him misunderstood the labor movement, maintaining the mistaken belief that because of the kindness shown by employer to employees “there should be no strikes in the factory, no revolt against the will of the employer because the employees were filled with loyalty.”⁶² As Addams saw it, the problem was that the employer too often assumed a philanthropic relationship to his workers rather than believing himself a member of the same community with them. Just as frequently, she believed, the labor movement failed to live up to its democratic potential. Many unions, she believed, were too focused on the narrow interests of their workers, concentrating exclusively on the resources and power that they could extract from management. Working people were no more inclined to judge industrial conflict

59. The Pullman Strike remains a contentious subject for social scientists and historians. For more recent interpretations, see Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore, eds., *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and Susan E. Hirsch, *After the Strike: A Century of Labor Struggle at Pullman* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

60. Addams, *Democracy*, 143.

61. Jane Addams, “A Modern Lear,” in *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, ed. Christopher Lasch (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 121. Although “A Modern Lear” was written in 1894 in the immediate aftermath of the strike, it languished unpublished until 1912 when the controversy over the strike had faded.

62. *Ibid.*, 156.

in terms of community interest than were the individual owners who thought only of their personal interest and control. Conflict arose, Addams averred, when neither management nor labor was willing to look for a common ground rooted in the needs of the whole community.

Workplace democracy, the most important reform of work, aimed to refashion the workplace as a community rather than a staging ground for two opposing groups. Centralized managerial authority was dangerously undemocratic, arrogating an undue amount of power to the employer and preventing the worker from seeing his or her stake in the direction and products of industry. “If a number of people decide to build a road,” Addams writes, “they are quite inevitably united by their interest in the road.”⁶³ The division of labor had not only increased workers’ interdependence within the workplace, but also given them a common purpose with others outside of it. The entire community from worker and employer to the eventual traveller on the road, has a stake in the road’s completion. That said, workers can be genuinely included in this community only if “they know where the road is going,” “have some curiosity and interest about it,” and “perhaps a chance to travel upon it.”⁶⁴ The transformation of these varied interests into a genuine community required both increasing the standard of living for wage-earners (a chance to travel upon the road), and including them in the operation and management of work (a chance to determine the direction of the road). As in “A Modern Lear,” neither the employers’ successes in creating agreeable working conditions, nor their generosity in compensating their employees were sufficient if those ideals are “unconnected with the consent of their fellow men.” Thus for Addams, unions were useful institutions that could guarantee the consent of workers, even where their goals were narrow. They were forceful reminders that the workplace itself was a

63. Addams, *Democracy*, 210.

64. *Ibid.*, 210–11.

community whose purpose was not satisfied by the employer's "personal ambition" or the workers' "narrow conception of emancipation."⁶⁵

Despite her criticism of labor unions, Addams regarded them as crucial instruments in building a more democratic community. Taking women's garment workers as her model, she argued that labor unions were most successful when they appealed beyond their own ranks to the most complacent citizens, forming a community that recognizes that moral striving is the foundation of democratic governance.⁶⁶ Seeking public solutions to economic problems, labor unions asserted that the problems of industrial work were social rather than individual ones, of interest to a community that did not always recognize itself as a stakeholder. Thus Addams saw labor conflict not only as an economic dispute over the fruits of industrial organization, but also as a political conflict between "the democratic ideal," which demanded the representation of wider community interests in the administration of industry, and the individualistic norm that the owner of the capital is the one who takes the risks and therefore has the exclusive right of management.⁶⁷ For her, the workplace was not another possession of the owner of the factory, but belonged instead to the community of people whose daily lives were affected—not only the workers, but the neighborhood, the city, and perhaps the nation itself. Of course, unions were susceptible to forgetting the wider community interests at stake in questions of workplace policy. Addams delivers her strongest judgment of them in her *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907), in which she criticized

65. Addams, "A Modern Lear," 120–22.

66. For Addams's most direct statement on unionism, which focuses primarily on garment workers, see Jane Addams, "Trades Unions and Public Duty," *The American Journal of Sociology* 4 (January 1899): 448–62. For more on Addams's practical political involvement with garment workers, see Karen Pastorello, "'The Transfigured Few': Jane Addams, Bessie Abramowitz Hillman, and Immigrant Women Workers in Chicago, 1905–15," in Chmielewski, Fischer, and Nackenoff, *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, 98–118.

67. Addams, *Democracy*, 139.

many unions for being provincial and clannish, “loyal only towards those whom their imagination included as belonging” to their group.⁶⁸ What she found admirable in a labor union was not its capacity to build class consciousness, but its insight that the means of production were not the property of the management, but “in some sense social possessions.” For Addams, unions would refashion the purpose of work as a common social goal, ameliorating the problems of industry, she wrote, “in the interest of society itself.”⁶⁹

Although the interpretations of scholars like Hamington, Elshtain, and Taylor rightly point to structures of community as central to Addams’s thought, they have each overlooked what Addams saw as the primary community: the workplace. It was only there that workers were brought into contact with a diverse community, working to break down the insularity that separated society by class, race, ethnicity, and religion. It was in the workplace that citizens cultivated the daily habits of solidarity, working together toward a common purpose. And it was the shared habits of the workplace that would encourage a democratic humility, encouraging both employers and labor unions alike to seek the interest of the whole community rather than their own narrow part of it. In short, Addams saw the industrial workplace as a venue of community life, its instruments as social possessions, and its mores as the foundation of the social and civic equality on which democracy depends.

68. Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1907), 129.

69. *Ibid.*, 149.

Inclusion and work

The most vehement disagreement over interpretations of Addams stem from differing views of the public and private spheres. Here Elshtain's interpretation of Addams aligns her with a conventional view of the private sphere as governed by a domestic femininity, a sphere that was nevertheless "an essential feature" of public life that would bring women and the poor "within the boundaries of the city newly understood."⁷⁰ By contrast, writing from the perspective of feminist and queer theory, Shannon Jackson views Addams as concerned not with bringing the virtues of the private sphere into public life, but with reconstructing the private sphere to make domestic relationships more inclusive through "new social rituals" that facilitate a "public household."⁷¹ Scholars like Wendy Sarvasy advance an interpretation that bridges this conflict, arguing that Addams's thought neither shored up traditional visions of the private sphere, nor radically reimagined the domestic sphere, but rather "reconfigured the relationship between the family and the state through the medium of the social."⁷² Yet the truth is that for Addams the sphere of the social, the site where the spirit of inclusion could be best cultivated, was primarily the realm of work, and its reconstruction would have consequences for both private and public life.

According to Addams, a model of citizenship that emphasized labor would be radically more inclusive. In *Newer Ideals of Peace*, she criticized the existing process of naturalization for beginning and ending with the abstract doctrines found in the United

70. Elshtain, *Jane Addams*, 157.

71. Shannon Jackson, "Toward a Queer Welfare Studies: Unsettling Jane Addams," in Chmielewski, Fischer, and Nackenoff, *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy*, 143–62.

72. Wendy Sarvasy, "Engendering Democracy by Socializing It: Jane Addams's Contribution to Feminist Political Theorizing," in *Feminist Interpretations of Jane Addams*, ed. Maurice Hamington (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 293–310.

States Constitution rather than with the everyday conditions of the lives of recent immigrants. Citizenship education, she complained, was rooted in a refusal “to consider matters of industry and commerce as germane to government.” To make this education meaningful to the laboring immigrant, it would have to begin with “that most natural and inevitable of all foundations, their industrial needs.”⁷³ The connection between a variety of occupations and governmental responsibilities ought to form the basis of this political education. More specifically, she argued that the political community ought to make clear the way in which the simple occupations of the recent immigrant—“the street-cleaning and sewer-digging in which he first engages”—are an integral part of self-government, thereby developing “an understanding of the relations of these simple offices to city government.”⁷⁴ Far from being a method of reconciling immigrants to such menial labor, Addams believed that a democratic education should make clear the obligations of the municipal administration to all residents, along with the rights of the newly arrived to assert themselves when these obligations were not fulfilled. Civic education rooted in the experience of work created not only a more inclusive model of citizenship, but also a more informed and engaged citizenry, one that recognized the “connection between their desire to earn their daily bread and their citizenship.”⁷⁵

Other aspects of public life should reflect the experience of work as well, fostering both solidarity and diversity. For Addams, discrimination and the demands of strict conformity to the dominant culture illustrated the embarrassing fact that the national community had not admitted ethnic immigrants into “real political fellowship.”⁷⁶ Here

73. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 112.

74. *Ibid.*, 72.

75. *Ibid.*, 71.

76. *Ibid.*, 39.

it was labor unions that provided a model of inclusion. Rather than forcing foreign-born workers to assimilate, unions included immigrants as equals, recognizing what still eluded the national consciousness, that the experience of work is universal, uniting people of diverse ethnic backgrounds.⁷⁷ The multiethnic coalitions of workers governed themselves with institutions of democratic autonomy, organizing sophisticated representative bodies, referendum procedures, and other “paraphernalia and machinery which have hitherto associated themselves only with governmental life and control.”⁷⁸ Even so, Addams argued that unions could do a better job of recognizing common ground across differences of class, resisting the urge to “respond first to a sense of loyalty to each other as against their employers.”⁷⁹ Contract negotiations between unions and employers would mitigate much of the period’s class conflict. If collective bargaining could supplant industrial warfare, then both classes would come to depend for their interests on “a more democratic and a more reasonable type of man.”⁸⁰ More important, unions often exploited racial animosity, striking a blow against the typically cosmopolitan sensibility that Addams saw as one of the great benefits of industrialization. Admittedly, unions brought to public attention inequalities and social grievances, but their aggressive tactics were all too often those of “a small group blindly attempting to defend what they consider their only chance to work.”⁸¹ It was the task of the public to respond to those grievances with a democratic spirit rather than narrow class loyalty.

Addams thought that the purpose of public life was the protection and support of society’s most vulnerable members, not by transmitting cultural values and financial

77. Addams did not hesitate to castigate labor unions for their racism, observing that “the trades union record on Chinese exclusion and negro discrimination has been damaging.” *Ibid.*, 95.

78. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 94.

79. *Ibid.*, 130.

80. *Ibid.*, 145.

81. *Ibid.*, 148.

resources from the middle to the lower classes, but by incorporating the most useful values and practices of marginal groups. Specifically, she believed that practices of work from different cultures might substantively enrich the democratic life of the United States. Work was the basis for a practical recognition of others' contributions to social and political life. Addams points, for example, to the way in which unwillingness to recognize the centuries of agricultural knowledge of Italian immigrants fails both native and foreign born. Recently arrived Italian peasants with centuries of knowledge of "that painstaking method of cultivating the soil which American farmers despise" remain in industrial neighborhoods, where the "cunning in regard to silk worms and olive trees" is forgotten, and the "old social habits" from these agricultural communities cannot find proper expression in the crowded tenements. If the potential contributions of these immigrants were recognized, the entire community might benefit from their occupational knowledge and methods, as well as from the vision of community life elaborated around their practices of work. The "primitive habits" of the German potter or the Polish seamstress might point the way toward curing many of the social ills of industrial life if only the polity would "give them their significance and place."⁸² Without such recognition, the community suffers. Addams remarked on how native-born Americans exhibit "the Anglo-Saxon distrust" of any form of communal land ownership rooted in other cultures' traditional occupational life.⁸³ Thus they overlook alternative forms of land and labor which could stimulate new experiments in democratic politics. In their native practices of work, immigrants had much to contribute to economic and political life, if only they were recognized by the dominant community.

Work would provide the basis for including not only ethnic immigrants but also women in public life. Addams argued that it was women's industrial experience that

82. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 64.

83. *Ibid.*, 67.

had prepared them to exercise the important responsibility of voting. Women were keenly aware of the dangerous conditions in most factories, being themselves factory workers who were “responsible for the advance of industry during these later centuries.”⁸⁴ Women’s electoral participation would be particularly valuable for building political institutions that regulated the industrial sphere. While civic clubs and consumer’s organizations were sources of political power, it was only suffrage that would allow them to mitigate industry’s harmful effects resulting from “men whose minds are fixed upon factory management from the point of view of profits.”⁸⁵ Moreover, domestic occupations in industrial cities gave women particular insight into the need for public solutions to urban problems, making them painfully aware of the innumerable ways in which “their duties to their own household” made them “utterly dependent upon the city administration.”⁸⁶ In short, Addams argued that a state that mitigated the problems of industry was only possible if women exercised the fundamental duties of citizenship, expanding democracy with their experience as workers both inside and outside the home.

Yet Addams argued for a wider role for women in public life, calling them to apply their knowledge as public servants and administrative officials. Expertise developed through centuries of women’s traditional labor made them particularly suited to the challenges facing industrial society. For example, Addams observes that most of the responsibilities of a city government “can be traced to woman’s traditional activity.”⁸⁷ Addams thought that the analogy between municipal administration and corporate

84. Jane Addams, “If Men Were Seeking the Franchise,” in *The Jane Addams Reader*, ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002), 230.

85. Jane Addams, “The Larger Aspects of the Women’s Movement,” in “Women in Public Life,” ed. James P. Lichtenberger, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 56 (November 1914): 6.

86. Jane Addams, “Why Women Should Vote,” in Lasch, *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, 144.

87. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 185.

management was too narrow, arguing instead that city government required skills more commensurate with “enlarged housekeeping.”⁸⁸ In other words, the modern city, with its problems of sewers, garbage, infrastructure maintenance, and the provision of parks, requires the expertise developed by women in centuries of domestic work. Moreover, the intricate complexity of a city’s executive management calls for skills developed specifically by women who, in the daily maintenance of a household and child-rearing, are “accustomed to detail and variety of work.”⁸⁹ In short, to Addams, the work of governance was women’s work. Denying women an opportunity to practice their expertise, she insisted, explains why industrial cities have neglected to ameliorate the problems of poverty and inequality. “The men of the city,” she wrote, “have been carelessly indifferent to much of this civic housekeeping, as they have always been indifferent to the details of the household.”⁹⁰ Women’s role in civic administration—as, in effect, civic housekeepers—would correct this carelessness. In particular, women in city government would provide stronger protection for workers. As Addams writes, “a certain healing and correction would doubtless ensue” if women were given responsibility for workers’ “nurture of health and morals,” skills “which women have so long reserved for their own families.”⁹¹ The inclusion of women in democracy would not only utilize the expertise developed through centuries of women’s work, it would also play a vital role in the reformation of democratic governance itself.

Women’s inclusion in the political sphere would mitigate their vulnerability as industrial workers, specifically protecting women’s domestic occupations. In the same

88. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 183. Others argue that the suffrage movement relied more on women’s roles as consumers than as laborers; cf. Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).

89. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 184.

90. *Ibid.*, 183.

91. *Ibid.*, 197.

way, their participation in municipal administration would protect the domestic sphere from the encroachments of industry. One of the more injurious consequences of industrialization was women's loss of control over their traditional activities, stunting the development of the skills and dispositions that were their main contribution to political life. Addams laments that the mechanization and industrialization of sewing and bread-making often removed these occupations from the household, denying women "the privilege of regulating the conditions" in which they worked.⁹² By the same token, industrial production had also penetrated the domestic sphere, fusing the home and the workplace for many women.⁹³ Thus whether tending looms in a factory or sewing piecework in the home, the burden of industrial labor overtook important household responsibilities. Other women worked as domestic servants, cooking for, cleaning up after, or rearing a family that was not their own. Addams felt a keen sympathy for women forced into back-breaking labor by poverty, frequently describing them as "overworked," "overburdened," or "workworn." The unregulated long hours of factory work and the ubiquity of home workshops left little time for the care of young children, one of society's most important occupations. She relates with particular alarm an encounter with a woman from her neighborhood working late at scrubbing the floors of a downtown Chicago office building. In response to Addams's query about her drenched clothes, the washerwoman reported that "she left home at five o'clock every night and had no opportunity for six hours to nurse her baby" and that as a result her "mother's milk mingled with the very water with which she scrubbed the floors."⁹⁴ To Addams, this disquieting scene suggested the folly of misdirecting motherly energies into wage

92. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 189.

93. See Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

94. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 174.

labor. Consequently, Hull-House served as a center of organization for anti-sweatshop legislation and tougher factory regulations that specifically protected both women and children.⁹⁵ The inclusion of women in political activity, as both voters and administrators, would be the surest way to create political institutions that protected mothers from the too frequent condition that they must “neglect their young in order to feed them.”⁹⁶

Finally, Addams saw work as the foundation of political inclusion, fostering a habitual encounter with difference that would transform politics. The crowded factories and neighborhoods of the working class constantly brought people together from diverse ethnicities, religions, genders, and beliefs—all united by common experience and common purpose at work. In a diverse community such as hers, Addams argued that the common ground shared by all were the human needs for “labor and the nourishing of human life,” and that political activity and institutions should answer these needs.⁹⁷ It was the practice of shared labor (including her own Hull-House) that encouraged this view of democratic politics, bringing individuals into “daily contact with those who are unlike each other in all save the universal characteristics.”⁹⁸ For Addams, the most significant barrier to the progress of democracy was the isolation of the middle class from the working class, and at times from the experience of labor itself. If the middle-class shared the labor with the poor, their educational and political advantages would allow them “to see the needs of their neighborhood as a whole, to furnish data for legislation, and to use their influence to secure it.”⁹⁹ The necessities of life and the

95. See Boris, *Home to Work*, 77 and Sklar, *Florence Kelley*, 206–236.

96. Addams, “The Larger Aspects of the Women’s Movement,” 6.

97. Addams, *Newer Ideals*, 24.

98. *Ibid.*, 14.

99. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 126.

work which fulfilled these needs were shared in common, and the differences between the classes and cultures which jostled together in the industrial city were subtle when compared with that shared experience. It was the dailiness and shared purpose of work that permitted an empathetic recognition of the needs of others, and that sustained the resolve to see those needs met.

In short, Jane Addams argued that political inclusion would follow from neither shoring up the traditional private sphere nor from radical new forms of public domesticity, as the competing interpretations of Elshtain and Shannon Jackson suggest. Nor does Sarvasy's concept of "the social" adequately capture the object of Addams's democratic imagination. Rather the workplace was the centerpiece of a more inclusive society, and its reform would have an effect on both the public and private spheres. Specifically, Addams argued that a reformed workplace would reinforce a habitual encounter with difference, a rough cosmopolitanism that would be carried from the workplace into the private and public lives of workers. Moreover, knowledge gained from traditional occupations of immigrants and women would provide the foundation for their political inclusion, reforming public governance and providing previously marginalized citizens opportunities to exercise political authority. Through their labor, working people of all classes would progress toward this vision of an inclusive democracy, walking together along what Addams would call "the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another's burdens."¹⁰⁰

100. Addams, *Democracy*, 6.

Conclusion

For all too long, Jane Addams has been misunderstood. Seen by many as a Victorian moralist, she has been alternately celebrated and reproached for those views. Among those who laud her interest in forming strong communities, she has been marshaled variously as a care theorist, a liberal universalist, and a proponent of a robust civic culture. Others have concentrated on her ideas on public and private, arriving at contradictory conclusions that she either hewed close to traditional notions of domesticity, originated radical, experimental forms of public domesticity, or carved out a new sphere of “the social” in between public and private. One reason for the differing interpretations of Addams is a lack of attention to the place of work in her thought. Not simply a bourgeois teetotaler concerned with moral order in the industrial city, Addams thought work was important not because idle hands are the devil’s playthings, but because it could liberate the political potential of human beings, becoming the means for individuals to discover a public identity and purpose. More important, work was the primary structure of community for Addams, uniting people from different backgrounds in a common undertaking. In fact, it was not the spheres of the public, the private, or the nebulous social that occupied her political imagination but that of work, the only site in which habits of recognition and inclusion could be adequately cultivated, bringing the privileged into daily contact with the poor and building with them a shared political interest. Uniting people from different backgrounds as equals in a common undertaking, work could form in all citizens a cosmopolitan sensibility and “identification with the common lot,” which was, for Addams, “the essential idea of Democracy.”¹⁰¹

And what would Jane Addams say to the contemporary student of democracy?

101. Addams, *Democracy*, 11.

Despite changes in practices of labor which might have been unthinkable to Addams, work that sustains identity, community, and democratic politics is as vital today as ever. The industrial factory that served as the model of community life for Addams is an increasingly rare workplace. In the so-called post-industrial era, it is in the service sector that jobs await those workers displaced by factory closings—when there are any jobs at all. The rise of temporary, contract, and freelance work further highlights the distance between Addams’s vision of the ideal workplace as a vibrant, multi-cultural community and its often lonely reality. In the absence of any political institutions to provide stability and security at work, employment is too precarious to develop a stable identity, lasting relationships with co-workers, or a sense of common purpose at work. Although Addams devoted her life to reforming a version of work whose daily practice looked vastly different from today, the same problems have continued to trouble contemporary working life, further eroding the bonds of solidarity that make democracy work. In short, Addams’s views comprise as much of a challenge to today’s political atmosphere as they did to that of her own time, reminding us that a democracy worthy of the name depends upon the availability of labor that provides for a stable sense of identity, integrates people into a community, and fosters political institutions that support the freedom and equality that democracies require to survive and thrive.

As it was in Addams’s time, work is still at the heart of politics in the United States. Public conversations about many of our most important policy issues are often as much about the nature and meaning of work as they are about the policy in question. The terms of debate about immigration reform concern whether or not to create a “guest-worker” path to citizenship, how much responsibility employers have in policing the legal status of their workers, and the consequences of unrestricted immigration on employment opportunities for workers who are citizens. In the arena of health care, one’s status as a worker is a prerequisite for insurance coverage, and questions of

healthcare reform inevitably raise questions about what employers owe their workers, or what non-working members of society justly deserve. The specter of the loafing welfare recipient lurks in the background when discussing almost any state provision of social services. Attention to the issues of work that lie at the heart of these and other political questions could both enliven contemporary democratic theory and embolden democratic practice. Rarely does the implicit conversation about the meaning of work and its place in a democratic community become as explicit as it was for Addams. Rarer still is any articulate statement of the promise and potential of work for democracy, a promise so powerfully evoked in her vision of the thronged and common road, and of the meaningful work that awaits at the wells of human experience.

3 Herbert Croly on Work and Democracy

Whether out of love or necessity, American workers spend more time on the job than those in nearly any other country.¹ Beginning as early as Tocqueville, this peculiar love affair with productive labor has been the subject of scholarly inquiry by social theorists, who have found its roots in the theological economy of early Protestantism, connected it to conflicted attitudes about acquisitive individualism, and viewed it as one explanation for the curious lack of a developed welfare state in the United States.² Although the arguments have become commonplace, their repetition has failed to provide an adequate understanding of the specific centrality of work to the American political imagination. This chapter attempts to correct this failure with an analysis of the thought of Herbert Croly, the Progressive era writer whose conception of democratic politics called not only for a reorganization of the workplace but also a rethinking of the meaning of work.

Although his prose is often leaden and even obtuse, Croly nevertheless was and remains a potent force in American political thought and discourse. In his own time, he provided the intellectual framework for Theodore Roosevelt's "New Nationalism,"

1. Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America, 2008/2009* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2009).

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Sever & Francis, 1863); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930); Rodgers, *Work Ethic*; Robert Wuthnow, *Poor Richard's Principle: Recovering the American Dream through the Moral Dimension of Work, Business, and Money* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

the rallying cry of TR's 1912 presidential campaign.³ As co-editor (with Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl) of *The New Republic* from its creation in 1914 to his death in 1930, Croly threw himself into the thick of national politics, shaping liberal and reform thought, and influencing the direction of national policy.⁴ A public intellectual, Croly can be seen as one of the first American popular social critics, whose occupational progeny today include the swelling ranks of the ubiquitous professional punditry.⁵ More important, he has been alternately celebrated and reviled as one of the intellectual founders of the modern American state. Thus liberal commentators look back to Croly as advancing some of the first and most forceful arguments for using government as a solution to public problems, seeing reverberations of his ideas in the New Deal, the Great Society, and the New Frontier.⁶ By contrast, libertarian conservatives critical of "big government" point to Croly's vision of the administrative state as a ghastly ideology that is responsible for the perceived collapse of individual freedom.⁷

Among academic political theorists and intellectual historians, Croly continues to inspire heated reactions. Wildly divergent readings of his relationship to modern liberalism posit alternately that he persistently favored collective national concerns at the expense of individual interests, and that his political vision is squarely in the liberal

3. Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern America* (New York: Knopf, 1952).

4. Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann and the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

5. Paul F. Bourke, "The Social Critics and the End of American Innocence, 1907-1921," *The Journal of American Studies* 3 (July 1969): 57-92.

6. Louisa Thomas, "Progressive Education," *Newsweek*, July 23, 2009, 61; John Judis, "The Quiet Revolution," *The New Republic*, February 1, 2010, 15-17.

7. Virginia Postrel, "The Croly Ghost: Exorcising the Specter Haunting American Politics," *Reason*, December 1997, 4-7; Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

tradition, seeing public power as the best protection of private rights.⁸ Scholars who explore his thinking on industrial relations come to similarly contradictory characterizations of him as either a disciple of corporate management or a defender of workers' control and unionization.⁹ Among those who try to understand his theory of the state, some see him as a champion of an elitist and technocratic statism while others see him as an advocate of a pluralist participatory democracy.¹⁰ At this point, no one seems able to agree on much of anything about Croly.

This chapter attempts to bridge these divergent readings by bringing the concept of work to its rightful place in Croly's thought. It argues that Croly's political thought, until now seen in widely disparate ways, can be understood best as a response to an early twentieth-century crisis of work. Using primarily his two principal political writings, *The Promise of American Life* (1909) and *Progressive Democracy* (1914), it looks at three themes that dominate much of his thinking: occupation, specialization, and administrative organization. In each case, it demonstrates how Croly believed that a reconceptualization of the American experience of work would resolve the very contradictions that have vexed his interpreters. For Croly, occupations could be conceived as individuating acts of social service, correcting both the atomizing and the conformist tendencies of modern industrial society. Specialization could energize both corporations and labor unions to achieve more efficient and productive work. Administrative management could be expanded to build a state that would organize the distribution

8. Nichols, "The Promise of Progressivism"; Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt*; Edward A. Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914*.

9. Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism*; Katz, "Syndicalist Liberalism."

10. Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Knopf, 1959); Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*; Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*; O'Leary, "Herbert Croly and Progressive Democracy"; Eisenach, *Lost Promise*.

of labor according to public desires and needs. In short, the chapter shows that Croly's political thought can be rightly understood as an attempt to realize democracy by changing the way Americans think about work.

Croly, work and the industrial crisis

Unlike many of his aristocratic peers at Harvard in the 1880s, Herbert David Croly's social position required that he actually work for a living. Although privileged enough to send their son to college, his parents were not people of independent means, but were instead members of the emerging professional middle class, both of whom actively pursued careers in journalism. David Goodman Croly, an Irish immigrant, was an editor of the *New York World*, a prominent organ of the Democratic party. A restless intellectual entrepreneur, David Croly also operated a successful professional publication, *The Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, a journal serving the city's rapidly growing real estate interests. But despite David's success in New York's publishing world, it was his wife, Jane Cunningham Croly, who was the real literary celebrity. Known to the reading public as "Jenny June," and arguably America's first newspaperwoman, Herbert Croly's mother was one of the most well-known women in America, and one of the most prolific.¹¹ Although Jenny June, like most of her readers, thought the world of politics too uncouth for the refined and genteel feminine constitution, Jane Cunningham Croly saw the working world as posing no danger to the feminine virtues, authoring an 1891 handbook and primer for would-be career women, *Thrown on Her Own Resources; or, What Girls Can Do*. With both of his parents working constantly, and apparently thinking about work constantly, the young Herbert Croly was given an

11. Caroline M. Morse, ed., *Memories of Jane Cunningham Croly, "Jenny June"* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904).

ideal preparation for both a career and a political philosophy in which work was the cornerstone.

In the Croly household, work was a theoretical as well as a practical concern. The home served as a salon for a circle of intellectuals and eccentric characters devoted to the study and interpretation of Auguste Comte, whose positivist science was premised on the principle that society should be organized according to an exact division of labor designed to serve the general good. Long curious about the French philosopher whose ideas were widely circulated amongst the literary public in Europe, David Croly bankrolled a series of lectures in New York on Comte and positivism in 1869. In the wake of the lectures, a loose association began meeting regularly at the Croly home to discuss, debate, and experiment with all aspects of Comtean thought.¹² Comte's theories of work were particularly appealing to the indefatigable David Croly, who would instill them in his son from an early age. To Croly senior, work gave meaning to life, since "good work well done is its own best reward."¹³ By the same token, those who failed to work—the loafers, idlers, and contemptible do-nothings—failed both themselves and society. Moreover, in David Croly's mind, social progress required specialized work, with "the man who devotes himself to a few things" being the only

12. Due to Comte's emphasis on religious themes in his later writing, his work is often ignored as an eccentric artifact of nineteenth-century intellectual history. On the reception of Comte in the United States and its most forceful advocate, Henry Edger, the mainspring of David Croly's New York circle of Comteans, see Richmond Laurin Hawkins, *Positivism in the United States (1853-1861)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938) and Robert Edward Schneider, "Positivism in the United States: the Apostleship of Henry Edger" (PhD diss., Columbia Univ., 1946). For an account of Edger and his milieu in the eccentric nineteenth-century utopian community of Modern Times, see Roger Wunderlich, *Low Living and High Thinking at Modern Times, New York* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 161–172. On the importance of Comte to the development of American social science and the formation of modern liberal ideology, see Gillis J. Harp, *Positivist Republic: Auguste Comte and the Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1920* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1–22, 183–209.

13. Cited in C.G. David, *A Positivist Primer: Being a Series of Familiar Conversations on the Religion of Humanity* (New York: David Wesley & Company, 1871), 62.

person who could “achieve perfection and be of value to his race.”¹⁴ Employers owed an obligation to their workers. Should his son find himself in the position of having employees, David Croly admonished him to remember that his duty to them “is not closed with the payment of the compensation agreed upon,” but that they were also owed “consideration, care, kindness, and love.”¹⁵ As for workers, it was essential that they understand that work was a form of “honest service” to not only an employer, but “through him, to Humanity” at large.¹⁶ Consciously or not, his father’s Comtean gospel of dedication to hard work, specialization in service to society, and a sense of mutual obligation and common purpose would be reiterated throughout Croly’s life.¹⁷

However, his father’s interpretation of Comte was not the only formative intellectual influence on Croly. Coming of age amid a continuing debate over the meaning of work in the industrial age, Croly combed and synthesized a rich academic literature, particularly in the emerging social sciences, combining insights from disparate sources in his own economic and political thought. Thinkers of the time on all sides were reconsidering the character of wage labor, its roots in republican ideas of personal liberty, and its application to the increasingly impersonal and illiberal situation of the industrial workplace. Among those thinkers, economists like John R. Commons and Richard T. Ely attempted to reassert the role of wage earners in the industrial economy, arguing that the growing importance of wage labor to the industrial economy required a reformed relationship between employers and workers, one that assured adequate

14. David, *A Positivist Primer: Being a Series of Familiar Conversations on the Religion of Humanity*, 37.

15. *Ibid.*, 102.

16. *Ibid.*, 46.

17. On the influence of Comte on Croly, see David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: the Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 28–42, 58–69. For an interpretation that suggests his father’s devotion to Comte was a minor influence, see Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism*, 9–13.

compensation, insurance to mitigate injuries at work, and public policies to counter cyclical unemployment. Advocates of scientific management as diverse as Thorstein Veblen, Mary Parker Follett, and Frederick Winslow Taylor sought a new organization of labor that not only maximized the efficiency of the workforce but also created an authoritative role for the corporate managers charged with overseeing it. As the nation grew, theorists of the state—utopian socialists, single-taxers, syndicalists, Progressives from Roosevelt to John Dewey—called for a democratic state system that would allow its citizens to contribute purposefully to collective life. Croly drew from all of these thinkers, developing his own views by distinguishing them from theirs in his articles and books, turning frequently to the issues posed in contemporary debates over the widespread industrial conflict and the social problems that attended the rapid expansion of industrial labor. Indeed, from his editorial chair, Croly took a leading role in these debates, commenting extensively on the purpose of work, the proper organization of labor, and the role of the state in providing a centralized administrative apparatus that could provide solutions to the excesses of Gilded Age capitalism.¹⁸

Occupation

Perhaps the most important issue upon which Croly's interpreters disagree is the relation of the individual to the community. For example, David Nichols argues that even generously read, Croly endorses an idea of individuality that is "extremely truncated," looking more like "self-abnegation" than self-expression.¹⁹ In this interpretation,

18. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 311–17; Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, 415–16; Eisenach, *Lost Promise*, 39–40.

19. Nichols, "The Promise of Progressivism," 38.

Croly's critique of self-interest and corruption leads to a dangerous rejection of individual rights that blithely calls upon citizens to renounce their own interests for the sake of the national community. Similarly, Bob Pepperman Taylor finds "a lot not to like" in Croly's *The Promise of American Life*, where he sees an apparent erasure of the "distinction between true or properly understood personal interests and the national interests" that ultimately undermines the need for "a respect for diverse and contending interests in a democratic order."²⁰ To Taylor, Croly's rejection of the language of rights is symptomatic of the wholesale dissolution of the individual into the community. On the other hand, scholars like Edward Stettner read Croly as a modern American liberal, concerned with "the full development of individual capacities." Indeed, Stettner argues that as Croly's thought matured he became even more vehement in his "core emphasis on individual choice," while also becoming "more accepting of individual rights."²¹ Nevertheless, neither of these contradictory readings adequately captures Croly's peculiar conception of individualism, which emphasized neither self-abnegation nor individual rights, but the personal pursuit of excellence and the obligation to social service in every occupation.

Croly's concept of occupation captures the combination of individualism and social obligation that defined his understanding of labor. As wage labor emerged as a permanent condition of industrial society, many workers simply pursued jobs that returned the most in the way of material rewards.²² The accumulation of money, he wrote, was "the absorbing occupation of the American people."²³ By contrast, a more democratic

20. Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt*, 35–42.

21. Stettner, *Shaping Modern Liberalism*, 54, 98.

22. Although he recognized certain differences between the specific tasks of the middle-class and those of the working-class, Croly did not recognize any conceptual or evaluative distinction between "work" and "labor." Compare Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 79–93.

23. Herbert David Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 22.

occupation was any conscious activity that not only satisfied an individual interest but also served a social purpose, no matter how menial the work itself. Work that was of personal significance could bring identity to an individual, organizing the “successive phases and various aspects of his own life.”²⁴ In this regard, an occupation was more than just a job; at its best, it was a worldly manifestation of a worker’s individuality. In addition, however, an occupation further implied a social purpose, a task that was “some serviceable art” in which “the processes of individual and social improvement” were “mutually dependent.”²⁵ Industrial wage labor, middle-class economic roles, and emerging professional activities were all united as occupations that conferred social significance on people’s lives, giving “the different aspects of their national experience” both “meaning and momentum.”²⁶ Undertaken with the proper attitude, occupations transcended mere labor, giving determination, direction, and purpose to individual and collective life.

Like many Progressives of the period, Croly believed that industrialization tended to degrade individual development, making people expendable and interchangeable. Unlike reform-minded economists such as Commons and Ely, however, Croly did not assume that it was the monotony of automation that was creating mindless workers, but rather a more pervasive acquisitiveness that made “the ultimate measure” of work’s value “its results in cash.” Indeed, although he believed acquisitiveness constrained individual development at all strata of society, he saw it most acutely among middle class “business men,” who “have a way of becoming fundamentally very much alike” whatever their differences in “temperament, circumstances, and habits.” Success in such a setting required surrender to the pressure of conformity, since any individual

24. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 410.

25. *Ibid.*, 439.

26. *Ibid.*, 405.

differences (such as special talents, knowledge, or interests) that did not bring immediate economic rewards languished unnourished or, worse yet, were actively stifled. As Croly put it, individual freedom in the modern world of work “is as much compromised by success as it is by failure.”²⁷ In fact, Croly argued that to the extent that individuals achieve some measure of “pecuniary independence,” they did so at the price of “moral and intellectual bondage.”²⁸ In this way the distinction between individuals was merely “quantitative,” and any independence “wholly comparative.”²⁹ Amidst such pathological conformity, the only way for an individual to excel was by the energetic and zealous pursuit and accumulation of wealth.

Thus, for Croly, the reform of work did not pertain strictly to ameliorating specific consequences of industrialization, but rather to transforming the deeper motivations and purposes of labor itself. Immediate rewards and short-term economic benefit were primary motivations of most workers. Consequently, most people engaged in “indifferent work” or “work which has absolutely no social value,” being content to perform in a way that brought only “the largest possible returns.”³⁰ Most egregious were those who managed to extract a living without engaging in any sort of productive activity themselves, who made money simply from the property they already owned, or who spent their days in nothing more taxing than “assiduous repose in an easy chair.”³¹ To Croly, indifferent work and laziness were an inevitable outcome of the uncritical acceptance of the profit motive as the only conceivable motivation for work. In fact, the profit motive actually “compels a man to stop at a certain point,” since workers

27. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 410.

28. *Ibid.*, 412.

29. *Ibid.*, 411.

30. *Ibid.*, 412.

31. *Ibid.*, 415.

would cease to make innovations “when they cease to bring in an immediate return.”³² Although critics like Nichols have noted Croly’s hostility to individual economic competition, they have ignored his assessment of its effects on individual development. In thrall to what he called a “religion of personal profit,” most workers measured the worth of their labor by its economic returns rather than by looking at the type of individual the work tended to create or the social purpose it aimed to achieve.³³ Thus not only did working exclusively for pecuniary rewards hamper individual creativity, in most cases it actually degraded the quality of work. Furthermore, it created a type of individual who was impoverished in other ways, whose life was “deprived of all serious moral and intellectual meaning.”³⁴ To Croly, any person able to attain some measure of intellectual independence or moral uprightness in the conditions of unrestrained economic competition did so “not because of the prevailing money making motive, but in spite thereof.”³⁵ In short, unrestrained profit-seeking made not only shoddy workers, but also vacuous human beings.

Croly believed that work itself should be a worker’s motivation, a vision which required both changing the conditions of work life and the worker’s understanding of labor. All labor should be disinterested, performed for the rewards intrinsic to the activity itself rather than for personal enrichment. Of course, removing the influence of the profit motive was easier where “the work itself was really interesting” and the worker could be “absorbed in it by the very momentum of his habitual occupation.” Labor in which a worker must live up to a “technical standard” that was “properly exacting” (as was often the case with skilled labor) was less likely to be motivated

32. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 412.

33. *Ibid.*, 426.

34. *Ibid.*, 413.

35. *Ibid.*, 412.

by merely economic motivations. Work in skilled occupations, he writes, is motivated by a standard defined by “the traditions and the honor of the craft,” and workers will strive to achieve that standard even where personal profit does not require it.³⁶ Admittedly, not all occupations are intrinsically interesting, but Croly believed that even in the absence of interesting work, a job well done would be its own reward. A worker must become “interested exclusively in the excellence of his work” in order to attain “complete disinterestedness.”³⁷ Lacking any clear measure of excellence, unskilled workers were much less likely to achieve such an exacting standard. In fact, given Croly’s focus on the problems affecting middle-class occupations, his insistence that the proper mental attitude could transform the most mindless work into a satisfying occupation can seem patronizing at best. Moreover, the ideal of disinterested labor might not preclude hierarchies of prestige and power at work. Even so, reforming work for Croly meant expanding opportunities for skilled labor, thereby thinning the ranks of unskilled and menial workers.

Like the Progressive economists, Croly argued that a flourishing of individuality required a fundamental transformation of wages and compensation. Unlike them, however, he believed that constructive work could never be wholly compensated by wages alone. Indeed, under the existing system, a competent worker did not receive an increase in wages for excellent performance of his work, but rather only when he had “shown himself capable of assuming larger responsibilities and exercising more power” over other workers.³⁸ Thus the most competent workers were often promoted to managerial positions in which they no longer practiced the skills with which they had distinguished themselves. To resolve this problem, Croly made the case for a conception of work in

36. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 416.

37. *Ibid.*, 417.

38. *Ibid.*, 416.

which workers would experience a new freedom of individual development in an occupation in which they were particularly interested or well-suited. In striking contrast to the social homogenization that was the natural outgrowth of merely acquisitive labor, this kind of labor created “innumerable special niches” and encouraged the flourishing of a boundless variety of individuals to fill them.³⁹ Rather than encouraging social conformity, it allowed for workers to practice new and different occupations. Moreover, the “spirit and method” by which they worked would also change, allowing individuality “to take substance and form.”⁴⁰ For Croly, workers in these new occupations would be able to practice truly disinterested labor, the primary means of individuation, since where work was pursued with disinterest “a man’s individuality is projected” freely into his labor, creating a product which would reflect his uniqueness.⁴¹

Occupation also possessed an educative capacity, cultivating both moral health and intellectual capabilities. Work was discipline with a special purpose, and the best arena in which to practice the perseverance necessary to the educated life. It was precisely the ability to “patiently and resolutely stick to the performance of some special and (for the most part) congenial task” that allowed a worker to “gather an edifying understanding of man and things.” The capacity to understand and learn from experience—for Croly, the very definition of education—depended “upon the sincerity and intelligence” that a person “brings to his own particular occupation.”⁴² The pursuit of excellence in one’s occupation required experimenting with new techniques, taking some risks, and ultimately making a few mistakes. From experience at work, one could gain personal insights and develop “some kind of a general philosophy” of life. Without the

39. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 414.

40. *Ibid.*, 411.

41. *Ibid.*, 412.

42. *Ibid.*, 404.

discipline of a habitual occupation, one's own experience would remain shrouded and opaque, without wider meaning. Croly argued that labor's capacity to educate was not dependent upon the task, since any worker could be "an educated man" even if his "particular job has been that of mechanic."⁴³ The general education thus pursued in an occupation was more important than the preliminary liberal or technical education received in traditional schools. It was this on-the-job education that made a person "capable of realizing his purpose."⁴⁴

Establishing disinterested labor as the foundation of a social and political education would also improve the quality of associational life. Croly argued that the disciplined pursuit of one's occupational purpose better equips one to live in a complex, interdependent society. It was in establishing daily relations with others and in making work fit a wider social purpose that workers acquired the skills necessary "for fruitful association."⁴⁵ As an organization in which people have unique and specialized interests, purposes, skills and knowledge, the workplace offered ideal instruction in navigating and negotiating not just social life, but also political life. Although not unique in bringing together diverse people, the workplace was crucial in its capacity to teach workers an important political lesson about the relative value of the needs of the whole and the desires of the individual. Without question, Croly's argument in *Progressive Democracy* that both good work and healthy political life required subordinating "individual interests and desires to the requirements of social welfare" seems to support the interpretations of those like Nichols and Taylor who argue that he conflates individual and public interest, or is overtly hostile to a meaningful understanding of individualism.⁴⁶

43. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 405.

44. *Ibid.*, 404.

45. *Ibid.*, 403.

46. Herbert David Croly, *Progressive Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 406.

Yet his insistence that individuals subordinate their personal desire to the standards of excellence in their occupation was rooted in a belief that political life would be enhanced by giving the worker daily “opportunity of participating on equal terms with his fellow-citizens.”⁴⁷ In working together toward some organized purpose, individuals would learn how to think and act as members of a community, skills not inculcated in overly individualistic understandings of labor.

Reflecting his intellectual debts to his father’s Comtean politics, Croly reimagines all work, menial or skilled, as social service. Yet whereas Comte had envisioned work at the service of all humanity, Croly believed that work was a form of specifically national service. The idea of the nation loomed large in his thinking, as a far-flung community held together by a commitment to a shared purpose. In the case of the American nation, that purpose was “the conviction and the feeling of human brotherhood.”⁴⁸ For Croly, such a lofty and abstract goal was best achieved through the quotidian practice of disinterested work. Working in the spirit of service, workers became instruments of “the fulfillment of the American national Promise.”⁴⁹ In fact, in reimagining work as social service, work became a condition of citizenship. Even the lowest task could be transformed into “exhilarating activity” through which the worker could “renew his life” in service to “his fellow-citizens.” Labor in the spirit of service, Croly wrote in *Progressive Democracy*, “converts a worker into a good citizen.”⁵⁰ By simply pursuing their own special occupation, these hard-working citizens would redress the many social pathologies introduced by industrialization. In essence, Croly considered the average worker a social reformer who did “more to revolutionize and reconstruct” the national

47. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 423.

48. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 453.

49. *Ibid.*, 439.

50. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 423.

political life than a “regiment of professional revolutionists and reformers.”⁵¹

Thus Croly’s concept of occupation furnishes a bridge between the conflicting poles of individual and public interest, resulting in a more cohesive politics than suggested by the divergent interpretations of recent scholars such as Nichols, Taylor, and Stettner. Seen as a theorist of work, he offers a vision of industrial life that neither requires the complete submission of self to society, nor cultivates an atomistic culture of individual self-interest. Rather, Croly proposed that work be reformed to blunt the force of the prevailing profit motive, to make work itself the individual laborer’s principal motivation. Specifically, this reform required more occupations that called for skilled workers, and a structure of compensation that recognized the value of all labor by providing all workers a wholesome quality of life. Only when labor was thus relieved of its economic motivations would the individuality necessary to democracy flourish, grounding national unity not in the people’s allegiance to the state, but in the citizen’s devotion to work.

Specialization

Because he lauded specialization, expertise, and organization, Croly has been understood by historians and political theorists as a disciple of efficiency, giving a special place to experts who would extract the most productivity from the labor process. Thus in his *Efficiency and Uplift*, a classic study of the history of scientific management, Samuel Haber argues that Croly celebrates experts who “could impose technical standards for the general good,” averting national dissolution by cultivating a shared commitment

51. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 439.

to productivity among all classes of workers.⁵² According to Haber's reading, Croly is merely an apologist for large corporations, ignoring the concerns of workers who chafed under the discipline of an increasingly severe management of labor. Similarly, Jeffrey Lustig argues that it was the corporation that would be "the basic building block of the new society" that Croly imagined.⁵³ That said, Lustig sees Croly as calling for a new breed of corporate managers who could work within the limits imposed by governmental regulation to protect workers against those rapacious industrialists who often "sabotaged production, mistreated workers, and appropriated too great a share" of the profits of labor.⁵⁴ However, other scholars go so far as to claim that Croly was not an advocate of expert management at all, but rather a proponent of workers' syndicalism. For example, Claudio Katz notes that throughout his writing Croly emphasized workers' self-determination, and reads him as an industrial democrat for whom any managerial scheme "would be tolerable only if producers introduced it themselves."⁵⁵ Yet Croly saw little essential conflict between corporations and labor unions, lauding corporations for their ability to create material abundance, and praising unions because they shaped a better-trained and more highly-skilled class of worker, and because they could provide a stable and efficient labor supply. In short, he endorses the consolidation of both corporations and labor unions only to the extent that each contributed to increasing the quality and skill of work.

Croly saw the emerging division of labor in the industrial economy as not only changing the practice of work for the individual laborer, but also threatening the basic integrity of society. Fortunes were made, lost, and remade again with such rapidity

52. Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift*, 90.

53. Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism*, 127.

54. *Ibid.*, 128.

55. Katz, "Syndicalist Liberalism," 699.

that society seemed constantly in flux, becoming more unstable and subject to capricious but devastating cycles of economic boom and recession. With industrialization, occupational tasks had become divided; business owners concentrated their energy on a single product or service, workers in a factory worked on only one part of the manufacturing process. As a result, the natural harmony between private interests and the public good, long a basic assumption of political and social life, had been lost. Prior to the age of industry, economic activity was simple enough that individual productivity implied public prosperity, and vice versa, making “every economic producer” also “a practical politician” who saw “no deep-lying division between these primary activities” of work and politics. However, the industrial era was stingier with its rewards, conferring economic benefits exclusively to those who focused their energies and became “capable of specializing” their work by making attention to their individual tasks a more important priority than concern for the public weal. As business became complex and specialized, it left no time for politics or the public interest. Specialization had begun to unravel the “general similarity of occupation” upon which the “natural community of feeling” was based.⁵⁶ Moreover, public-spiritedness had become anachronistic, and public figures owed their status to “achievements in their private and special occupations” rather than to their public service.⁵⁷ In severing the link between private and public good, the division of labor had begun to erode the basic assumptions of American society, challenging the very possibility of a public life.

Despite its problems, Croly believed that specialization also conferred positive benefits to society. Most important, specialization increased the quality of work. The division of labor created a greater productive capacity and nearly unfathomable prosperity for a few savvy businessmen. Seeking advantage over their competitors, business owners

56. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 104.

57. *Ibid.*, 105.

demanded workers who could efficiently perform a single task. The unrelenting competition to provide services and products to an increasingly dispersed marketplace created a need for all manner of specialists who together produced “a constant improvement in the mechanism of production.”⁵⁸ These improvements were possible only because of the expertise and “special technical competence” that developed as a response to industrial specialization.⁵⁹ The “political specialist,” Croly’s euphemism for those who worked the urban political machines, similarly improved the practice of governance. Like their industrial counterparts, political machines utilized a highly specialized division of labor, requiring operatives with specific skills. Whereas many reformers viewed the party machines as tainted and destructive instruments of politics, Croly argued that urban bosses provided tangible goods to their constituents, the jobs and social services that made more of a difference in the daily lives of citizens than abstract guarantees of individual rights. Because their methods were “better suited to actual popular needs,” these urban political specialists had become experts in political mobilization.⁶⁰ Social scientists like Thorstein Veblen (who also had a prominent role in public life as editor of *The Dial*) complained that despite the benefits of specialization, business and political leaders took advantage of the division of labor only to enrich themselves, subverting specialization when its public benefits failed to return large personal profits. Croly shared Veblen’s concern, but was more optimistic that specialization and the division of labor could be organized in more socially beneficial ways. Indeed, as specialized work became the standard, workers would see themselves as possessing skills that assisted a larger productive process, laboring to achieve not their personal self-interest,

58. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 108.

59. *Ibid.*, 442.

60. *Ibid.*, 125.

but what he called “some general human interest.”⁶¹ Whether producing shirtwaists or organizing the public, specialization would serve the cause of solving social problems.

Most important, work was becoming more efficient thanks to the increasing importance of experts. As Haber observed, Croly shared with other theorists of scientific management, including F.W. Taylor and Follett, the belief that efficiency was a form of social improvement. Indeed, the term itself, in addition to its technical definition which described an output-input ratio, connoted a relationship of social harmony. At the very least, efficient work was economically beneficial. A more specialized organization of production succeeded in “reducing the amount of waste,” allowing industrialists “to reduce the cost of production to a minimum.”⁶² Together, specialization and efficiency also created a new role for rank-and-file workers. Efficient work depended upon workers having “as much responsibility as is necessary for the efficient performance of their work.”⁶³ Although this emphasis on efficiency demanded more severe discipline from workers, they were rewarded with more freedom and authority over their own work, an aspect of Croly’s thought that those who view him as merely a proponent of efficiency for efficiency’s sake have ignored. Moreover, workers who were more concerned about the efficient performance of their job than their personal profits improved the moral health of society. As efficiency became the standard, more workers would themselves become experts, adopting broad social purposes in place of self-interest. Specialization, “in so far as it is efficient,” has “a tendency to be constructive,” Croly wrote, forming a society that not only rewarded individuals for the efficient performance of their work but also for their ability to bring about “social amelioration.”⁶⁴

61. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 447.

62. *Ibid.*, 115.

63. *Ibid.*, 203.

64. *Ibid.*, 196.

Despite the resulting improvements in the quality of work, the full social benefits of specialization would not be realized until the moral and intellectual dimensions of competence were recognized in both industry and politics. Surveying the social world around him, Croly saw the most technically proficient businessmen and politicians rise to power, even when their specific expertise did not necessarily confer a socially-minded perspective. As a result, society was disorganized, lacking competent leaders, while the benefits of industrial specialization were not equitably distributed and political processes were manipulated to satisfy a small minority of the population. With the advance in specialization, by contrast, it would be possible to classify workers according to knowledge and ability, and to organize their labor to give the most competent and morally upright among them a chance to exert a “constructive social influence.”⁶⁵ Croly argued that in such a society the most competent worker would reflect on “the subject-matter of his own work,” considering its social value rather than merely improving his “manual proficiency.”⁶⁶ Moral standards would be every bit as exacting as technical standards, and just as much a part of good work. In a properly organized society, moral lassitude would “meet the same reprobation as would manual incompetence.”⁶⁷ According to Croly, specialization rendered obsolete the generalized egalitarianism of the pioneer spirit, while also making it easy to identify and elevate society’s most competent members into positions of leadership. These competent and morally robust leaders would more ably oversee the economic and political system, thus ensuring a better distribution of the fruits of industrial organization. Thus while appearing to undermine the peculiar American insistence on equality, organizing society according to a hierarchy of competence was in fact the best way to achieve an equitable arrangement

65. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 442.

66. *Ibid.*, 437.

67. *Ibid.*, 436.

of economic life.

The proper organization of the workplace was the product of scientific study. Although an advocate of scientific management, Croly's conception of that term was quite distinct from that of Taylor, with whom it is most closely associated. Indeed there were many variants of scientific management popular at the time, with some (like Follett's) stressing the obligation of owner to worker and others (like Taylor's) explicitly aimed at expropriating the efforts of labor by placing it in under managerial control.⁶⁸ Croly's views fell somewhere between these extremes, stressing the material benefits that would accrue to disciplined workers whose skilled work was organized by expert managers.⁶⁹ Croly argued that scientific study of the workplace could reveal a plan of organization that would place each part of the productive process, whether machine or man, in its proper role. Such a scientifically organized workplace would depend upon workers who knew their purpose, possessed the skills to fulfill it, and had the discipline to carry it out efficiently. But it was a workplace whose workers must themselves choose to so organize, accepting a "rigorism" that would be "authorized by their own choice."⁷⁰ As

68. Haber provides a thorough overview of Taylor's unique and wide influence, acknowledging that Taylor's views were not always in step with the mainstream of the emerging profession of business management. For example, Wharton School economist Simon Patten developed theories of management that were closer to Croly than to Taylor, emphasizing cooperation between management and labor, and a strong commitment to the public interest. Croly's views were also consonant with those of management theorists like Mary Parker Follett who stressed significant employee participation that were absent from Taylor's formulation of scientific management. For more on Patten, see Daniel M. Fox, *The Discovery of Abundance: Simon N. Patten and the Transformation of Social Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); for Follett, see Pauline Graham, ed., *Mary Parker Follett, Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s* (Washington, D.C.: Beard Books, 2003). See also Eisenach, *Lost Promise of Progressivism*, 260–262.

69. Croly's views on scientific management were echoed by William Cox Redfield, Secretary of Commerce in the Woodrow Wilson administration, whose 1912 book *The New Industrial Day* was a clarion call for enlightened corporate leadership, cooperation between labor and capital, and disciplined scientific management. For Croly's laudatory review of Redfield's book, see Herbert Croly, review of *The New Industrial Day*, by William C. Redfield, *American Economic Review* 3 (March 1913): 129.

70. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 402. On the role of union's own expert managers, see *The New Republic*, "Trade Unions and Productive Efficiency," May 11, 1918, 41.

for the managers, they contributed more to the efficient production than a watchful eye and a stopwatch. Like so many others of his milieu, Croly viewed business management as an increasingly professional occupation, one rooted in academic disciplines of social economics, sociology, and social psychology. More than mere foremen, the new scientific managers would systematically investigate the methods of production, the achievements of workers, and the future expansion of business enterprises, approaching the organization of labor “with as much tenacity, patience and method as are purely scientific problems.”⁷¹ Thus for Croly, scientific management, far from a powerful tool of individual ownership or class interest, was an exacting master of the entire enterprise.

Unlike many who placed their faith in experts, and in stark contrast to Taylor, Croly also sounded the need for a more comprehensive organization of labor into collective unions. Organization of labor was a necessary step in the continuing classification of society, as well as in the development of expertise. Indeed, Croly made no place for the independent, individual worker, calling non-union laborers “a species of industrial derelict” who “should be rejected as emphatically, if not as ruthlessly, as the gardener rejects the weeds in his garden.”⁷² For the most part, non-union laborers drive down not only wages but also the quality of work, “either because of irresponsibility, unintelligence, or a total lack of social standards and training.”⁷³ However, Croly envisioned labor unions not as vehicles of class consciousness, but as instruments of classification, organizing workers according to skills and aptitude. Workers who could not perform work according to the union’s standards would be expelled from its ranks and would be forced to search for union membership “in another and less exacting trade.”⁷⁴ The

71. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 399.

72. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 387.

73. *Ibid.*, 388.

74. *Ibid.*, 395.

only sort of work that Croly thought would remain non-unionized was agricultural labor, to which workers who did not have the discipline for skilled trades would be consigned “until or unless they are prepared for a higher class of work.”⁷⁵ In short, the primary benefit of organized labor consisted of new methods of training workers and of distributing labor, thus improving the standards of work and matching skilled laborers to work that was appropriate for them. Although Croly’s support of labor unions set him apart from many advocates of scientific management, he viewed them as organizations that should transcend narrow class politics. Indeed, he saw unions as potential instruments of efficiency and competence, handmaidens to a unique brand of scientific management.

Croly’s particular blend of scientific management and unionism entailed a new relationship between workers and their employers. Labor unions would allow workers more authority in the workplace, but it was the efficiency of scientific management that would make it possible for workers to extract material benefits from their employers. As Croly saw it, without a more active role in workplace governance, scientific management would make workers even more dependent on employers and “more completely entangled in the coils of an inhuman industrial system.”⁷⁶ As for employers, scientific management was of little economic benefit without workers who were classified and organized according to their abilities. Croly believed that thus organized, workers would be willing to accept the exacting discipline of the workplace in exchange for an amount of authority in the workplace that corresponded to their expertise and skill. Employers and unions would negotiate the terms under which workers were admitted to the union, so that employers could be ensured “a higher standard of individual work.”⁷⁷

75. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 396.

76. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 401.

77. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 392.

But unions would also have a say in determining the conditions of work, and establishing “the minimum amount of work and pay.”⁷⁸ These changes would amount not only to a higher standard of living and some measure of economic independence, but would exercise a “humanizing effect” as more “responsibilities and discipline” were demanded of workers.⁷⁹ The discipline of expert administration could only be justified if workers chose it for themselves through democratic processes. Thus the purpose of scientific management was regulating the symbiotic relationship between concentrated capital and organized labor, ensuring that industrial work contributed to an improved quality of life for the whole community.

In the same way, expertise had the capacity to cultivate loyalty to the nation itself. Workers who aspired to competency were bound to one another by loyalty to the principles that guided their work and the standards which determined its excellence. For Croly, a specialized occupation was like a faith, composed of a “foundation of knowledge,” of “formal traditions,” and “manual practice.”⁸⁰ Mastery required a thorough understanding of the accumulated experience of a history of practitioners. He argued that knowledge of an occupational tradition and mastery of its techniques supplied a shared “language” that unskilled “technical irresponsibility or mere eclecticism” could not.⁸¹ Whether one worked in Kentucky or in California, the standards of excellence were the same. Workers were thus embedded in an occupational community that transcended geography, their membership dependent upon fidelity to standards of technical excellence. The nation was not tremendously different in its demands, requiring loyalty

78. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 391. For Croly’s view that a more efficient labor force should receive higher wages, see *The New Republic*, “Anti-efficiency in War,” May 4, 1918, 8–9.

79. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 396.

80. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 433.

81. *Ibid.*, 434.

not to technical standards but to “a constructive social ideal.”⁸²

Put simply, in contrast to what those such as Haber and Lustig have claimed, Croly did not advocate expertise, scientific management, and the organization of labor because he was in thrall to corporate efficiency. Nor, contrary to the arguments of those like Katz, did he see workers’ control as being only about who would rule the industrial roost. Instead Croly contended that strong labor unions and competent managers were both indispensable to the efficient organization of an increasingly specialized workforce. Efficiency was an important result of specialization, but it was not the only goal. Workers would also develop expertise and technical mastery in their occupation, exercising more authority over their labor. As workers with special expertise, their labor would be experienced not only as a source of wages, but also as a service to the nation. In becoming specialists, workers also learned how to be better Americans.

Administrative organization

Although all Croly scholars agree that one prominent feature of Croly’s thought is his resolute statism, they sharply disagree on his views of the character of the state. Thus some have been quick to paint Croly as an elitist who favored an expansive role for government, provided it was conducted and overseen by what historian Henry May has called “the superior man,” namely “the disciplined and trained intellectual” who knew best what the average citizen needed and how to provide it.⁸³ Seizing on Croly’s technocratic and paternalistic statism, those like John Patrick Diggins have

82. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 140.

83. May, *The End of American Innocence*, 318.

gone so far as to label Croly a protofascist and Mussolini sympathizer.⁸⁴ Others, far from reading Croly as an authoritarian collectivist, see him instead as a democratic liberal. For example, James Kloppenberg understands Croly to categorically reject any “system of social services purchased at the price of undemocratic government.”⁸⁵ Some of Croly’s recent interpreters argue that these democratic commitments lead him to envision an open and pluralistic state that cultivates deliberation and disagreement in its citizenry. Thus, Kevin O’Leary describes Croly’s vision of society as a vibrant and active citizenry engaged in “energetic discussion, debate, and participation at the grassroots.” In this view, each citizen shares in the governance of society by practicing “deliberation, argument, and negotiation.”⁸⁶ Yet the truth is that Croly’s vision of the state was neither exclusively elitist nor entirely participatory, but rather drew from both of these views, in that he expected government administrators to implement policies with an eye to the equitable distribution of work, constantly investigating how the state’s attempts at management measured up in daily life, while also refining their methods when citizens spoke out against them.

Croly wrote at a time of an unprecedented expansion in the size and scope of government, and he hoped to exert some influence over the course and character of that expansion.⁸⁷ To Croly, the administration of government was itself another occupation that, like all other skilled trades, was a matter of expertise and training. A revolving cast of legislators and executives with limited authority and a circumscribed term of office were not well suited to the details of social administration. Thus government’s

84. John P. Diggins, “Flirtation with Fascism: American Pragmatic Liberals and Mussolini’s Italy,” *The American Historical Review* 71 (January 1966): 487–506; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 228–234; Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism*, 97–99.

85. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 358.

86. O’Leary, “Herbert Croly and Progressive Democracy,” 552, 548.

87. See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 165–211

proper administration increasingly depended upon the specialized knowledge of experts who were given the responsibility of implementing public policies and programs. The executive was responsible for developing a broad vision of social progress, and his expertise was in “organizing a temporary majority of the electorate” rather than fussing over the details of public policy.⁸⁸ Put differently, the executive was a political visionary who mobilized public support for a social program, exciting the people’s imaginations but not actually crafting any concrete plans. The details of executing social policy were to be left to those with training and knowledge, “a permanent body of experts in social administration.”⁸⁹ Like all experts, social administrators were expected to be above partisan and personal interest and singularly devoted to efficiency and excellence in their occupation. Although assumed to be loyal to the cause of social amelioration, they were to be judged principally on their competence and their willingness to carry out “orders from the state” with “the utmost efficiency.”⁹⁰

The expansion of government administration created occupations for an educated middle class otherwise stifled by conformity. Both Croly and John Dewey, a frequent *New Republic* contributor, lamented the paucity of commercial occupations that could satisfy the public-spirited individual. Indeed, Croly went further, arguing that politics itself had become so corrupt that there were no opportunities for public work that advanced some cause greater than self-interest. While Dewey looked to reform educational practices, thereby expanding democracy in the workplace, Croly proposed extending the scope and depth of government authority to purge the corrupt and incapable, who

88. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 355.

89. *Ibid.*, 359.

90. *Ibid.*, 373.

did their jobs poorly “chiefly because they have not been permitted any sufficient responsibility.”⁹¹ In other words, the role of government had been constrained so much that no special skills or talent were required of those who worked in it. If government had greater regulatory responsibility, only the competent and knowledgeable would be capable of performing the requisite work. While Croly applauded the referendum and initiative models of direct democracy as means of mobilizing public opinion, he argued that the most important aspects of the practice of government must be carried out by those citizens who possessed technical and special knowledge, the educated minority “to whom science comes to have real meaning.”⁹² Thus Croly’s enlarged state harnessed the capabilities of middle-class citizens whose talents were being wasted in a conformist commercial society, giving the “highly educated” and “more distinguished individuals” an opportunity to “make their personal lives more interesting” through an occupation that realized a “collective purpose.”⁹³

Because it was a form of social inquiry, the task of administration could only be performed by the educated. Unlike his colleague Walter Lippmann, who viewed administration as the province of moral authorities in possession of timeless truths, Croly saw the administrator as a type of social scientist, who could explain and understand a complex society through observation and experimentation. The kinds of social problems administrators were tasked with solving could not be addressed without knowledge of specific social conditions. Croly believed that previous generations had conceived of the work of government as basically reactive, protecting and interpreting an infallible law. In contrast to the scales of justice, the new administrators were outfitted with “a much more homely and serviceable set of tools” like “a barometer with which to measure the

91. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 321.

92. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 377.

93. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 406.

pressure of the social air” and “the indispensable type-writer and filing cabinet with which to record the behavior of society.”⁹⁴ More than an ordinary bureaucracy, this body of social experts would organize and create a “social record” that would be the foundation of a flexible, proactive policy process, rather than a formal governmental structure.⁹⁵ As good scientists, expert administrators would view public policy as a series of social experiments, observing the results, refining the methods, and arriving at a progressively better understanding of society. Knowledge was therefore “the fruit of policy” as well as its prerequisite.⁹⁶ Conceived as an agent of social amelioration, a working government depended upon experts who were skilled in both collecting and interpreting social knowledge.

Yet in addition to providing an occupation for the middle class, the administrative state also oversaw a more equitable distribution of labor. Although Croly shared much in common with Walter Weyl, his other co-editor and *New Republic* colleague, Weyl was committed to a state that redistributed wealth, equalizing opportunities for consumption and leisure. By contrast, Croly insisted that it was the distribution of work that was vital to a democratic state. Everyone, including administrators themselves, would share in the necessary labor of society. Thus, intrinsically uninteresting forms of labor would be distributed across society, so that none would toil endlessly in a monotonous occupation that was “necessarily irksome and tedious.”⁹⁷ Moreover, the special competence of administrative experts would be useful only if it was made adaptable and flexible through the “systematic interchange between the men who are

94. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 369.

95. *Ibid.*, 370.

96. *Ibid.*, 183.

97. *Ibid.*, 422.

working in the offices” and their counterparts who were engaged with society’s necessary labor, working on the shop floor or in the field.⁹⁸ In this regard, it was generally good for administrators to spend a period of time in menial occupations, since it served as a “useful social discipline.” Although Croly argued that the necessary labor of society “should not be forced upon any special group of citizens, but should be socialized by being distributed,” he made no analogous argument about the administrative tasks of governance.⁹⁹ Here, those who charge Croly with technocratic elitism recognize an important point: he ultimately leaves the work of the state to the educated experts. Nevertheless, his view of administration is at the same time democratic, albeit not in the way Croly’s defenders have supposed. The reason that Croly’s administrators are engaged in an essentially democratic occupation is that the effective performance of their job requires that they come to share the outlook of those they govern by literally sharing their work.

While Croly’s vision of the democratic state retained a clear distinction between those who govern and those who are governed, the latter would be assuaged with material compensation. In contrast to Lippmann’s democratic elitism and Weyl’s redistributive social democracy, Croly’s administrative state presupposed that the integrity of society could only be maintained by managing the distribution of both labor and wealth. Especially among the nation’s workers, the legitimacy of the state itself would be questioned to the extent that the expanding economic opportunity that had long defined the historical experience of the United States was withheld from them. Indeed, for the average union worker “his allegiance to his union” is “paramount to his allegiance to the state.”¹⁰⁰ And it was easy to see why: it was labor unions and not

98. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 375.

99. *Ibid.*, 422.

100. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 206.

the state that provided the material prosperity that workers had been led to believe was “the inevitable result of American political ideas and institutions.”¹⁰¹ Croly’s plan was to redistribute both burdensome and intrinsically rewarding work, thereby easing class antagonisms and quelling the “revolutionary agitation in favor of dispossession” that characterized too many labor unions.¹⁰² It was through the distribution of labor that the state would supply the prosperity that would “regain the loyal adhesion” of the working class without incurring the resentment of economic elites.¹⁰³ Indeed, Croly argued that if a better distribution of work could be achieved, “the socially desirable distribution of wealth will take care of itself.”¹⁰⁴

The state’s most important role was cultivating a particular meaning and practice of work among the working class. Although Croly’s state offered promising occupations to the middle class, the nation’s workers, especially the unskilled, were often the objects rather than the agents of state action. Although the state would support and recognize organized labor movements, the working class would have to earn its economic independence incrementally, proving themselves increasingly worthy of industrial self-government by evincing the proper attitude toward their work. If they were disciplined workers, they would receive some economic and social benefits. In promoting the general public interest, the state could only actively take the side of workers if they

101. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 127.

102. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 423. A more concrete application of these themes can be found in a series of editorials in *The New Republic*. Although generally supportive of striking workers, Croly castigated unions that were suspected of constricting labor supply for short-term wage gains. For example, see *The New Republic*, “Labor in 1918,” September 18, 1918, 156–157. Responding to the labor unrest that accompanied the United States’ entrance into World War I, many of these short commentaries offered a vigorous assault on the unions, charging union leaders with a lack of patriotism. See especially *The New Republic*, “Ships and Organized Labor,” March 2, 1918, 132–33. For an account of the impact of World War I on the practice of work, see David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 91–138.

103. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 206.

104. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 423.

rendered “a positive benefit to general economic and social efficiency.”¹⁰⁵ Hence Croly favored insuring workers against the vicissitudes of illness and cyclical unemployment or wildly fluctuating wages. But the state’s priority was to ensure that workers would be devoted to their work rather than to the accumulation of property. Merely offering workers a higher standard of living would reinforce the wrong understanding of work, rarely forming “a good worker or a desirable citizen.”¹⁰⁶

For Croly, the state led not only by admonition, but also by example. The state would lead the way in realizing his vision of work, modeling the benefits of scientific management, unionization, and industrial democracy. Public workers would be among the first to experiment with new modes of organizing work, since these “improvements in public administration should have a wholesome effect on private business.” In particular, organizing unions within the agencies of the state itself would succeed in “emancipating its workers and dignifying their work” while making public administration collectively more efficient.¹⁰⁷ More important, Croly was emphatic that the state should be aggressive in its support of union membership, citing the preference for unions as a “fundamental public interest” that “a democracy must necessarily take in the economic interest of its own citizens.”¹⁰⁸ In part, his support of organized labor was intended to moderate the demands of the most militant class-based unions, which fought for the interest of their members alone. To eliminate these unions, Croly suggested the creation of counter-unions that aimed to advance a broad public interest, a proposal that would have horrified most syndicalists and guild socialists. Class-based unions would be shut out from occupations in which they wielded outsize influence by

105. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 206.

106. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 386.

107. *Ibid.*, 400.

108. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 389.

denying “laborers who belong to unions of that character” of employment, reserving “any chance of obtaining work” to the members of counter-unions.¹⁰⁹ Although Croly believed that unions had the responsibility to demand adequate wages and working hours, the artificial restriction of the labor supply was inimical to the public interest. The purpose of unions was to optimize industrial efficiency, contributing to a “genuine economy of production” even if paying for a more efficient labor supply reduced “business prosperity.”¹¹⁰ In effect, the state would fashion an industrial truce by both restricting the power of aggressive, class-based unions and requiring employers to adequately compensate a highly skilled workforce. The economic rewards that both capital and labor sought to secure through militant industrial struggle were thus used to purchase greater productive efficiency, a public good that advanced the economic interest of the entire nation.

In short, Croly’s statism was neither of the two dominant readings of his political theory, neither Diggins’s profascist vision of social control nor the promise of emergent democratic pluralism lauded by Kloppenberg or O’Leary. Rather, he envisioned a state in which capable administrators and industrious citizens worked together to create a democratic distribution of labor that was both productive and rewarding. Administrators would not be cloistered bureaucrats but would work alongside the citizenry they served. Although some occupations were reserved for the educated elite, everyone shared in the necessary work of society. Moreover, the state would pursue an agenda that imbued all labor with a sense of duty. As Croly confidently concluded, democracy would fully exist when each worker, administrator and garbage collector alike, has “every inducement to keep his eye upon his work.”¹¹¹

109. Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 390.

110. *Ibid.*, 379.

111. Croly, *Progressive Democracy*, 389.

Conclusion

Herbert Croly saw the social crisis of the early twentieth century as a crisis of work. Although industrialization posed great dangers to the social fabric, it also represented an opportunity to create a more efficiently organized society, thus lifting all citizens to economic independence. To achieve this benevolent industrial economy, Croly called for a fundamental reconceptualization of the meaning of work. Work was the first duty of every citizen, an occupation that invited genuine and constructive individuality. In contrast to those who criticized the monotony of industrial labor or called for the redistribution of wealth, Croly sought to develop a sense of meaningful service in occupation that would provide a substitute for crass economic motivations alone. The new specialized economy provided a unique niche for everyone to practice excellence in service to the nation, an organization of labor that was best achieved through scientific methods of management that, in contrast to other schemes of scientific management, enhanced workers' autonomy. Croly further stands out among his peers in calling for the creation of an administrative state that concerned itself not only with regulating a national economy, but also made meaningful work a priority.

There are good reasons to be skeptical of Croly's faith in expertise and professional responsibility. In Croly's vision of society, where work becomes the principal form of democratic participation, other opportunities for political voice and citizen engagement recede in importance. His is a democracy driven by the benevolence and engagement of those privileged few whose work is the exercise of state authority, allowing material concessions to the dispossessed rather than sharing political power with them. Rather than an activity of the body politic, directing the state becomes one occupation among many—one to which access is restricted. Although Croly insists upon competent administrators, the history of the twentieth century is littered with grim reminders of the dangers of Croly's faith in expertise and professional responsibility. His promise

of a progressive democracy that calls ordinary citizens to the important task of self-cultivation (and gives them the intellectual tools to attend this task) is lovely, but it does not elide the shortcomings of his political views. Croly's democratic state suffers because it offers only enough redress of deep economic inequalities to prevent national disunity. More important, despite a commitment to broaden access to the education that would prepare one for an administrative occupation, he still leaves the few occupations that possess meaningful political power to society's elites. The opinions, ideas, and voices of all others are relegated to the undifferentiated mass of public opinion, which the state would work to educate and improve.

Yet Croly's work-centered vision of politics maintains democratic commitments to political and economic equality. He sees work as the means to cultivate and promote diversity within society, suggesting that the pervasiveness of economic motivations threatens the political community with a stifling conformity. Specialization would promote equality by giving workers greater control over their labor, and by institutionalizing their interests in powerful labor unions. The authority of the state would be expanded to promote this vision of work, using the guidance of administrative experts to direct all labor toward public purposes. In expanding the authority of the state, Croly also sought to ensure a democratic distribution of work, directing those charged with executing public policy to retain a tangible connection to the body politic through shared labor.

So what would Croly say about today? As contemporary economic changes in the United States erode job security, Croly reminds contemporary readers that democracy is impossible without work that is both personally significant and socially useful. As unemployment festers, he demonstrates the importance of the equitable distribution of access to meaningful and satisfying work. As skilled labor gives way and workers swell the ranks of the service sector's most menial occupations, he shows that a specialized

economy that expands the opportunities for skilled labor not only creates better workers but also better citizens. And as public officials seem unable to act in the face of growing economic uncertainty, he tells us in no uncertain terms that it is the state, not ethereal market forces, that has the capacity to balance the benefits of national economic efficiency and the need for satisfying work. In the end, Croly's views comprise a challenge to modern democratic theory, reminding us that the renewal of democracy requires work that calls forth competence and excellence, forming citizens dedicated not only to achieving their individual interest, but also to the higher purpose of contributing to the collective life of a working community.

4 A Vocational Democracy: John Dewey on Work's Role in Democracy

In recent years, as record numbers of Americans have joined the ranks of the jobless, thinkers have begun to seriously reconsider the role of work. In 2009, a book appeared on the New York *Times* bestseller list celebrating the pleasures of manual labor and skilled trades.¹ Matthew Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft* was not unique in its celebration of work; cultural critics like Richard Sennett and Alain de Botton have each offered their own book-length treatments of the meaning of work.² Although both of these books are nostalgic for an earlier era of craftsmanship, each finds reasons to be hopeful even as traditional manufacturing occupations and manual trades become rarer. Social scientists, by contrast, find few reasons for such hope. After surveying the moribund American manufacturing sector, sociologists like Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio have forecast a jobless future for American workers.³ Economists like Lawrence Mishel have given the topic considerable attention, portraying an equally grim predicament for those at the margins of the job market.⁴ Political scientists have recently begun to consider the declining relevance of organized labor in American politics, and the declining rights of workers in the workplace.⁴ Through it all however, with only a few exceptions, political theorists have remained largely silent on the issue of work and its meaning for democracy.⁵ Nevertheless, as unemployment persists

1. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*.

2. Sennett, *The Craftsman*; Alain de Botton, *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

3. Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz, *The State of Working America, 2008/2009*.

4. Paul Frymer, "Labor and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (Summer 2010): 609–616.

5. Muirhead, *Just Work*; Arnold, "The Difference Principle at Work."

and economic inequality in the United States grows, the meaning of work should be a particularly salient concern for students of American political theory.

One place to start is with John Dewey. The renaissance of interest in Dewey has produced several fine studies of his work that touch on topics of work. Biographers like Robert Westbrook and Allan Ryan demonstrate that Dewey was a deeply committed liberal whose own notion of democracy was an explicit response to industrialization and industrial conflict.⁶ Students of the history of education have long recognized Dewey as a central figure in educational reform not only in his own lifetime, but also in current debates, where his ideas of vocational education draw praise and ire in equal measure.⁷ Scholars who study organizations have turned to Dewey's thought to discuss the role of expertise in business and government, finding in his life and work a model of democratic professionalism.⁸ Yet none of these studies traces such themes to their foundation: Dewey's notion of vocation, and his views on the proper place of work in democratic society.

In this chapter, I argue that ideas about work were the starting point for Dewey's political theory. Dewey held that democracy required a democratic conception of work. Democracy could only thrive when work had become purposeful and satisfying, a kind

6. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*; Eisenach, *Lost Promise*; Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*.

7. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1964); E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1987); Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010).

8. James A. Stever, "Technology Organization, Freedom: The Organizational Theory of John Dewey," *Administration & Society* 24 (February 1993): 419–443; Karen G. Evans, "Reclaiming John Dewey: Democracy, Inquiry, Pragmatism, and Public Management," *Administration & Society* (July 2000): 308–328; Albert Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* (College Station, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008); Mark Brown, *Science in Democracy: Expertise, Institutions, and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

of personal and public calling. Thus a vibrant democracy required a revitalized model of public education, one that prepared citizens from all walks of life for their individual vocations. It also required new kinds of industrial workers, expert professionals, who had a special obligation to use their labor to serve the public interest. This chapter explores these themes in Dewey's thinking. It turns back to the years between his move to the University Chicago in 1894 and World War I, a period in which Dewey solidified the fundamental philosophical and political principles that would mark him as one of the nation's leading defenders of democracy and one of industrial capitalism's most vigorous critics.⁹ In describing the development of these principles, the chapter turns to his lectures to teachers' organizations, talks before groups of political activists, and transcripts of his own seminars at the University of Chicago from this time. These sources reveal that Dewey's theory of democracy was at its core a theory of vocation.¹⁰

9. Oddly, the pivotal years between the Pullman Strike and World War I have received scant attention from political theorists interested in Dewey, giving pride of place to his writings from the 1920s onward. Notable exceptions are Axel Honneth, "Democracy and Reflexive Cooperation," *Political Theory* 26 (December 1998): 763–783; Eldon J. Eisenach, ed., *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006); Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion Morality and the Ethos of Democracy*; Melvin Rogers, "The Fact of Sacrifice and Necessity of Faith: Dewey and the Ethics of Democracy," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 47 (Summer 2011): 274–300.

10. Although Dewey and Max Weber both developed concepts of vocation at this time, the two social scientists had little knowledge of one another. For a comparison of their thought, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Democracy and Disenchantment: From Weber and Dewey to Habermas and Rorty," in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1890–1930*, ed. Dorothy Ross (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). Likewise, Dewey had little use for Marx, despite their shared recognition of the importance of work as a social relationship. For a comparison of Dewey and Marx, see Alfonso J. Damico, "Dewey and Marx: On Partisanship and the Reconstruction of Society," *American Political Science Review* 75 (September 1981): 654–666.

Dewey's vocation

John Dewey's life was a search for vocation. Although his genteel mother, Lucina Artemisia Dewey, would see to it that all her sons would attain a college education, the family was not in possession of the largesse that would fund the European education that was then a de facto requirement for University faculty. Besides, Archibald Dewey, the practical Yankee father who supported a stable if middling affluence by tending a grocery store, would have hardly approved of the extravagance. No, John Dewey would have to work for a living, paying his own way by honest labor. Dewey began his philosophic career as an assistant principal and high school algebra teacher in Oil City, Pennsylvania, where he composed an essay criticizing the metaphysics of materialism in his solitary spare time. Had Dewey been of a different temperament, he might have found quite a lot of trouble to get into in Oil City, a petroleum boom town that was exactly the sort of wilderness of temptation that his pious mother had prepared her son to resist. The very place in which John D. Rockefeller started the Standard Oil Company, Oil City was bustling with a transient workforce—riggers, teamsters, and derrick-men—looking for a quick buck, and cagey speculators eager to exploit them. Between the fumes, the oil gushers, and the unsavory collection of brokers, fixers, and con men who variously served the community's baser desires and preyed upon its dreams, the place presented in rich microcosm the greed and exploitation which defined the working life for oil barons and itinerant manual laborers alike. No doubt even the aloof and bookish algebra teacher noticed in Oil City the problematic character of work to which he would address his social philosophy.¹¹

11. On Dewey's early life, see George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973); Neil Coughlan, *Young John Dewey: An Essay in American Intellectual History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*; Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*; Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); James A. Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The "Permanent Hegelian Deposit" in the Philosophy of John*

His vocational aspirations for a life of the mind drew Dewey away from the seedy Pennsylvania oil works in 1881, back to the familiar terrain of Vermont where he set in motion a plan to become a professor of philosophy. Studying at the newly opened Johns Hopkins University, Dewey moved quickly through the program before joining the faculty of the philosophy department at the University of Michigan in 1886. But it was at the University of Chicago, where he moved in 1894, that Dewey began to dedicate himself to the problems posed by America's urban industrial economy. Arriving amid the Pullman Strike, he found in the industrial crucible of Chicago new direction to his philosophical and political work, an awakening to concerns that were largely absent in the leafy confines of Ann Arbor.¹² In Chicago, his efforts extended well beyond the classroom. Beginning almost at his arrival, he quickly fell in with Jane Addams and began teaching at her Hull-House settlement, where his frequently rowdy auditors included a motley assortment of the city's working-class—recent immigrants who worked as seamstresses, factory hands, or washerwomen. At the same time, he started to experiment with new forms of education for children, acting with his wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, to found and administer the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. And it was also at this time that he took up an active public role as an advocate for workers' organizations and a crusader for social justice, giving particularly forceful support to the city's incipient teachers' unions. Blending the role of professional philosopher with that of the political activist, Dewey began to develop his own distinctively democratic vocation.

But for Dewey, Chicago was also the context for creating his vocation-centered

Dewey (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

12. For the impact it made on Dewey, see Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 83–92. For more on the Pullman Strike, see Schneirov, Stromquist, and Salvatore, *The Pullman Strike*; Janice L. Reiff, "Rethinking Pullman: Urban Space and Working-class Activism," *Social Science History* 24 (Spring 2000): 7–32; Hirsch, *After the Strike: A Century of Labor Struggle at Pullman*.

version of Progressive political theory. The industrial crisis had given particular urgency to the democratic theory of the day, inspiring various amateur do-gooders, professional reformers, and early social scientists to turn their attention to the continuing debates taking place on what was commonly called “the labor question.”¹³ For Dewey, the debates provided the opportunity to fuse the Christian, idealist, and radical strains of his thinking into a distinctively democratic form of Progressivism. Although he chafed under his mother’s piety, his understanding of work had long been indebted to the framework of liberal Christianity, as seen in the moralistic piety that was a hallmark of his early writing.¹⁴ In German idealism he had found notions of work, and of education for work, that emphasized an essentially interconnected and organic conception of society.¹⁵ And along with other Progressive intellectuals of the time, including left-leaning social scientists like Richard Ely and E.A. Ross, he had come to see a restructuring of the division of labor as central to industrial democracy.¹⁶ Coming together in Chicago, his Christian upbringing, idealist education, and professional social scientific reformism seemed to triangulate, leading him toward a philosophical stance whose centerpiece was the concept of vocation.

13. On the wider currents influencing Progressive thought, see Eisenach, *Lost Promise*; Eisenach, *The Social and Political Thought of American Progressivism*.

14. Feffer, *The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism*.

15. Although idiosyncratic, Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The “Permanent Hegelian Deposit” in the Philosophy of John Dewey* is a richly detailed study of the Dewey’s early intellectual milieu at the University of Vermont and Johns Hopkins, emphasizing the importance of American appropriations of German idealism in Dewey’s intellectual development. See also Honneth, “Democracy and Reflexive Cooperation.”

16. According to Westbrook, what troubled Dewey most about the Pullman strike was the hostility of intellectuals, academics, and other professionals toward the workers. See Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 87.

The idea of vocation and the meaning of work

Studies of Dewey have been marked by ongoing arguments about his views of the role of work. Among his earliest critics, Max Horkheimer was particularly outspoken in charging him with a fixation on usefulness that dominated every aspect of his thinking. Thus to Horkheimer, Dewey was concerned less with the character of work than with its outcome, less with work than with “what works best,” considering all activities “productive work” as long as “they are useful.”¹⁷ What followed, Horkheimer argued, was a view of society that was individualistic and instrumentalist, in which public problems were viewed entirely in terms of efficiency. By contrast, a growing group of recent scholars sees Dewey in more democratic terms, describing him as less concerned with economic efficiency than with social cooperation and political reciprocity. Among this group, Axel Honneth has turned his attention to Dewey’s views on work, arguing that his conception of democracy as a form of social cooperation required at base a “just organization of the division of labor.”¹⁸ Yet in truth, neither view captures the complexity of Dewey’s thinking on work, which he considered to be both a private and a public matter, bringing coherence to the lives of individual workers, while also integrating individuals into a wider society.

For Dewey, work was pervasive and unavoidable. It was also essential to life, since it consisted of any attempt to realize concrete purposes through organized activity. Yet while work was essential, vocation was uniquely valuable. Indeed, a person’s vocation was something more than simply a job. Vocation was a gift and a duty, giving meaning to every part of one’s identity and making one a more “developed human being.” In this way, vocation was interchangeable with Christian conceptions of “calling,” though it

17. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 41.

18. Honneth, “Democracy and Reflexive Cooperation,” 777.

lacked the latter's distinctly religious denotation. It included artistic pursuits, manual labor, and political activity—in fact, it included any activity that rendered life “perceptibly significant to a person.” Thus a vocation need not be practical, or connected to making a tangible product. Rather it was defined by purposeful, directed action that rescued life from not only “aimlessness, capriciousness and the absence of cumulative achievement,” but also “idle display” and “parasitic dependence upon others.”¹⁹ In short, a vocation was the activity in which a person recognized his life as truly his own.

According to Dewey, a vocation was more an attitude and disposition toward work than an objective and concrete occupation. Vocation provided a sense of ownership over one's work. In contrast to simply following orders, it allowed workers to order their own tasks, making it possible for “different experiences, facts, items of information to fall into order with one another.”²⁰ Although this attitude was most common among professionals, manual and industrial laborers could also have absorbing vocations, through which they became “masters of their industrial fate.”²¹ In this way, all occupations were potentially equally significant. Vocation also implied self-development and personal growth. Dewey cautioned against a seeing a vocation as simply a single occupation or a defined career path, calling it instead “a rough sketch map” that would direct “further activities.” All told, a vocation opened new paths of understanding, giving workers new ways of looking at themselves and the world, a discovery, as Dewey put it, “in the sense in which Columbus discovered America when he touched its shores.”²²

Vocation connected work to the rest of life. Although Dewey understood one's

19. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1916), 359.

20. *Ibid.*, 362.

21. *Ibid.*, 374.

22. *Ibid.*, 364.

occupation to be an important aspect of life, it would become a vocation only when it was linked to its “social bearings.”²³ All workers had special responsibilities and obligations in their social lives, as friends, family members, or participants in civic, religious, and social organizations. When labor became disconnected from this social life, it ceased to be a vocation, becoming instead “either routine or capricious.”²⁴ Thus Dewey saw a danger in rigid specialization, arguing against restricting vocations to a single activity, since labor lost its meaning “in the degree in which it is isolated from other interests.” Indeed, favoring the working life to the exclusion of familial, social, or civic obligations actually inhibited personal development, making the worker “a kind of monstrosity.”²⁵ In short, a vocation would bring coherence to the variety of roles and callings that were not paid labor, nourishing an understanding of the relationship between an occupation and the rest of the worker’s life.

Absent an understanding of labor’s social relationships and consequences, more advanced skills or information would not suffice to make the worker more fulfilled in his occupation. In particular, although unskilled labor might be useful, it could never rise to the ideal of a vocation. As Dewey understood it, unskilled labor was simply routine, “the maximum of the fixed habit and the minimum of conscious adaptation.”²⁶ Taking ditch digging as his example, Dewey argued that routine menial labor offered few opportunities to the laborer to improve, or even reflect, upon the process. Shoveling is a matter of muscular strength and physical stamina that cannot be improved by anything other than technological inventions, meaning the diggers themselves can do little to improve upon their craft. Improvements in ditch digging are the responsibility

23. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 371.

24. *Ibid.*, 361.

25. *Ibid.*, 359.

26. John Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics, 1900-1901*, ed. Donald F. Koch (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 288.

of canny inventors who create new tools. As for the diggers, they adapt to the new tools rather than adapting the tools themselves. Thus Dewey claimed that unskilled labor was one of society's most urgent problems, consigning some people to occupations that require "next to no deliberation and reflection," but are instead the result of a "series of choices and conclusions" of others.²⁷ Rather than making life significant in a positive way, unskilled labor made the laborer conscious of his insignificance.²⁸

All forms of unsatisfying work posed a danger to society, leading people to become less engaged with the world. For those in servile occupations, their intelligence became hardened and inert, their work stupefying. Rather than learning about the world around them, workers instead satisfied an "eccentric fancy" or "emotional indulgence," seeking "refuge from the hard conditions of life." Disconnected from the life of society, their work became an "inner play of sentiment and fancies."²⁹ In short, work receded from consciousness, becoming a regimented distraction. For workers in positions of managerial authority, such consequences were most dangerous. When uninteresting work drove managers to self-absorption, they turned to the pursuit of personal satisfaction through "the manipulation of other men."³⁰ By contrast, workers who understood their occupations as integral to the life of society would be more consciously engaged not only with their own work, but also with the world in which they lived. Dewey argued that workers who had a vocation would thereby create a more satisfying social life, enlarging the "scope and qualities" of their work and with it their "fundamental

27. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 289.

28. Of course, while their work required little consciousness, unskilled laborers were capable of becoming conscious of the gross inequality between their labor and that of other segments of society; they could even begin to wonder why society is arranged in such a way.

29. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 159.

30. *Ibid.*, 160.

attitudes toward the world.”³¹

Vocations not only affected attitudes about society, but also directed labor to be of service to it. For Dewey, it was social service that made an individual’s work distinctive and personally important. A true vocation contributed something new to society, Dewey told his graduate students at the University of Chicago in a 1901 seminar; it was an individual response to a need that “other people do not see in the habitual way of doing things.”³² Of course, novelty alone did not mark a vocation if it did not meet an actual social need. All too often work “simply resulted in making new modes of amusement.”³³ Instead, a vocation must contribute something to society that could be put to use, responding to “the periodic or even unique wants” of others.³⁴ While the inventor and the industrialist were commonly seen as making such contributions by creating revolutionary technologies or tangible products, the artist, the teacher, and the scientist all contributed something useful to society as well, since they tended instead to “the spiritual reproduction of the intellect.”³⁵ Indeed for Dewey, the vocations whose results were impalpable and imprecisely measured, seemed every bit as important, for just as surely as mechanization had brought the evolution of society, so too would the greater “appreciation of ideas and art” and the development and expansion of “broad human interests.”³⁶

In short, Dewey’s understanding of vocation neither insisted on narrowly individualistic instrumentalism nor implied a cooperative division of labor. Dewey understood

31. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 159.

32. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 299.

33. *Ibid.*, 301.

34. *Ibid.*, 307.

35. *Ibid.*, 308.

36. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 142.

work primarily as a vocation, as an individually significant activity that was also the foundation of social life. All forms of work could become a vocation if they permitted the worker a sense of personal integrity, imparting value beyond compensation in wages. In addition to its personal significance, however, a vocation would furnish workers with an understanding of the world around them and the social purposes of their labor. Thus, a vocation integrated workers into a wider society, cultivating broad interest in the life of the community. Most important of all, a vocation would allow workers to be of service to their community, offering them self-realization only when they were also serving social needs.

Education for work

Among his interpreters, Dewey's educational views have been a site of long-standing disagreement. Despite his lofty democratic rhetoric, some see Dewey as a technocratic administrator preparing children to take their place in a corporate order. Thus, Christopher Lasch casts Deweyite progressive education as nothing more than "indoctrination into the values of the grown-up world."³⁷ Similarly, although scholars like Alan Ryan have seen Dewey's educational experiments as affording students more control over their industrial fate, they worry that Dewey's educational ideals tend toward ideological conformity, failing to develop the ethical individualism that allows citizens "to put up with estrangement from their fellows when sufficient intellectual or moral reasons demand it."³⁸ By contrast, scholars like Melvin Rogers see Dewey's pedagogy as an

37. Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as Social Type*, 160.

38. Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 149. See also Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 167–82.

important resource for deliberative democracy, inspiring, on the one hand, a “democratic self-reliance” and, on the other, a general interest in public life that cultivates “attentiveness to the claims of others.”³⁹ Although there is something to be said for each of these views, neither goes to the heart of Dewey’s concept of education. For to Dewey, the purpose of education, as Lasch rightly noted, was to prepare citizens of all social classes for work, cultivating the democratic habits identified by Rogers in order to put them to use in their working lives.⁴⁰

The traditional educational institution of the household was undergoing a rapid change in the period of industrialization. In the experience of living generations, the household had been the site of most of the major industrial employment, as homes and farms teemed with occupational activity from spinning wool and sewing clothing to rendering tallow and making candles. The necessities and ornaments of life were produced within the neighborhood, whose shops were known to all and were frequently public gathering places. Work was toilsome and unrelenting, requiring the contribution of “every member of the household,” each with “his own share in the work.”⁴¹ As Dewey told a group of parents whose children attended his experimental school at the University of Chicago, in the household economy, there was no need for an industrial education because “the entire industrial process stood revealed.”⁴² Children were

39. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion Morality and the Ethos of Democracy*, 146.

40. Political theorists have turned rarely to Dewey’s educational writings to understand his political theory. A notable exception is RW Hildreth’s recent interpretation of Dewey that emphasizes the importance of Dewey’s views of vocational education to his understanding of citizenship, which Hildreth argues should be seen “in vocational terms,” as a set of “critical and political habits” that can be developed by understanding how “political, social, and economic systems actually work.” R.W. Hildreth, “What Good is Growth? Reconsidering Dewey on the Ends of Education,” *Education and Culture: The Journal of the John Dewey Society* 27 (October 2011): 25–44 See also, Jason Kosnoski, “John Dewey’s Classroom as a Model of Deliberative Association,” *Political Theory* 33 (October 2005): 654–677.

41. John Dewey, *The School and Society: Being Three Lectures by John Dewey, Supplemented by a Statement of the University Elementary School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915), 7.

42. *Ibid.*

gradually brought into this economy, “initiated into the mysteries” of those activities that sustained the life of the community. The limited prosperity—indeed, for some the survival—of the family and community depended upon an education that left the young with an “immediate and personal concern” with work.⁴³

By contrast, in a thoroughly industrialized society, the household and the neighborhood were no longer centers of most people’s occupations. Not only were most people employed outside of their homes, but also those occupations connected with provisioning the household had been dislocated. Once produced in the home by mothers and daughters, clothing, butter, and even bread were purchased outside it, as were the products of the traditional occupations of fathers and sons, like lumber and metalware. As work moved outside the home and neighborhood, generations were dislocated from one another. With the home receding in importance, the school became “a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart to learn lessons.” Yet the organization of the school did not yet reflect its new role, clinging to traditional forms of instruction and socialization that were wholly disconnected from the “processes by which society keeps itself going” and the “primal necessities of human life.”⁴⁴ Instead of integrating students into a common social life, schools revealed “no obvious social motive” and made education “so exclusively individual an affair” that it inevitably would “pass into selfishness.”⁴⁵ As Dewey saw it, without reform, the schools of industrial society would become merely institutions that relieved parents of child-care responsibilities so they could remain part of the labor force, leaving the youngest cut off from the inherited resources of the community and unprepared to participate in

43. Dewey, *School and Society*, 8.

44. *Ibid.*, 10.

45. *Ibid.*, 11.

“occupations which exact personal responsibilities.”⁴⁶

Dewey was a fierce critic of the so-called “industrial education” of the time. At its worst, he argued, it simply used schools to subsidize industrial capitalists in their need for labor; at its best, it emphasized specific occupational training at the expense of a more general education. In the secondary schools, industrial education ignored general education altogether, doing nothing more than “encourage children under sixteen to leave school by assisting them to find jobs.”⁴⁷ These programs merely institutionalized prevailing class divisions by creating a class of laborers who, lacking a wider education, were shunted into jobs devoid of any opportunity for social mobility. Even where industrial education offered students a complete course of study, it tended to be narrow, task-oriented, and rote. Students were not prepared for industrial democracy when they were trained in “methods of repetition” or “mechanical proficiency in a narrow trade.”⁴⁸ Most advocates of industrial education advocated an institutional structure by which children bound for manual trades would be educated in wholly separate schools. In this scheme, some students would receive a “liberal or cultural education” while the others would receive merely a “money-earning education.”⁴⁹ Moreover, an industrial education that was conceived of as giving students the skills to earn money did nothing to address the essential relationships between employers and workers. Even as they became more skilled, workers would remain subordinate, unable to fully participate in directing community life. Put simply, most systems of vocational education prepared

46. Dewey, *School and Society*, 9.

47. John Dewey, “A Policy of Industrial Education,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 7 (1914; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 98–99.

48. John Dewey, “The Need for an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 10 (1916; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 141.

49. *Ibid.*, 147.

workers to “defend things in which the workers themselves have no share.”⁵⁰

Dewey was equally critical of schools that offered only the broad cultural education commonly associated with society’s leisure class. He argued that the entire purpose of educational reform was to remove the barriers between those who participate in the workaday world, and those who do not, having been relieved by their wealth from toiling with the many. Consequently, he believed that it was folly to maintain schools that had no connection with the life of work, a life that most citizens were forced by economic necessity to enter at a young age. The old models of education that aimed to cultivate cultural sensibilities merely trained “a comparatively small number for an academic life and culture,” doing nothing to educate the majority of working citizens.⁵¹ Furthermore, educational practice was thoroughly suffused with a suspicion of physical activity in general, and productive work more specifically, and it was beholden to old myths about the proper relationship between work and leisure, where the former exists for the sake of the latter, “industry for the sake of culture.”⁵² However, industrial society made impossible the economic isolation implied by the notion of a leisure class. In the increasingly interdependent society of global commerce, Dewey believed the idle rich would become more rare; should those few remain idle, they would ultimately undermine their own status, lacking “the insignia of moral nobility” that comes from laboring for others.⁵³ Hence, the educational approach that ignored the existence of manual occupations prepared neither elites nor masses for industrial society.

Using a more expansive understanding of “vocational education” than his contemporaries, Dewey aimed to do something quite different from either job training or an

50. Dewey, “Need for an Industrial Education,” 141.

51. John Dewey, “Culture and Industry in Education,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 3 (1906; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 289.

52. *Ibid.*, 286.

53. *Ibid.*, 290.

education for leisure and culture. Contrary to those who subordinated educational institutions to industrial ends, he thought that an industrial education for an industrial democracy would engage students in active work directed at learning “the factors of scientific and social importance in present-day industry.”⁵⁴ For example, in Dewey’s Lab school, gardening was not taught with the purpose of training future laborers, but as a concrete example through which students would learn the science of chemistry, botany, and the place of agriculture in the organization of society, past and present. Yet rather than furnishing pupils with intellectual material to sustain them through the inevitably monotonous stretches of their future occupations, the scientific exploration of industrial society would equip the student to “recognize and apply his own abilities” and to become “an integral part of a self-managing society.”⁵⁵ Dewey argued that work at school should not be connected with immediate economic interest, offering a unique opportunity to illuminate not only the scientific value, but also the social purpose of work. Schools would teach civics and economics in specific and concrete relation to industrial occupations, and were charged with “the responsibility of restoring their connection” to what he called “social interests.”⁵⁶ Education for industrial life required a curriculum common for students from all social classes, a course of study that emphasized the social value of work.

The concerns were not merely curricular, but political: industrial education should be an instrument of political and economic equality. Formalized education in public schools was as much about cultivating responsible citizenship as it was about creating workers prepared to enter the industrial workforce. Indeed, the two goals were

54. Dewey, “Need for an Industrial Education,” 141.

55. *Ibid.*, 142.

56. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 201.

inseparable to Dewey, who argued that workers must be “vitaly and sincerely interested” in their callings if they were to exercise good “political conduct” in a democracy “where industry is the prime factor.”⁵⁷ An industrial education should prepare society’s wealthy and impoverished alike to work in an occupation that was useful to the community. In Dewey’s estimation, schools should recognize the equal obligation to contribute one’s labor to the common work of society, and avoid the creation of “social parasites whether they are called tramps or the leaders of ‘society.’”⁵⁸ Yet it was not enough that schools emphasize work as an obligation. A well-ordered industrial society “must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability.”⁵⁹ For their part, workers should be able to exercise control over their work lives, rather than simply laboring for the purposes of another. Only by equalizing educational resources would all students be enabled “to be masters of their own economic and social careers.”⁶⁰ Dewey allowed that the exigencies of industrial economics would limit the occupational choices in certain areas of the United States, but industrial education should “supply motive and meaning to the work” that was available.⁶¹ In a society that allowed the political participation of all of its citizens, the failure to educate the working majority was foolish.

Dewey’s educational thought has been maligned by critics as nothing more than unctuous bromides ultimately providing business with a docile workforce, and celebrated by defenders as the foundation of an engaged citizenry and participatory civic culture. But Dewey conceived of education in neither of these ways. For him, the school’s

57. John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1915), 249.

58. Dewey, “Need for an Industrial Education,” 149.

59. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 88.

60. *Ibid.*, 98.

61. Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow*, 252.

purpose was to prepare each student for a proper vocation. Disposing of the long-standing divide between education for leisure and education for work, Dewey's school provided students from all social classes with an understanding of the social significance of industrial occupations. A well-designed curriculum would supplant both acquisitive motivations for work and the suspicion of physical labor, directing all members of society to work toward social interests. In Dewey's view, this experiential understanding of vocational education was the only adequate preparation for work in a democratic society, demanding labor from rich and poor alike, creating citizens capable of working together in the interest of shared self-government.

Democracy's professionals

The subject of professionals in a democracy is an obvious source of contention between Dewey's technocratic interpreters and his more recent democratic revivalists. For example, scholars like Jeffrey Lustig argue that Dewey emphasized using state power to make populist opinion subordinate to "scientific intelligence."⁶² For Lustig, Dewey would have scientists and technical experts stand as "a neutral bar before whom people of differing outlooks could bring their conflicts, and by whose verdicts they would willingly be bound."⁶³ Very much in contrast, those like Harry Boyte have urged a populist understanding of Dewey that recognizes the knowledge and expertise of common citizens in projects of various types of "public work," citing him as the source of a model of politics that calls for "extensive lay citizen participation" and contrasting

62. Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism*, 153.

63. *Ibid.*, 173.

bureaucratic forms of state administration with grassroots “citizen professionalism.”⁶⁴ Along these lines, Mark Brown has sought to blend the technocratic interpretation of Dewey with a democratic one, emphasizing the role of expertise in democracy but arguing that the primary role of experts is to “facilitate civic engagement” that would disseminate scientific knowledge throughout society and thereby achieve a new type of “political representation.”⁶⁵ At the same time, Brown’s focus on political representation makes the experience and organization of work subordinate to civic engagement and other forms of explicitly political activity. Both sides are only partly right. For while Dewey called for a political role for the professional and the expert, his conception of democracy depended neither on the top-down dissemination of expert knowledge into the political sphere, nor on the bottom-up extension of political engagement, but on a class of professionals in both the workplace and the state who were committed to building more democratic forms of labor, applying their professional expertise to creating the conditions for a vocation for all workers.

For Dewey, industrial society created a critical role for professionals. The professions were traditionally understood as doctors, lawyers, and the clergy, but the development of a more complex economy had begun to require the work of various additional professions.⁶⁶ Although often connected to industry, professional work was distinctly different from productive labor in that its purpose was “to render a service instead of to produce

64. Boyte, “Constructive Politics as Public Work: Organizing the Literature,” 649. See also Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* and William Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

65. Brown, *Science in Democracy: Expertise, Institutions, and Representation*, 137.

66. The years between 1870 and 1920 were a period of explosive professional activity, leading to the formation of more than 200 professional organizations and associations. See, Olivier Zunz, *Why the American Century?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Henrika Kuklick, “Professional Status and Moral Order,” in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

a commodity.” In offering a specialized service, professions stood aloof from commerce, removed from productive labor because their work was primarily intellectual. The primary task of professional work was to supply a method by which the “more advanced or trained” could “reconstruct” social processes or institutions.⁶⁷ For example, engineers brought their superior training to industry, offering methods to improve the process of production. The superior training of intellectual labor did not mean that the work of professionals was somehow more important than that of others. Indeed, professional work had to be rescued from “a mediocre and dubious position” precisely because “its aim was rendering service to others.”⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the problems accompanying industrial development—unemployment, inadequate housing, municipal corruption—were all areas that called for those whose vocation was to use their professional skills and training in the service of others.

Scholars who advance a technocratic interpretation of Dewey’s political thought have emphasized a special role for scientists, engineers, and other expert professionals who would direct and manage the rank-and-file workers and citizens. Yet Dewey recognized a distinction between the occupations of scientific inquiry and the professions, whose explicit purpose was to mediate between the abstractions of scientific thought and the practical needs of workers. In fact, it was through the agency of the professions that the work of others would be recognized as vocational, uniting “the ideas of the theorist” and the activity of labor in “organic connection.”⁶⁹ Attentive to the dangers of an emerging opposition between a ruling and obedient class, Dewey argued that professionals in the workplace must make workers conscious of the connection between

67. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 376.

68. Dewey and Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow*, 233.

69. John Dewey, “Psychology and Social Practice,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 1 (1899; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 137.

their work and its larger social and scientific foundations. To illustrate his point, Dewey claimed that industrial engineers had failed to properly make the connection between the science of physics and “the practical workingmen in the mills,” giving them instead only a “formal” understanding that effects their “outward actions” and not their “consciousness.”⁷⁰ According to Dewey, the primary difference between a professional like an engineer or a physician, on the one hand, and a common factory hand, on the other, was their understanding of labor. The physician and engineer understood the “scientific character” of their work, separating them from “dependence upon a vibration between superstition and routine,” while giving them a sense of “certainty and efficacy” in their occupations.⁷¹ It followed, in the same way, that the role of the expert was to give the factory worker an appreciation of “the significance and bearing of what he does” and a sense of “sharing in a larger scientific and social consciousness,” bringing him thereby into “the ethical kingdom.”⁷²

Other professions were also defined by whose interests they served. Although corporations might have a battery of lawyers at their disposal, or an executive class of engineers at their service, the properly conceived professions performed public service. Public service did not preclude private employment; it merely required that professions render a service that “reflected a social need.”⁷³ Professions would only become vocations if the experts who practiced them were to address the wider social significance of the concrete problems they solved, serving the public good rather than any specific private interest. For example, doctors in industrial society should do more than simply attend the sick at their bedside in exchange for fees; they should also work toward

70. Dewey, “Psychology and Social Practice,” 138.

71. *Ibid.*, 139.

72. *Ibid.*, 138.

73. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 377.

greater “public sanitation” and assume some responsibility for “problems connected with the slums, prostitution, or conditions in the factory and shop.” Municipal administrators, legislators, and what Dewey called “amateur philanthropists” should be given the necessary training and skills to solve social problems that would be addressed most successfully by a convergence of “professional interest and public concern.”⁷⁴ The universities where such professionals were educated would take on a new public role, subjecting the bustle of industrial life to rigorous inquiry. Rather than serving as a haven for scholars to exhaust esoteric texts, the university was to investigate not only “the intelligence and learning” embodied in the large centralized enterprises that dominated political and economic life, but also their “social possibilities.”⁷⁵ Thus, properly educated intellectuals with specialized knowledge were uniquely able to ensure that the advances in technology, understanding, and economic efficiency were used for public benefit. If professionals were to see their occupation as a vocation, then they would be obliged to ensure that its operation was not serving personal or class interests, but that it would “function for the good of the whole.”⁷⁶

The public work of professionals was vital to the task of democratic government. Professionals were instruments of community formation. Professional work was unimportant, perhaps even dangerous, if cloistered and closeted, inaccessible to the public. Expert knowledge would “create a bond of social union” and mediate a “personal community of interests” in an increasingly complex and disconnected industrial society.⁷⁷ The dispersed professions functioned as a decentralized organ of democratic education,

74. John Dewey, “The Modern Trend Toward Vocational Education in its Effect Upon the Professional and Non-professional Studies of the University,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 10 (1917; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 156.

75. *Ibid.*, 157.

76. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 352.

77. *Ibid.*, 383.

transferring human knowledge throughout the entire society. Dewey believed that this movement of knowledge from specialist to non-expert citizens would be necessary for democracy because without the knowledge of the social forces underlying the daily lives of citizens, the exercise of authority would be experienced as arbitrary and external. The principal criterion that separated an arbitrary political authority from a reasonable and legitimate one was “the evolution of the agencies of commerce and publicity.” While the dispersion of professional knowledge did not necessarily furnish an enlightened public opinion, it unified a disembodied polity where bonds of personal acquaintance and social friendship were previously only possible among local communities. The function of professions was to augment the economic commerce of industrialization with a “spiritual commerce” that illuminated “other peoples’ ways of living” and “their difficulties, interests, purposes, ends.”⁷⁸

Professionals did not merely educate the populace, they organized it. For Dewey, professionals were crucial agents of democratic life because they organized an inchoate public opinion into institutions of popular government. Most citizens were not directly controlled by the laws declared by the state, but were instead subject to “the minor laws of subordinate institutions” whose regulations, prohibitions, and strictures “control most effectively the lives of most men.”⁷⁹ Families, trade unions, business partnerships, fraternal organizations, and churches shaped the social order. Under conditions of social and economic inequality, these subordinate institutions of public life were not always sufficient to give expression to the will of the people, leaving many popular demands “unrealized and inchoate.” It was the responsibility of professionals to organize the inchoate impulses and desires that led to social agitation and disturbances into “definite

78. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 384.

79. John Dewey, “Austin’s Theory of Sovereignty,” in *The Early Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 4 (1894; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 48.

organs of expression.”⁸⁰ Thus they would serve to mediate industrial conflict, helping to build an institutional expression of public opinion. To Dewey, professionals would be engaged not simply in a systematic reeducation of the unwashed masses, replacing the tawdry concerns of the public with higher pleasures; rather they would also serve as instruments to amplify the voices of others, seeing to it that social progress was put to “actually useful ends and aims.”⁸¹

Social scientists would play a particularly prominent role in creating a more democratic society. Historically, the exercise of political authority had been a matter of despotic ruling classes extracting as much value as possible from the life and property of others. In the modern democratic state, by contrast, this exploitative ruling class had given way to new kinds of authorities, political professionals for whom public service was a “scientific calling.”⁸² It was the responsibility of these professionals to reinvent the state, making it an adaptable instrument of scientific progress. In an uncharacteristically mordant essay entitled “Political Science as a Recluse,” Dewey excoriated those social scientists who only sought to explain the essential features of society, accusing them of “complacent acceptance” and a “pedantic conservatism” born of “the lazy indulgence of a secluded and self-involved imagination.”⁸³ Too many social scientists were concerned with the discovery of basic principles or general laws, rather than with the application of their expertise to social problems. Instead, Dewey saw politics as a scientific calling defined by experimentation and observation, requiring social scientists who would contribute “large working hypotheses” that would in turn be put

80. Dewey, “Austin’s Theory of Sovereignty,” 52.

81. Dewey, *Lectures on Ethics*, 350.

82. *Ibid.*, 383.

83. John Dewey, “Political Science as a Recluse,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 11 (1918; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 730–31.

into practice in “legislation, administration, and education.”⁸⁴ Thus Dewey called on social scientists to use their expertise for public good, admonishing them to bring their intelligence and scientific skills to practical politics.

The most pressing public problem was the regulation of work. For Dewey, a democratic society was one in which every person could pursue their vocation. In a bracing call to action, he urged expert professionals in business and in government to organize industrial and economic processes so that “no man or woman who is capable of work shall lack useful, steady, and reasonably remunerative employment.”⁸⁵ The failure of business and government in the past to bring coherence to political and economic institutions had resulted in periodic bouts of mass unemployment. In addition, even when jobs were plentiful, too little attention had been given to the character of the work, specifically its ability to offer anything to “the person who is separated or divorced from interest in his work.”⁸⁶ What workers needed was greater control and autonomy over their labor, including methods of workplace governance in which representatives of “the laborers themselves” were given some say over the “consequences and meaning of what they are doing.”⁸⁷ Because leaders in business had been unwilling to bring about these changes, Dewey called on those in government to address them more systematically. Acknowledging that such problems required the expertise of public administrators, he charged them with implementing a minimum wage, providing decent housing, and insuring “the ordinary amenities of human life” through “intelligent administration.”⁸⁸

84. Dewey, “Political Science as a Recluse,” 737.

85. John Dewey, “Internal Social Reorganization After the War,” in *The Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 11 (1918; Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 748.

86. *Ibid.*, 753.

87. *Ibid.*, 758.

88. *Ibid.*, 756–57.

In short, whether it resulted from economic crisis or corporate disinterest, the breakdown of society's ordinary economic machinery called for the state to guarantee the right to work. Professionals in government would devise programs and institutions that would enforce this right, ensuring the opportunity for all workers to have "some kind of productive work which a self-respecting person might engage in with interest and with more than mere pecuniary profit."⁸⁹

Dewey's understanding of professions and professionalism have been fodder for a continuing debate between those who see him as creating a regime dominated by technical experts, and those who insist that the authority of professionals was matched by an expansive role for citizen participation. However, his model of professionalism contains elements of both interpretations, suggesting a political role for society's experts who would use their knowledge not only to solve pressing social problems but also to transform the experience of work into a vocation for all. Dewey called on professionals to serve the public interest, applying their expertise to the complex problems that could not be solved by amateur philanthropists alone. Professionals would also educate public opinion and organize public representation, working alongside citizens to ensure that institutions of popular government were truly democratic. By organizing work so that all citizens could realize their individual callings, professionals would assure the construction of a true vocational democracy.

Conclusion

The main faultline between competing assessments of Dewey divides his interpreters into critics who detect an anti-democratic urge beneath his aloof optimism, accusing

89. Dewey, "Internal Social Reorganization After the War," 756.

him of a hollow instrumentalism, insidious conformism, and technocratic elitism; and disciples who celebrate his democratic commitments to participatory democracy, civic engagement, and populist community organizing. Yet an analysis of his views on work illustrates a number of surprising convergences between these two approaches. For Dewey, every citizen had an obligation to work. The idle rich person whose effort was consumed in ostentatious display was more deserving of opprobrium than the down-at-the-heels tramp whose workless condition was the result of distant and unseen economic forces. A vocation assured each person an individual identity, while also engaging them with their peers in the social world. Vocations were in service to society even as they called upon a personal interest, balancing the desires of the individual with the needs of the community. Forming citizens who aspired to a vocation would require reforming educational practice, making occupations the centerpiece of a curriculum of industrial education. For students whose callings were in physical labor, education in the liberal arts and the manual trades would complement and enrich one another, preparing them for a self-directed life. Those whose aptitudes led them to intellectual work were called upon to make their labor directly serve the interest of society as a whole, to transmit their knowledge to the public at large, and to enable more intelligent work for all citizens. And those whose vocations led them to service in the government had a special responsibility to organize society to defend workers from exploitation, developing institutions that made a meaningful vocation possible and accessible for all.

Dewey's lessons seem particularly apt today. As policy makers struggle with the increasingly intractable problem of joblessness, he reminds us that it is a vocation that enables workers to see themselves as integral to the community. As economic inequality insulates rich from poor, he argues that educational institutions that are rooted in work can enable citizens to see themselves as equals. As professional workers increasingly become instruments of corporate power, he argues that democracy requires autonomous

professionals who redouble their commitments to serving and organizing the public. Furthermore, Dewey provides a forceful argument that forms of work that achieve the status of vocation cannot be sustained by a profit-driven market alone, but only by state-sponsored institutions that explicitly serve wider social concerns. Read in light of his ideas of work, Dewey would judge the American state as having failed its only legitimate purpose. His political thought serves as a trenchant reminder that although economic recovery depends on creating jobs, the long-term health of democratic politics depends on creating vocations.

5 Conclusion: The Legacy of Progressivism

The legacy of Progressive thinking about work has been mixed. In the decades after World War I, the connection between work and democracy that was emphasized by Jane Addams, Herbert Croly, and John Dewey continued to be championed by liberal thinkers, becoming concrete in the New Deal programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Works Progress Administration. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, democratic thinkers had begun to seriously reexamine the role of work in a democracy. The prosperity of the mid-twentieth century American economy promised self-realization through consumption rather than labor, occupation, or vocation.¹ In this context, public intellectuals began to speculate about a future in which the machinery of production itself would sustain the consumer economy, liberating workers from their occupations and giving them an abundance of free time. Historians like Richard Hofstadter imagined his readers “contemplating the possibility of a nearly workless economic order, powered by atomic energy and managed by automation.”² Social critics like Daniel Bell argued that “the vast development of automatic controls and the continuous flow of work creates the possibility of eliminating the workers from production completely.”³ Sizing up the technological advances of the century, the political theorist Hannah Arendt worried that the apparent liberation

1. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

2. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955), 11.

3. Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1962; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 264.

from work was not really freedom at all, creating a society that no longer knows “of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won.”⁴ In short, the Progressive vision of a working democracy had been eclipsed by a consumer society, largely obscuring work as concern for democratic politics.

Recent decades have reversed the trend. Although contemporary life in the United States is hardly the jobless future mid-century intellectuals predicted, neither is it one marked by an expanding and aspiring middle-class. The deindustrialization (and deunionization) associated with global capitalism has ejected many workers from secure employment, leaving them increasingly in poorly paid and precarious jobs. Among those workers who have maintained or improved their economic position in recent decades, jobs have become more demanding. Observers of American work life have noted how workers from all walks of life have experienced longer hours, deteriorating working conditions, and wage stagnation.⁵ Cultural critics like Richard Sennett and Matthew Crawford have begun to think about the values this form of work encourages, its consequences for individual character, and its proper relation to identity.⁶ These thinkers look for ways to resuscitate the craft tradition, with Sennett celebrating today’s computer programmers as modern-day craftsmen, and Crawford calling for an increased educational emphasis on manual labor. Yet while these recent critics share many of same concerns of their Progressive-era predecessors, they fail to connect their analysis of work to any more systematic treatment of democratic political practice.

4. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.

5. Steven Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

6. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*; Joanne B. Ciulla, *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work* (New York: Crown Business, 2001); Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*.

Progressive thinkers like Addams, Croly, and Dewey saw work in explicitly political terms. Writing in the troubled times between the Pullman Strike and World War I, they found themselves immersed in the politics of work. The development of industrial capitalism had created boom-and-bust cycles of employment and massive unemployment. The concentration of wealth had illustrated plainly the unequal distribution of the rewards of industrial capitalism. The rise of labor unions demanding economic security and a just share of the profits of industry had made decent wages, fair working conditions, and full employment into mainstream political issues. It was in this context that these Progressive theorists began developing their democratic thought. Addams, Croly, and Dewey shared common concerns about the dangers to democracy posed by the industrial crisis. Each envisioned employment as an activity more significant than its financial returns. Each emphasized the role of work in serving public purposes rather than private interests. Each saw the middle class as having a special responsibility in shepherding this view of work into the public imagination, reforming when necessary the public institutions of government. In short, these thinkers were eager to include work in the ambit of politics, arguing that how we work and how we think about work play a large role in the progress of democracy.

Jane Addams viewed work as an essential foundation of democratic life. For her, work was central to political identity, forming citizens who understood themselves as part of a larger public and as actors in history. The actual practices of labor forged a material connection to others who shared their labor. In particular, immigrant workers would develop an identity attached to their labor rather than to ascriptive categories of ethnicity and culture, working alongside the native-born to construct a common American identity. The workplace was not only the citizen's primary community, it also brought people of different backgrounds together to achieve a common purpose, helping to foster solidarity and a sense of commonality. In this way, Addams though

work would be the basis for a more inclusive society, as well as a more democratic one.

Critics have consistently attacked Addams's view of democracy, and, by extension, her view of work. Most lines of criticism accuse her of ignoring the material conditions of labor, charging her with an inability to see beyond the assumptions of her own class. Intellectual historians like Paul Boyer have argued that Addams and her circle were basically bourgeois moralists who "viewed the settlement as the nucleus of purified slum neighborhoods that would ultimately banish rowdiness, drunkenness and vice from their midst."⁷ To critics like Boyer, Addams hoped to remake the industrial working class in the image of the middle-class reformer. Assessing her views on work, scholars like Daniel Rodgers see more evidence of this tendency, contending that Addams was merely projecting her own vocational struggle onto industrial workers whose "intrinsically vacant" and dangerous tasks could not "be conquered by the proper mental preparation."⁸ In other words, Rodgers sees Addams as overly concerned with reforming hearts and minds, rather than the factories themselves. T.J. Jackson Lears goes further, arguing that Addams was misguided in that she provided intellectual support for the managerial exploitation of workers by assuming "an intellectual position scarcely different from the unctuous paternalism of the 'job enrichment' programs now run by giant corporations."⁹ For Lears, Addams's focus on personal fulfillment diverts attention from the material conditions of industrial labor. Lears and Rodgers each argue that Addams misunderstands the fundamental problem with industrial labor, that the wounds of back-breaking work cannot be healed with educational balm. To these critics, having the right attitude about work was no solution to poverty, discrimination, or the lack of political power.

7. Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 156.

8. Rodgers, *Work Ethic*, 90.

9. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 80.

Yet Addams's critics have been too quick to dismiss the importance of identity to democratic politics. As this study has argued, Addams saw work as the foundation of individual identity that was both personal and political. At Hull-House, workers were not only educated to attain employment, but also encouraged to enlarge their understanding of work, through which they could come to claim a larger share of public life. Not content to merely encourage workers to see their lives differently, she gave intellectual and material support to workers' organizations that were reforming the industrial workplace itself, arguing that democracy depended on an industrial workplace that operated on principles of solidarity and community. Moreover, Addams's own writing makes sophisticated arguments that the work of immigrants and women entitles them to political power. In essence, Addams placed a traditional conception of the familiar work ethic in service to a reformist ethos of egalitarian democracy, bending traditionally individualistic understandings of work to social purposes.

Although Herbert Croly's view of work was distinct from Addams, for him it was also central to democracy. Croly viewed work primarily in terms of occupation, seeing in it a combination of individualism and social obligation. Profit alone was not enough to motivate a democratic occupation. Occupations were personally interesting and significant, but they also served a public purpose. Specialization and division of labor made possible a wider variety of personal occupations, fostering the type of labor that was necessary to democracy. In the same way, labor unions and democratic forms of scientific management depended on increasing specialization, enabling the productive efficiency that would improve the standard of living for all Americans. Croly's view of democracy also required an expanded role for the administrative state. Creating a variety of new occupations for educated Americans, the expanded state would be comprised of professional administrators who not only possessed special managerial expertise, but also worked alongside the citizens they served. Thus, Croly's views of

work promoted individuality and diversity, encouraged expertise and efficiency, and expanded the role of the state.

Despite its attractive features, Croly's view of work also has its unsavory elements. Critics have charged Croly with being overly reliant on an aggressive scientific management and dangerously consumed by nationalism. Scholars like Samuel Haber have worried over the affinities between Croly's view of scientific management and that of Frederick Winslow Taylor, suggesting that Croly relied on "efficiency experts" whose "technical standards" imposed restrictions on all workers by order of the "the planning department."¹⁰ Haber sees Croly as putting too much faith in technocratic administrators in both business and in government, believing them to know best how to manage the labor and lives of individual workers and citizens. Historians like John Patrick Diggins have viewed Croly's countenancing the fusion of state power and corporate power with suspicion, seeing "disturbing overtones of authoritarian corporatism" and a "hardheaded elitism" that demanded "individual sacrifice and national discipline."¹¹ For Diggins, there was nothing particularly surprising in *The New Republic's* agreeing to print defenses of the fascist Mussolini regime in 1927. Likewise, Bob Pepperman Taylor suggests that Croly asked citizens to subordinate their individual desires to the public good as defined by society's elites, placing the administration of a democratic society in the hands of a "cadre of heroic and self-sacrificing citizens guarding and promoting the public good."¹² To critics like Taylor, his nationalism came dangerously close to conflating the interests of the individual with those of the state. Taken together, these critics argue that Croly's view of work and of democracy is too technocratic to be considered truly democratic, subsuming the political role of the common citizens to

10. Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift*, 89.

11. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, 234.

12. Taylor, *Citizenship and Democratic Doubt*, 35.

their productive one.

Although critics are right to point to the technocratic features of Croly's views on work and the state, they have overlooked his commitments to protecting individual workers. Seizing on Croly's interest in discipline and efficiency, critics have missed his parallel concerns with excellence and individual distinction. For Croly, an occupation was an expression of individuality, leading the worker to a better understanding of himself and his place in society. Far from subsuming the individual into the nation, Croly argued the first duty of citizens was to distinguish themselves through their work. Specialization created a unique opportunity for the development of managerial occupations, but also called for stronger labor unions that would assist the specialization process, pushing individual workers to higher levels of skill and excellence. His vision of the state certainly included a strong role for administrators, but it also directed them to use the state to realize an occupation for all citizens. Hence Croly hoped to democratize the distribution of work, and he directed those charged with executing public policy to retain a tangible connection to the body politic through shared labor.

Throughout his early writings, John Dewey gave work a central place in democratic thought. For him, vocation was key, a matter both of individual significance and public service. Vocation gave workers an understanding of the world around them and furnished them a sense of self-realization even as they served social needs. Institutions of education that fostered this view of work were therefore essential to democratic life. Departing from conventional understandings of vocational education, Dewey advocated schools that taught students from all social classes about the social significance of industrial occupations, preparing students from all walks of life for work. Although he was a committed democrat, Dewey saw a prominent role for professionals in a democracy. Professionals would apply their expertise to industrial problems, using their specialized knowledge to serve public purposes rather than private interests. Some experts would

also play a significant role in democratic government, devising policies and institutions that would enforce each individual's right to a satisfying work. Put simply, Dewey's theory of democracy was at its core a theory of vocation.

Nevertheless, later interpreters of Dewey have found a variety of reasons to be skeptical about his own democratic commitments. Critical theorists like Antonio Gramsci mocked pragmatists like Dewey as insufficiently radical in their support of labor, contending that they abetted "conservative and reactionary movements" while contributing nothing more to democracy than "the creation of the Rotary Club."¹³ For Gramsci, pragmatists like Dewey were correct to see the political dimensions of daily experience, but fell back on common sense bromides rather than genuinely critical reflection. Scholars like Jeffrey Lustig are more tempered in their criticism, but see Dewey's political theory as overly reliant on scientific administration, leaving no room for democratic disagreement and "the conflict and uncertainty that had always characterized the political realm."¹⁴ To Lustig, Dewey sought to sanitize politics by means of science, while being seemingly unaware of the outsized authority that engineers, scientists, and professional experts would thus exercise. Among those who are more willing to give Dewey's democratic faith the benefit of the doubt, critics have assailed him for his apparent failure to articulate a systematic political program, contending that he provides no "normative criterion" for democracy, only vague assertions of "democratic values."¹⁵ For example, on Stephen White's reading, Dewey sought to bring democratic values to deliberation and scientific inquiry, but nevertheless was unable to see how structures of power and inequality could distort these values. According to his critics, Dewey was not suspicious enough of the forces arrayed against democracy, assuming that science and deliberation

13. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 373.

14. Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism*, 153.

15. White, "The Very Idea of a Critical Social Science: A Pragmatist Turn."

were natural extensions of democracy rather than tools of elites.

Overlooking Dewey's ideas about work, these critics have been searching in the wrong place for a more robust statement of his democratic values. For Dewey, transforming dull and monotonous labor into a satisfying and personally significant vocation was the true work of democracy. Working for goals more significant than the largest profits, individuals would find in their vocation a wider understanding of their place in social and political life. Through public education, rich and poor alike would be prepared for a satisfying vocation. As to those in professional vocations, particularly experts in law, management, and engineering, Dewey described their special responsibility to apply their expertise to solving public problems, whether working in business or in government. Thus Dewey's views on work sought to mitigate social and economic inequalities, realizing democratic values by providing a vocation for all.

Addams, Croly, and Dewey were each household names in their own time, yet they exercise too little influence on today's ideas about democracy, let alone on our ideas about work. Whatever influence their thinking might have had in the decades that followed the Progressive era, their legacy to our own time does not include a recognition of the importance of work for democratic life. For Jane Addams, her active and outspoken opposition to World War I and continued peace activism in its aftermath marked her as a pariah, diminishing her opportunities for the lectures and speeches that had been her primary source of income and her most effective public activity. The Nobel Prize she was awarded in 1935 did some to restore her public fortunes, but she is primarily remembered today as the mother of modern social work, not as a labor activist who sought to reform the the meaning of working life, and to make its institutions more hospitable to the democratic aspirations of all citizens. Herbert Croly was more successful at transmitting his ideas to practical politicians, using the pulpit of *The New Republic* to speak directly to policy-makers and the emerging administrative middle class. With

the early support of Teddy Roosevelt, Croly's *The Promise of American Life* became required reading for Progressives, remaining a fixture when today's periodical press discusses the role of the state. Nevertheless, neither his supporters nor his detractors have much to say about Croly on work, ignoring the very foundations of his vision of the state. In the same way, John Dewey's public legacy has been limited, confined primarily to matters of education. While he is recognized as the intellectual father of experiments in education like so-called child-centered curriculums or school gardens, the theme of vocation seldom appears when his ghost is conjured to authorize this or that educational innovation. In short, the legacy of the Progressives has been blunted because it has not included their theories about work.

At the same time, these thinkers have been assailed from the right and the left. Predictably, their critics on the right recoil at their willingness to use the state to intervene not only in the workings of economic institutions, but also in shaping the everyday lives of all citizens. Meanwhile, Addams, Croly, and Dewey have been accused by their critics on the left of not being radical enough, giving working people little more than crumbs from their own table. Overlooking the numerous ways Addams's ideas were challenges to the expectations of her own class, her critics have suggested that she should be treated as a representative of genteel Victorianism rather than as a resource for contemporary thought. Long a bogeyman of the right, Croly has likewise drawn fire from critics on the left who worry that his technocratic vision of the state and society does little to relieve workers from their subordination to a managerial elite. Although he was once feted by presidents as the "philosopher of freedom," John Dewey now vexes his critics for failing to illustrate exactly how politics would come to be guided by human intelligence, and exactly what role the people themselves would play. All told, students of Progressive political thought have suggested that its lessons for our own time are largely about the pitfalls of reform efforts, emphasizing the myriad ways

that the noble intentions of elites actually bring harm to the masses they hope to help.

This study has argued against seeing the legacy of Progressive political thought as a cautionary tale. On the contrary, these three Progressives suggest that contemporary political thought could learn important lessons by paying more attention to the working life. Although work in the contemporary United States bears little resemblance to the industrial workplace of the Progressive era, the thought of writers like Jane Addams reminds us that without political institutions that provide stability and security at work, employment is too precarious to develop stable identities and lasting relationships with co-workers, the underpinnings of a sense of common purpose that is essential to democratic life. As skilled labor gives way and workers swell the ranks of the service sector's most menial occupations, Herbert Croly shows that a specialized economy that expands the opportunities for skilled labor not only creates better workers, but also better citizens. And as professional workers increasingly become instruments of corporate power, John Dewey argues that democracy requires autonomous professionals who redouble their commitments to serving and organizing the public. Taken together, these writers offer a forceful challenge to today's increasingly undemocratic economy, calling us to create institutions that can sustain individually significant work and a socially responsible society.

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