

The Mutual Influence
Of Society And Hull-House

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Introduction

Compared to other events in American legal history that are more well known to the average person living in America (i.e. The Scopes Trial, The Dred Scott Decision), the story of Jane Addams and her social experiment of Hull-House might seem trivial and unimportant. In fact, many people living in the United States today (assuming on a figure of randomly surveyed college students) have never even heard of Hull-House. Although Hull-House never involved a huge, high-profile court case like Scopes or Dred Scott, the influence of Hull-House on law is significant.

Hull-House was a “settlement house established in an ‘industrial quarter’ of Chicago to provide social and educational services to the thousands of poor and working-class ‘neighbors’ crowded into the streets and tenements around it.”¹ Jane Addams was driven by a desire to better the conditions of the lower-class of Chicago. Through this societal need, laws and other legal facets were influenced, updated, changed and added to the legal code. Through these legal aspects, society was in turn influenced by the changes that had been made in the legal system. A careful examination of the situation in Chicago along with the activities of Hull House should prove these facts indeed.

1. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, ed. Victoria Bissell Brown (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 3.

In our society today, we often hear of situations of people who lack some sort of means to survive or to live comfortably. This lack is caused by several different issues. Some of these issues are the result of a failure to take initiative on the part of those who lack, disabilities and handicaps, little or no education, linguistic barriers, cultural attitudes or social-economic status. It is important to note that none of these issues are new to society. From classical times to the present, the underprivileged have always been an interwoven part of civilisation.² However, just as interwoven as poverty has been in civilisation, there has also often been interwoven a desire by some to eliminate extreme poverty and assist those who lack necessities by changing the environment in which they inhabit.

Background

The Need: Chicago

Take, for instance, the city of Chicago in the United States of America around the late nineteenth century. Postbellum Chicago had become a city of nearly two million inhabitants which gave it the distinction of being the second largest city in the United States. No other city in the United States had seen the magnitude of growth that Chicago did during the period following the American Civil War.³ The reason why Chicago grew the way in which it did was mostly the result of its location in the Midwest of the country during

2. Matthew 26:11

3. Addams, *Hull-House*, 15.

the period of westward expansion; the city served as an important railroad hub and the destination of supplies heading from west to east. An explosion of immigrants coming to the Chicago area was the result of a similar explosion of business in the city; immigrants were searching for work to support themselves, and Chicago was the place that had a great abundance of work to be performed.⁴ This explosion of immigration, commerce and industry caused Chicago to grow extremely rapidly that city planning took a back seat to the growth of business. As such, vital city services did not increase at the same level as the growth found in the other factors of the city.⁵

The Solution: Jane Addams

Take, as another instance, Jane Addams. Jane Addams was the daughter of a moderately wealthy businessman and politician, John Addams. John Addams was a very successful businessman who sought to improve the condition of the general public through his business. John Addams invested his money in the railroad as a means not only to increase his wealth but also to bring the railroad through his town of Cedarville to insure that the rest of the community was benefited through its presence. John Addams was respected among the community for his “elite stewardship.” It is this attribute his daughter Jane was influenced by and tried to emulate⁶

4. Addams, *Hull-House*, 17

5. Addams, *Hull-House*, 16.

6. Addams, *Hull-House*, 4-5.

Jane Addams attended Rockford Female Seminary which existed to turn out “Christian wives, mothers, and missionaries.”⁷ However, none of these roles became engraved within Addams, but her values were still consistent with those of Christian society having been influenced by her father. Her attitudes lent more towards a position of a “steward” — just like her father. She utilised her attitude of stewardship by serving in a number of important roles during her four years at the seminary. In the year 1881, she graduated as the valedictorian of her class.⁸

After graduating from seminary, Jane Addams wanted to seek out a profession in the medical field. However, her father died shortly after she graduated.⁹ Shortly after her father died, Jane Addams took an eight-year period of travel throughout the world.¹⁰ While visiting the Toynbee Hall Settlement House in London with a companion of hers from seminary, Ellen Gates Starr, the two were inspired to establish a settlement house of their own. Taking a part of her generous inheritance left by her father, Addams and Starr moved to Chicago in the August of 1889.¹¹ Addams was able to rent the estate of the Hull family in downtown Chicago for a reasonable amount of money since the Hull family had migrated to nicer conditions in the suburbs

7. Addams, *Hull-House*, 5.

8. Addams, *Hull-House*, 5-6.

9. Addams, *Hull-House*, 7.

10. Addams, *Hull-House*, 8.

11. Addams, *Hull-House*, 10, 15.

of Chicago. It was in this house of the Hull family (hence the name *Hull-House*) that Addams and Starr founded their settlement house.¹² Initially, the two had founded Hull-House as a means to share literature and the arts with the underprivileged. Many people had misconceptions that the poor would be uninterested in artistic study. However, Addams and Starr held three postulates concerning the issue: “poverty and education did not render people impervious to artistic beauty”, European immigrants were more aware of the European culture of which high class Americans tried to emulate and there were some people within the Hull-House neighbourhood who came from a background that would have been cultured.¹³ From a weekly schedule of classes at Hull-House from 1882 March 1, it is possible to know what type of classes were offered at Hull-House. Athletics, English composition, taxes, cooking, maths, literature, Latin, sewing and debate were just a small sample of the types of classes offered.¹⁴ In addition, several of the classes offered at Hull-House were taught by college professors from the University of Chicago. These courses in turn provided the people taking them with college credits while the other, non-professor-led courses provided the residents with the knowledge for the simple skills to go about daily lives and to integrate into American culture and, if desired, to eventually obtain American citizenship.¹⁵

12. Addams, *Hull-House*, 17.

13. Addams, *Hull-House*, 21.

14. Addams, *Hull-House*, 207-218.

15. Addams, *Hull-House*, 20.

In the year 1910, Jane Addams published the book *Twenty Years at Hull-House*.¹⁶ The book was a partial autobiography of the life of Jane Addams, but it was more of an account of the situation in Chicago and how Hull-House operated to respond to those situations.

Jane Addams was appointed to several great honours throughout her lifetime mostly involving women's organisations or peace movements. Perhaps the greatest honour of all came in the year 1931 when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and, in the process, becoming the first female American to receive the award. Three years later, Jane Addams died of pneumonia in Chicago, the city where she practised most of her charitable works.¹⁷

The Evolution Of Law And Society

The Influence Of Society On Law

In a paper by Jane Addams entitled “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements”, Jane Addams wrote concerning the relationship between social improvement and democracy:

These young men and women, longing to socialize their democracy, are animated by certain hopes which may be thus loosely formulated; that if in a democratic country nothing can be permanently achieved save through the masses of the people, it

16. Addams, *Hull-House*, 255.

17. Addams, *Hull-House*, 256.

will be impossible to establish a higher political life than the people themselves crave; that it is difficult to see how the motion of a higher civic life can be fostered save through common intercourse; that the blessings which we associate with a life of refinement and cultivation can be made universal and must be made universal if they are to be permanent;¹⁸

In this way, Addams showed that she believed that the only way for the condition of the underprivileged to become improved would be if all of society desired to change their conditions.

With the exception of divine derivation, it is generally assumed among men that law is created by men themselves. Plato is attributed with saying that “necessity is the mother of invention.”¹⁹ If this is the case, law was invented by man because there was a need for the law to be implemented. In this manner, the law (excepting the case of divine derivation as mentioned above) is influenced by society.

For example, during the time period in which Jane Addams' account of Hull-House takes place, Upton Sinclair published a novel known as *The Jungle* which exposed extreme corruption in the meat-packing industry (of which Chicago was the centre of trade for the world). The novel tells the story of an immigrant family in Chicago while explaining the supposed

18. Addams, *Hull-House*, 91.

19. “Invention”. *WikiQuote*, <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Invention>.

practices of the meat-packing industry of Chicago.²⁰ The book demonstrated a need for laws to ensure that the quality of meat was unadulterated.²¹ Soon after the book was published, the sale of meat “dropped precipitously.”²² The reaction caused by the book inspired a piece of legislation known as the Meat Inspection Act.²³

Another case in which society influenced the law is in the case of child labour laws in Illinois. Jane Addams began to campaign for the passage of the Illinois Child Labor Law in the year 1903.²⁴ The condition of child labour in Illinois before the legislation was passed was extremely poor. There were instances of children killed on the job by committing the childish tendency to play with equipment.²⁵ There were cases of parents sending their children off to work in factories while the parents stayed at home and lived off of their children's wages.²⁶ There was another instance in which a child committed suicide because she had mismanaged her wages and deprived her family of a week's pay.²⁷ As a matter of fact, the only laws that did exist in Illinois that

20.Lawrence M. Friedman, *Law in America* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 127.

21.Addams, *Hull-House*, 16.

22.Friedman, *Law in America*, 127.

23.Addams, *Hull-House*, 16.

24.Addams, *Hull-House*, 255.

25.Addams, *Hull-House*, 122.

26.Addams, *Hull-House*, 122-123.

27.Addams, *Hull-House*, 123.

addressed the issue of child labour applied in the case of coal mining.²⁸ Due to the necessity of the improvement of the child labour condition, a resident of Hull-House, Mrs. Kelly, proposed to a state agency that the issue of child labour be looked into. The state then authorised Mrs. Kelly to investigate and provide statistics to the state legislature concerning the issue. The examinations were in turn passed to the Illinois Legislature which appointed a committee to examine the conditions. As a result, the State of Illinois passed a law improving workplace conditions and setting the age of fourteen as the minimum age at which a person could be legally employed.²⁹ However, before the state passed the law, the powers that were at Hull-House sought out the various people of the community in order to convince them that the law was beneficial.³⁰ Several opposed the law as it reduced for some families a significant portion of their income, but they supported the law in the end due to the fact that the ultimate desire of most of these parents was to eliminate the poor conditions in which the children were living. The strongest opposition to the measure was from glass companies which (for some reason) needed children to perform certain tasks.³¹ The strongest support of the law came from the trade unions that were probably seeking to secure jobs for

28. Addams, *Hull-House*, 122.

29. Addams, *Hull-House*, 123.

30. Addams, *Hull-House*, 124.

31. Addams, *Hull-House*, 126.

adult workers.³² Despite the fact that the legislation passed and was made into a law, the law was pointless unless the law was enforced. In order to get the law enforced, Hull-House worked together with several of the unions to force employers into following it.³³

Throughout Jane Addams' book, she makes a couple references to an alderman known as Johnny Powers.³⁴ As a saloon owner, his business practices conflicted with the message of temperance that Addams preached. As a result, Powers abused his powers by harassing Addams in her efforts to improve the neighbourhood. His corrupt practices aside, Powers went out of his way to combine the position of garbage inspector (a position that Addams held as her only paid job ever) with that of street repairer with civil service requirements that would have only permitted men therefore disqualifying Addams.³⁵ Powers had a loyal following of citizens that he gained through corrupt methods. Children of ward residents were often let go for trivial offences as a means of indebting the parents to his office. One street peddler was given a free license. Due to Powers' corruption, there were three movements in the nineteenth ward of Chicago aimed at replacing Powers which were all backed by Addams. Eventually the movements for completing

32. Addams, *Hull-House*, 124.

33. Addams, *Hull-House*, 123-127.

34. Addams, *Hull-House*, 155, 164.

35. Addams, *Hull-House*, 155.

the jobs that Powers left unfinished became so popular that Powers himself jumped aboard in order to retain whatever power that he could.³⁶

The Influence Of Law On Society

It has just been shown that law is generated by means of societal necessity. However, it is clearly obvious that law, once enacted, will influence society due to the fact that people within the jurisdiction of the law are bound to follow it. For instance, modern-day American society does not have numerous issues with child labourers due mostly to the fact that there are laws in place that prohibit the practice. In every day society, however, it is extremely difficult to see the effects of law on society since without the situations and conditions that necessitated the creation of the law in the first place, very often, people can unappreciate the reason why such a law exists.

Conclusion

The question is one of what influences what: does law influence society or does society influence law? Dealing with this question in the context of the history of Hull-House, I would have to conclude that the simple answer to the question is both. However, I would tend to think that it is critically important not to segregate law and society. Law is an integrated facet of society just like art, cuisine, religion, technology, government, education and commerce are all facets of society as well.³⁷ Each of these facets influence each other in a way that could resemble building blocks: each new concept in law, art,

36. Addams, *Hull-House*, 154-166.

technology et cetera is simply an evolution based on the compiled history of all such facets of society with necessity acting as the driving force behind all new innovation.

For instance, suppose that new technology can reduce errors in automobile accidents. Eventually, the need of automobile manufacturers to implement such technology would lead to legislation requiring them to do so just as legislation is in place requiring seat belts and child-safety seats. However, the costs of the new devices could make automobiles prohibitively expensive for a large portion of the population. That would in turn produce a need for another means of transportation. There, legislation is passed again providing for public transportation, and taxes are raised to finance it and so on and so fourth. In this hypothetical situation already, it has been shown how technology can influence law which in turn can influence commerce which in turn can influence the law again.

Society is the end result of the blank slate that existed after God had created the world and everything in it and the changes that humanity has made to it out of either necessity or convenience. The law portion of society has evolved in much the same way. As time continues, the law will continue to morph. Judging from the pattern followed in the past, present needs will determine future legislation. While in some cases, the progression of law has

37. "Civilisation", *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

Civilisation#What_characterizes_civilization

proven negative, it generally follows that people will cooperate with other people in order to improve their conditions and survive.

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Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.

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