



## Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology



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# EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY



# I. Jane Addams, “Trade Unions and Public Duty” (1899)

“The habitual use of ‘the people;’ as a phrase practically equivalent to the ‘working classes’ is a constant admission of the fact that the proletariat is not, properly speaking, a ‘class’ at all, but the body of society itself.” –Comte<sup>1</sup>

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article published by Addams in the *American Journal of Sociology* in January 1899 (volume 4, number 4, pp, 448-462). It has been abbreviated for publication here, but all original pronoun usage has been retained.

## Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

While Jane Addams never held a position as a sociologist, she was hugely influential on sociological thought, particularly among those who held that a primary goal of the science was to inform public policy and promote social reform. The fact that she had articles published in the major American sociological journal of the day is testament to this influence. When this article was published there was no federal law regulating or prohibiting child labor. It was not uncommon for children as young as eight to be put to work in factories and mines. Trade unions were the primary organizations pushing for restrictions and prohibitions in this area.

## Trades Unions

In this paper I have assumed that the general organization of trades unions and their ultimate purposes are understood, and also that we recognize that the public has a duty toward the weak and defenseless members of the community. With these assumptions granted, two propositions are really amazing: first, that we have turned over to those men who work with their hands the fulfillment of certain obligations which we must acknowledge belong to all of us, such as protecting little children from premature labor, and obtaining shorter hours for the overworked; and, second, that while the trades unions, more than any other body, have secured orderly legislation for the defense of the feeblest, they are persistently misunderstood and harshly criticized by many people who are themselves working for the same ends.

1. This quote graced the original Addams article.

The first proposition may be illustrated by various instances in which measures introduced by trades unions have first been opposed by the public, and later have been considered praise-worthy and valuable, when the public as a whole has undertaken to establish and enforce them.

For years trades unions have endeavored to secure laws regulating the occupations in which children may be allowed to work, the hours of labor permitted in those occupations, and the minimum age below which children may not be employed. Workingmen have accepted women into their trades unions, as an inevitable development of industrial conditions, but they resent the entrance of children into their trades, not only because children bring down wages, for women do that as well, but because children are injured by premature labor. The regulation of child labor is one of the few points in which society as a whole has made common cause with the voluntary efforts of trades unions, but the movement was initiated and is still largely carried forward by them. It is quite possible to understand the reasons for this.

We may imagine a row of people seated in a moving street car, into which darts a boy of eight, calling out the details of the last murder in the hope of selling an evening newspaper. A comfortable-looking man buys a paper from him, with no sense of moral shock; he may even be a trifle complacent that he has helped along the little fellow who is making his way in the world. The philanthropic lady sitting next to him may perhaps reflect that it is a pity that such a bright boy is not in school. She may make up her mind in a moment of compunction to redouble her efforts for various newsboys' missions and homes, that this poor child may have better teaching and perhaps a chance of manual training. She probably is convinced that he alone, by his unaided efforts, is supporting a widowed mother, and her heart is moved to do all she can for him. Let us imagine that next to her sits a workingman trained in trades-union methods. He will probably view with indignation the spectacle of a heedless child jumping on moving cars at the risk of his limbs, shouting out facts and reports that should be unknown to him for many years, and he may wonder for the hundredth time why it is that society allows this utter waste of its immature members. He knows that the boy's natural development is arrested, and that the abnormal activity of his body and mind uses up the force which should go into growth. He is forced to these conclusions because he has seen many a man enter the factory at eighteen and twenty so worn out by premature work that he is laid on the shelf within ten or fifteen years. He knows very well that he can do nothing in the way of ameliorating the lot of this particular boy; that his only possible chance is to agitate for proper child-labor laws in order to regulate, and, if possible, prohibit, street vending by children, so that the child of the poorest may have his school time secured to him, and may have at least his short chance for growth.

These three people sitting in the street car are all honest and upright and recognize a certain duty toward the forlorn children of the community. The self-made man is encouraging one boy's own efforts. The philanthropic lady is helping on a few boys. The workingman alone is obliged to include all the boys of his class. Workingmen, in their feebleness in all but numbers, have been forced to the state to secure protection for themselves and for their children. They cannot all rise out of their class, as the occasionally successful man has done; some of them must be left to do the work in the factories and mines, and they have no money to spend in ameliorating philanthropy.

In order to secure help from the state they have been obliged to agitate, and to make a moral appeal to the community as a whole -that most successful appeal which has ever distinguished great popular movements, but which we seem to distrust, and do not ordinarily use so often as the appeals to self-interest, national tradition, or class prejudice. Almost all the labor legislation which has been secured in this country to

protect the workman against the harshest conditions of industry has been secured through the efforts of trades unions, the training in which naturally leads men to appeal to the state, and to use those tools which democracy affords.

Child-labor laws once enacted and enforced are a matter of pride to the entire community, and they even come to be regarded as a register of the community's humanity and enlightenment. To consider the second proposition: For many years I have been impressed with the noble purposes of trades unions, and the desirability of the ends which they seek; and at the same time I have been amazed at the harshness with which their failures are judged by the public, and the undue stress which is laid upon the violence and disorder which sometimes accompany their efforts. How far is this violence and the consequent condemnation of the public the result of ignoble purposes on the part of the trades unions, and how far is it the result of the partial effort and failure which we thrust upon them, when the trades unions alone are obliged to do what the community as a whole should undertake?

Scenes of disorder and violence are enacted because trades unions are not equipped to accomplish what they are undertaking. The state alone could accomplish it without disorder. The public shirks its duty, and then holds a grievance toward the men who undertake the performance of that duty. It blames the union men for the disaster which arises from the fact that the movement is a partial one

It is easy to misjudge from the outside act. The man who reads the newspapers and has no other acquaintance with labor organizations than the record of their outside and often unofficial acts, is almost sure to be confused in regard to their ultimate objects. It is also difficult for the victorious side to see fairly. There is no doubt that the employer, the man who represents vested interests, often routs and defeats labor organizations, drives them from the field with an honest misunderstanding of what they are trying to do, and of the principles which they represent. He is flushed with triumph and imagines a victory which he has never achieved. We may consider half a dozen measures which trades unions have urged and concerning which the community has often been stirred by indignation, and find that, when the public undertakes to enforce identical, or similar, measures, they are regarded with great complacency. The disapproval may be merely the result of the fact that the trades unions alone are doing that which belongs to the entire public.

We hear from time to time of a strike in which men are prevented from taking the places of the strikers, and in the ensuing struggle are beaten and injured. We call the whole affair brutal and unjustifiable, and our sympathies are aroused for the men whom the strikers drive away from the chance to work. We make no sincere effort to find out what principle it is that justifies the strikers to themselves in their action. It is hardly possible that large bodies of men, all over the country, should repeat this course of action, over and over again, without an underlying motive which seems right to them, even if they are mistaken. An attempt to take a scholarly and fair view of life is bound to find out what this motive is. To condemn without a hearing, to correct without an understanding, has always been the mark of the narrow and uneducated person. It is not difficult to see the significance of a fine action; the test of our insight comes in interpreting aright an action such as this.

Let us put ourselves in the position of the striking men who have fallen upon workmen who have taken their places. The strikers have for years belonged to an organization devoted to securing better wages and a higher standard of living, not only for themselves, but for all the men in that trade. To this end they have steadily contributed from their wages. They have given their time to the study of trade conditions, and enthusiastic

and unceasing service to bettering those conditions in the only way that seems to them possible. They have thus worked, not only for themselves and their children, but for all their class. Every gain they have made, every advance they have secured, has been shared with the very men who now, when these gains are at stake, range themselves on the other side. They honestly believe, whether they are right or wrong, that their position is exactly the same which a nation, in time of war, takes toward a traitor who has deserted his country's camp for that of the enemy.

We condemn the boycott and say that the trades unions are bigoted in their allegiance to each other, and harsh to those outside their membership. Within a few years, circles of women in several great cities have formed themselves into a "consumers' league," because they have become uncomfortable concerning the conditions under which clothing is manufactured and sold. The members of these little circles, because of a stirring of conscience in regard to social wrongs, exert themselves to buy goods only from houses which conform to a certain required standard of sanitation, wages, and hours of work. They are willing to submit to a certain inconvenience and to a possible loss of opportunity for "bargains." They naturally regard themselves as an advance guard, and if given to self-congratulation would perhaps claim that they were recognizing a social duty which the community as a whole ignores.

The members of these consumers' leagues are beginning to hold conventions to discuss the propriety of a label which shall mean that those houses to which it is given provide seats for their saleswomen, summer vacations, and so on. All this is a valuable effort in the right direction, but it has already been initiated and sustained for many years by trades unions. So early as 1885, in New York a blue label was put upon cigars made by union men, and loyal trade-unionists were supposed to smoke no others. The label claimed to guarantee not only the payment of union wages, but fair conditions of manufacture. Many a workingman has spent his Saturday evening going from one store to another, until he found a hat with the trade-union label in its lining. He might, possibly, have bought cheaper and better-looking hats elsewhere, and it would have been easy to urge the smallness of the purchase as an excuse from the search. In short, the advanced woman is only now reaching the point held by the trade-unionist for years. The consumers' league carefully avoids the boycott, as does, indeed, the trade-unionist when he purchases only labeled goods. He is again using the method in his organization that the nation has long used when it prohibits by high tariff the importation of certain goods in order that home products may be purchased, which have been manufactured under better conditions. Who cannot recall the political speech urging high tariff for the protection of the American workingmen, in their wages and standard of living? It is singularly like the argument used by the workingman when he urges the boycott, or the more peaceful method of purchasing labeled goods made by union workmen who have been paid union wages. Here, again, as in the case of industrial warfare, I do not wish to commit myself to the ethics involved, but merely to point the analogy, and call attention to the fact that the public is apt to consider the government righteous and the trades unions unjustifiable.

For years trades unions in every country have steadily bent their efforts toward securing a shorter working day. In many unions these persistent efforts have been crowned with success, but many others are still making the attempt to secure the eight-hour day and have before them a long and troublous undertaking. Here, again, trades unions are trying to do for themselves what the government should secure for all its citizens.

The well-to-do portions of the community are prone to think of politics as something off by itself. They may conscientiously recognize a political duty as part of good citizenship, but political effort is not the natural expression of their moral striving. A contempt for law is almost certain to follow, when we lose our habit of turning toward it for moral support. There is little doubt that appeals through corporation attorneys are often made to legislative bodies solely with the view of protecting vested interests and property rights. In their preoccupation there is no time to consider morals or the rights of the community as a whole. This non-moral attitude, as well as the immoral one of open corruption of legislators, does much toward destroying the foundations of democratic government.

The body of trades-unionists in America are becoming discouraged from the fact that moral appeal and open agitation do not have fair play, because the "interests of capital" are not confined to these, but have methods of securing legislation which are perforce denied to the workingmen. The confidence of workingmen in the courts has been shaken by the fact that the judges have so often been trained as corporation attorneys, and it is a common assertion which may often be heard in workingmen's meetings that the militia and United States troops are almost invariably used to protect the interests of the employer in times of strike.

Any sense of division and suspicion is fatal in a democratic form of government, for although each side may seem to secure most for itself, when consulting only its own interests, the final test must be the good of the community as a whole.

One might almost generalize that the trades-union movement, as such, secures its lower objects best where there is a well-defined class feeling among the proletarians of its country, but that it accomplishes its highest objects in proportion as it is able to break into all classes and seize upon legislative enactment. A man who is born into his father's trade, and who has no hope of ever entering into another, as under the caste system of India or the guilds of Germany, is naturally most easily appealed to by the interests within his trade-life. A workingman in America who may become a carpenter only as a stepping-stone toward becoming a contractor and capitalist, as any ambitious scholar may teach a country school until she shall be fitted for a college professorship, does not respond so easily to measures intended to benefit the carpenter's trade as he does to measures intended to benefit society as a whole, and it is quite as important that the appeal should be made to him in his capacity of citizen as that it should be large enough to include men outside his class.

That all its citizens may be responsible is then, perhaps, the final reason why it should be the mission of the state to regulate the conditions of industry. The only danger in the movement, as at present conducted, lies in the fact that it is a partial movement, and antagonizes those whom it does not include. It may certainly be regarded as the duty of the whole to readjust the social machinery in such a way that the issue shall be a higher type of character, and that there shall be a moral continuity to society answering to its industrial development. This is the attempt of factory legislation. It is concerned in the maintenance of a certain standard of life, and would exercise such social control over the conditions of industry as to prevent the lowering of that standard. After all, society as society is interested in this, and there is no more obligation upon workingmen to maintain a standard of living than there is upon the rest of us. It is well, sometimes, to remind ourselves that, after all, the mass of mankind work with their hands.

Is it too much to hope that in time other citizens, as well as trade-unionists, may be educated to ask themselves: "Does our industrial machinery, or does it not, make for the greatest amount and the highest quality of character?" And that when it is answered, as it must be at the present moment, that the state does

not concern itself with the character of the producer, but only with the commercial aspects of the product, is it again too optimistic to predict that those other citizens will feel a certain sense of shame and recognize the fact that the trades unions have undertaken a duty which the public has ignored?

### *Questions for Contemplation and Discussion*

1. Addams has a particular style of writing that is different from other theorists included in this volume. Note that she sometimes writes in the first person. Why do you think this is so? What other peculiarities of style and usage do you find here, and how do these relate to her message and work?
2. Why does Addams think workers are the main agitators for reform by the state? It is common around Labor Day to see posters and signs that list all the advances brought about by the labor movement (e.g., the weekend, overtime pay, 8-hour work day, minimum wage, paid vacation, sick days, safety standards, child labor laws, health benefits, retirement security, unemployment compensation). What would Addams say about this if she were alive today?