

Jane Addams's Values

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Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy by Jean Bethke Elshtain, Basic, 336 pp., \$ 28

The Jane Addams Reader edited by Jean Bethke Elshtain, Basic, 432 pp., \$ 20

Jean Bethke Elshtain, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago, intends her sympathetic intellectual biography of Jane Addams and her companion anthology of Addams's writings to contribute not only to an appreciation of Addams, but also to the current public debate about the meaning of democracy in America. Indeed, in the preface to her biography, Elshtain contends the intellectual and political stakes are particularly high: "Concerns about America's civic health, voiced in recent public and scholarly debates, have brought to the fore the urgent need for a revaluation of the status of democracy in the United States."

We are thus at "a propitious moment," according to Elshtain, at which to reconsider Jane Addams, who was born just before the Civil War in 1860, lived to see the New Deal before her death in 1935, and at the turn of the century founded Chicago's famous Hull House. Addams, in Elshtain's reading, provides a model of the importance of balancing and blending competing goods — family commitments and social commitments, discipline and compassion, community engagement and intellectual inquiry — essential to realizing the dream of American democracy. What Elshtain's well-balanced account also reveals is that achieving and maintaining the right balance and blend is a daunting and endless task.

In fact, the last fifteen years or so have witnessed striking efforts by public intellectuals and politicians from both parties to balance and blend goods whose irreconcilability had long been taken for granted. In the 1980s the Democratic Leadership Council (led by Bill Clinton and Al Gore, among others) concluded that the Democrats had mistakenly ceded to Republicans care for a variety of critical goods — including personal responsibility, the family, religious worship, civic participation — essential to the public interest. Then, in the late 1990s, George W. Bush introduced himself to the nation as a new kind of conservative, a compassionate conservative. Bush affirmed familiar conservative themes — lower taxes, freer markets, tougher educational standards, and stronger defense — while stressing that a

proper concern for limited government was consistent with government support of private efforts to address the needs of those whose poverty, or illness, or age made it impossible for them to care for themselves.

Was all this good for democracy or bad? On one interpretation, the balancing and blending embodied in, say, the welfare reform bill that President Clinton signed into law in 1996, President Bush's faith-based initiative, and the rise of the school choice movement exhibit a high-minded determination to craft public policy that reflects the competing claims of genuine goods. On another interpretation, these undertakings betray a cynical scheme, common to both parties, to co-opt the nation's growing numbers of independent voters.

This is the background against which Elshtain takes up Jane Addams. By showing that high-minded political attempts to give competing goods their due are possible and can advance the cause of democracy, Elshtain aims to equip us to resist cynical dismissals. And by dramatizing the professional and personal demands imposed by such high-mindedness, how in politics it can lead one to lose one's balance, she cautions against romanticizing idealism.

Addams's reputation has lost much luster since the height of her acclaim, in 1910, which saw the publication of her masterpiece, *Twenty Years at Hull House*. When she died twenty-five years later, Addams was, Elshtain reports, "America's best-known and most widely hailed female public figure." Yet her fervent pacifism and vocal internationalism in response to World War I had earned her intense and persistent public opprobrium, and her reputation has never entirely recovered.

Much of the criticism, Elshtain shows, is vulgar and baseless. While still alive, she was denounced as a Communist sympathizer whose selfless work on behalf of the poor served as a guise under which she sought to promulgate radical anti-American ideas. No better are the contemporary academic critics who condescendingly condemn her as a cultural imperialist out to "civilize the masses" and indignantly disparage her as an elitist determined to stamp out the diversity that immigrants brought to this country and impose on them a homogenized American identity.

Even our attempts to praise her end up doing her a disservice. To recall her as a suffragette and social worker disparages her pioneer accomplishment in the settlement-house movement — a democratic reform effort that provided an alternative to both government relief and private charity. It also obscures her standing as a leading public intellectual whose voluminous writings include a dozen books and more than five hundred articles and speeches. (Several recent studies also seek, with scant evidence, to sexualize her relations with her close female friends at Hull House.)

Jane Addams grew up in the small northern Illinois town of Cedarville, the daughter of a politically active and successful businessman whom she revered and a mother who died when Jane was young. As a child, Jane Addams was intense, self-disciplined, and preoccupied with

moral questions. She read literature voraciously. She went on to graduate from Rockford Female Seminary at twenty-one. She followed her schooling with two grand tours of Europe, the first trip lasting for more than two years. In 1889, at age twenty-nine, she opened Hull House.

At the time of its founding, there was nothing quite like it. The same can be said today. It represented an extraordinary merging of the democratic ethos, Christian universalism, the maternal impulse, and the pragmatic, tough-minded, can-do spirit. Its dominant purpose was to address the needs of the poor Italian, Greek, Bohemian, and Eastern European immigrants, particularly children, who lived in and around the west side of Chicago. It provided a wide range of facilities and activities: a playground and gymnasium and all sorts of sports, literary and political discussions, a nursery, a public kitchen, and instruction in dance, theater, art, and music. It was part club, part community center, part home away from home, and part residence. It was, in the words of an elderly woman interviewed by Elshtain who grew up in and around Hull House, “a way of life.” Addams lived there and worked indefatigably for forty-five years.

“All of Hull House’s activities,” Elshtain observes, “pointed toward one goal: the building up of a social culture of democracy.” This was a culture that saw a deep connection between the family and society, insisting on society’s responsibility to promote conditions in which parents could rear their children free of grinding poverty, pervasive crime, and deadly pollution. It emphasized the need for individuals — men and women — to conceive of themselves as citizens, seeking to instill in them a sense of solidarity with fellow citizens. It encouraged citizens to get involved in politics, while seeing moral and artistic and physical education as prerequisites for the politically engaged life. And it demanded that cities give civic form to the yearning for a common life by establishing schools, building public parks, and sponsoring public festivals of all sorts.

The balance and blending of competing goods that in many ways she achieved at Hull House eluded Addams when she turned her attention to international affairs. As early as 1907, in her book *Newer Ideals of Peace*, she envisaged a progressive democratization of the international community that would make war obsolete. From 1914 on, she concentrated her labors on the advocacy of pacifism and internationalism — an advocacy that grew out of her genuine concern for the victims of war but which was so doctrinaire and one-sided that it allowed no place for a distinction between national defense and aggressive militarism. As Elshtain puts it:

By minimizing the ways in which the operation of power at all levels of government helps create and secure the contexts Addams celebrated — the multinational city in which everyone is a candidate for civic membership — she evaded the distinction between a great city within a nation-state, on the one hand, and the individual sovereign state in its relation to an

international arena that lacks an overarching authority. If every state is analogized to Chicago and its internal context, an analogy Addams often made, then what political body plays the role of the U.S. government or its equivalent?

Having laid bare a crucial flaw in Addams's thinking, Elshtain hastens to find a partial corrective in Addams's practice, noting that the last twenty years of her life were particularly devoted to bringing about the international law and organization that her terribly lofty humanitarian ideals presupposed.

It was not only in the international arena, Elshtain delicately but resolutely reveals, that Addams failed to harmoniously blend competing goods. Addams was without doubt an extraordinary individual, but she disparaged the virtues of individuality in favor of those of democratic solidarity. Much of her work at Hull House involved the maternal impulse directed beyond the confines of the family, but Hull House's success depended in part on her remaining husbandless and childless. She was a proponent of "Christian Humanitarianism" who believed that Jesus was a seminal teacher of the social and political egalitarianism she championed, but she sought rather uncritically to detach what she took to be Christian ethical teaching from Christian faith.

Elshtain can be faulted for an excess of generosity, as, for example, when she declares that "Addams herself had a gift for speaking *to* the right, the left, and the center without speaking *for* any camp in the narrowly consistent way so cherished by ideologues." But, finally, it is not in the great achievements or in the stunning lapses that Elshtain finds the true Jane Addams. It is, rather, in their complicated enmeshing over the course of a long, immensely fruitful, practically and intellectually engaged life.

And this larger lesson — that in democratic politics there is always a balance to be struck and striking it well presents a perennial challenge — comes into focus precisely because of the salutary sensibility that Jean Bethke Elshtain is able to bring to her subject.