CHAPTER IX

A DECADE OF ECONOMIC DISCUSSION

THE HULL-HOUSE RESIDENTS WERE often bewildered by the desire for constant discussion which characterized Chicago twenty years ago, for although the residents in the early Settlements were in many cases young persons who had sought relief from the consciousness of social maladjustment in the "anodyne of work" afforded by philanthropic and civic activities, their former experiences had not thrown them into company with radicals. The decade between 1890-1900 was, in Chicago, a period of propaganda as over against constructive social effort; the moment for marching and carrying banners, for stating general principles and making a demonstration, rather than the time for uncovering the situation and for providing the legal measures and the civic organization through which new social hopes might make themselves felt.

When Hull-House was established in 1889, the events of the Haymarket riot were already two years old, but during that time Chicago had apparently gone through the first period of repressive measures, and in the winter of 1889-1890, by the advice and with the active participation of its leading citizens, the city had reached the conclusion that the only cure for the acts of anarchy was free speech and an open discussion of the ills of which the opponents of government complained. Great open meetings were held every Sunday evening in the recital hall of the then new auditorium, presided over by such representative citizens as Lyman Gage, and every possible shade of opinion was freely expressed. A man who spoke constantly at these meetings used to be pointed out to the visiting stranger as one who had been involved with the group of convicted anarchists, and who doubtless would have been arrested and tried, but for the accident of his having been in Milwaukee when the explosion occurred. One cannot imagine such meetings being held in Chicago to-day, nor that such a man should be encouraged to raise his voice in a public assemblage presided over by a leading banker. It is hard to tell just what change has come over our philosophy or over the minds of those citizens who were then convinced that if these conferences had been established earlier, the Haymarket riot and all its sensational results might have been avoided.

At any rate, there seemed a further need for smaller clubs, where men who differed widely in their social theories might meet for discussion, where representatives of the various economic schools might modify each other, and at least learn tolerance and the futility of endeavoring to convince all the world of the truth of one position. Fanaticism is engendered only when men, finding no contradiction to their theories, at last believe that the very universe lends itself as an exemplification of one point of view. "The Working People's Social Science Club" was organized at Hull-House in the spring of 1890 by an English workingman, and for seven years it held a weekly meeting. At eight o'clock every

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Wednesday night the secretary called to order from forty to one hundred people; a chairman for the evening was elected, a speaker was introduced who was allowed to talk until nine o'clock; his subject was then thrown open to discussion and a lively debate ensued until ten o'clock, at which hour the meeting was declared adjourned. The enthusiasm of this club seldom lagged. Its zest for discussion was unceasing, and any attempt to turn it into a study or reading club always met with the strong disapprobation of the members.

In these weekly discussions in the Hull-House drawing room everything was thrown back upon general principles and all discussion save that which "went to the root of things," was impatiently discarded as an unworthy, halfway measure. I recall one evening in this club when an exasperated member had thrown out the statement that "Mr. B. believes that socialism will cure the toothache." Mr. B. promptly rose to his feet and said that it certainly would, that when every child's teeth were systematically cared for from the beginning, toothaches would disappear from the face of the earth, belonging, as it did, to the extinct competitive order, as the black plague had disappeared from the earth with the ill-regulated feudal regime of the Middle Ages. "But," he added, "why do we spend time discussing trifles like the toothache when great social changes are to be considered which will of themselves reform these minor ills?" Even the man who had been humorous fell into the solemn tone of the gathering. It was, perhaps, here that the socialist surpassed everyone else in the fervor of economic discussion. He was usually a German or a Russian, with a turn for logical presentation, who saw in the concentration of capital and the growth of monopolies an inevitable transition to the socialist state. He pointed out that the concentration of capital in fewer hands but increased the mass of those whose interests were opposed to a maintenance of its power, and vastly simplified its final absorption by the community; that monopoly "when it is finished doth bring forth socialism." Opposite to him, springing up in every discussion was the individualist, or, as the socialist called him, the anarchist, who insisted that we shall never secure just human relations until we have equality of opportunity; that the sole function of the state is to maintain the freedom of each, guarded by the like freedom of all, in order that each man may be able to work out the problems of his own existence.

That first winter was within three years of the Henry George campaign in New York, when his adherents all over the country were carrying on a successful and effective propaganda. When Henry George himself came to Hull-House one Sunday afternoon, the gymnasium which was already crowded with men to hear Father Huntington's address on "Why should a free thinker believe in Christ," fairly rocked on its foundations under the enthusiastic and prolonged applause which greeted this great leader and constantly interrupted his stirring address, filled, as all of his speeches were, with high moral enthusiasm and humanitarian fervor. Of the remarkable congresses held in connection with the World's Fair, perhaps those inaugurated by the advocates of single tax exceeded all others in vital enthusiasm. It was possibly significant that all discussions in the department of social science had to be organized by partisans in separate groups. The very committee itself on social science composed of Chicago citizens, of whom I was one, changed from week to week, as partisan members had their feelings hurt because their cause did not receive "due

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recognition." And yet in the same building adherents of the most diverse religious creeds, eastern and western, met in amity and good fellowship. Did it perhaps indicate that their presentation of the eternal problems of life were cast in an older and less sensitive mold than this presentation in terms of social experience, or was it rather that the new social science was not yet a science at all but merely a name under cover of which we might discuss the perplexing problems of the industrial situation? Certainly the difficulties of our committee were not minimized by the fact that the then new science of sociology had not yet defined its own field. The University of Chicago, opened only the year before the World's Fair, was the first great institution of learning to institute a department of sociology.

In the meantime the Hull-House Social Science Club grew in numbers and fervor as various distinguished people who were visiting the World's Fair came to address it. I recall a brilliant Frenchwoman who was filled with amazement because one of the shabbiest men reflected a reading of Schopenhauer. She considered the statement of another member most remarkable—that when he saw a carriage driving through the streets occupied by a capitalist who was no longer even an entrepreneur, he felt quite as sure that his days were numbered and that his very lack of function to society would speedily bring him to extinction, as he did when he saw a drunkard reeling along the same street.

The club at any rate convinced the residents that no one so poignantly realizes the failures in the social structure as the man at the bottom, who has been most directly in contact with those failures and has suffered most. I recall the shrewd comments of a certain sailor who had known the disinherited in every country; of a Russian who had served his term in Siberia; of an old Irishman who called himself an atheist but who in moments of excitement always blamed the good Lord for "setting supinely" when the world was so horribly out of joint.

It was doubtless owing largely to this club that Hull-House contracted its early reputation for radicalism. Visitors refused to distinguish between the sentiments expressed by its members in the heat of discussion and the opinions held by the residents themselves. At that moment in Chicago the radical of every shade of opinion was vigorous and dogmatic; of the sort that could not resign himself to the slow march of human improvement; of the type who knew exactly "in what part of the world Utopia standeth."

During this decade Chicago seemed divided into two classes; those who held that "business is business" and who were therefore annoyed at the very notion of social control, and the radicals, who claimed that nothing could be done to really moralize the industrial situation until society should be reorganized.

A Settlement is above all a place for enthusiasms, a spot to which those who have a passion for the equalization of human joys and opportunities are early attracted. It is this type of mind which is in itself so often obnoxious to the man of conquering business faculty, to whom the practical world of affairs seems so supremely rational that he would never vote to change the type of it even if he could. The man of social enthusiasm is to him an annoyance and an affront. He does not like to hear him talk and considers him per se "unsafe." Such a business man would admit, as an abstract proposition, that society is susceptible of modification and would even agree that all human institutions imply progressive

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development, but at the same time he deeply distrusts those who seek to reform existing conditions. There is a certain common-sense foundation for this distrust, for too often the reformer is the rebel who defies things as they are, because of the restraints which they impose upon his individual desires rather than because of the general defects of the system. When such a rebel poses for a reformer, his shortcomings are heralded to the world, and his downfall is cherished as an awful warning to those who refuse to worship "the god of things as they are."

And yet as I recall the members of this early club, even those who talked the most and the least rationally, seem to me to have been particularly kindly and "safe." The most pronounced anarchist among them has long since become a convert to a religious sect, holding Buddhistic tenets which imply little food and a distrust of all action; he has become a wraith of his former self but he still retains his kindly smile.

In the discussion of these themes, Hull-House was of course quite as much under the suspicion of one side as the other. I remember one night when I addressed a club of secularists, which met at the corner of South Halsted and Madison streets, a rough-looking man called out: "You are all right now, but, mark my words, when you are subsidized by the millionaires, you will be afraid to talk like this." The defense of free speech was a sensitive point with me, and I quickly replied that while I did not intend to be subsidized by millionaires, neither did I propose to be bullied by workingmen, and that I should state my honest opinion without consulting either of them. To my surprise, the audience of radicals broke into applause, and the discussion turned upon the need of resisting tyranny wherever found, if democratic institutions were to endure. This desire to bear independent witness to social righteousness often resulted in a sense of compromise difficult to endure, and at many times it seemed to me that we were destined to alienate everybody. I should have been most grateful at that time to accept the tenets of socialism, and I conscientiously made my effort, both by reading and by many discussions with the comrades. I found that I could easily give an affirmative answer to the heated question "Don't you see that just as the hand mill created a society with a feudal lord, so the steam mill creates a society with an industrial capitalist?" But it was a little harder to give an affirmative reply to the proposition that the social relation thus established proceeds to create principles, ideas and categories as merely historical and transitory products.

Of course I use the term "socialism" technically and do not wish to confuse it with the growing sensitiveness which recognizes that no personal comfort, nor individual development can compensate a man for the misery of his neighbors, nor with the increasing conviction that social arrangements can be transformed through man's conscious and deliberate effort. Such a definition would not have been accepted for a moment by the Russians, who then dominated the socialist party in Chicago and among whom a crude interpretation of the class conflict was the test of faith.

During those first years on Halsted Street nothing was more painfully clear than the fact that pliable human nature is relentlessly pressed upon by its physical environment. I saw nowhere a more devoted effort to understand and relieve that heavy pressure than the

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socialists were making, and I should have been glad to have had the comradeship of that gallant company had they not firmly insisted that fellowship depends upon identity of creed. They repudiated similarity of aim and social sympathy as tests which were much too loose and wavering as they did that vague socialism which for thousands has come to be a philosophy or rather religion embodying the hope of the world and the protection of all who suffer.

I also longed for the comfort of a definite social creed, which should afford at one and the same time an explanation of the social chaos and the logical steps toward its better ordering. I came to have an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the poverty in the midst of which I was living and which the socialists constantly forced me to defend. My plight was not unlike that which might have resulted in my old days of skepticism regarding foreordination, had I then been compelled to defend the confusion arising from the clashing of free wills as an alternative to an acceptance of the doctrine. Another difficulty in the way of accepting this economic determinism, so baldly dependent upon the theory of class consciousness, constantly arose when I lectured in country towns and there had opportunities to read human documents of prosperous people as well as those of my neighbors who were crowded into the city. The former were stoutly unconscious of any classes in America, and the class consciousness of the immigrants was fast being broken into by the necessity for making new and unprecedented connections in the industrial life all about them.

In the meantime, although many men of many minds met constantly at our conferences, it was amazing to find the incorrigible good nature which prevailed. Radicals are accustomed to hot discussion and sharp differences of opinion and take it all in the day's work. I recall that the secretary of the Hull-House Social Science Club at the anniversary of the seventh year of its existence read a report in which he stated that, so far as he could remember, but twice during that time had a speaker lost his temper, and in each case it had been a college professor who "wasn't accustomed to being talked back to."

He also added that but once had all the club members united in applauding the same speaker; only Samuel Jones, who afterwards became the "golden rule" mayor of Toledo, had been able to overcome all their dogmatic differences, when he had set forth a plan of endowing a group of workingmen with a factory plant and a working capital for experimentation in hours and wages, quite as groups of scholars are endowed for research.

Chicago continued to devote much time to economic discussion and remained in a state of youthful glamour throughout the nineties. I recall a young Methodist minister who, in order to free his denomination from any entanglement in his discussion of the economic and social situation, moved from his church building into a neighboring hall. The congregation and many other people followed him there, and he later took to the street corners because he found that the shabbiest men liked that best. Professor Herron filled to overflowing a downtown hall every noon with a series of talks entitled "Between Caesar and Jesus"—an attempt to apply the teachings of the Gospel to the situations of modern commerce. A half dozen publications edited with some ability and much moral enthusiasm have passed away, perhaps because they represented pamphleteering rather than journalism and came to a

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natural end when the situation changed. Certainly their editors suffered criticism and poverty on behalf of the causes which they represented.

Trades-unionists, unless they were also socialists, were not prominent in those economic discussions, although they were steadily making an effort to bring order into the unnecessary industrial confusion. They belonged to the second of the two classes into which Mill divides all those who are dissatisfied with human life as it is, and whose feelings are wholly identified with its radical amendment. He states that the thoughts of one class are in the region of ultimate aims, of "the highest ideals of human life," while the thoughts of the other are in the region of the "immediately useful, and practically attainable."

The meetings of our Social Science Club were carried on by men of the former class, many of them with a strong religious bias who constantly challenged the Church to assuage the human spirit thus torn and bruised "in the tumult of a time disconsolate." These men were so serious in their demand for religious fellowship, and several young clergymen were so ready to respond to the appeal, that various meetings were arranged at Hull-House, in which a group of people met together to consider the social question, not in a spirit of discussion, but in prayer and meditation. These clergymen were making heroic efforts to induce their churches to formally consider the labor situation, and during the years which have elapsed since then, many denominations of the Christian Church have organized labor committees; but at that time there was nothing of the sort beyond the society in the established Church of England "to consider the conditions of labor."

During that decade even the most devoted of that pioneer church society failed to formulate the fervid desire for juster social conditions into anything more convincing than a literary statement, and the Christian Socialists, at least when the American branch held its annual meeting at Hull-House, afforded but a striking portrayal of that "between-age mood" in which so many of our religious contemporaries are forced to live. I remember that I received the same impression when I attended a meeting called by the canon of an English cathedral to discuss the relation of the Church to labor. The men quickly indicted the cathedral for its uselessness, and the canon asked them what in their minds should be its future. The men promptly replied that any new social order would wish, of course, to preserve beautiful historic buildings, that although they would dismiss the bishop and all the clergy, they would want to retain one or two scholars as custodians and interpreters. "And what next?" the imperturbable ecclesiastic asked. "We would democratize it," replied the men. But when it came to a more detailed description of such an undertaking, the discussion broke down into a dozen bits, although illuminated by much shrewd wisdom and affording a clue, perhaps as to the destruction of the bishop's palace by the citizens of this same town, who had attacked it as a symbol of swollen prosperity during the bread riots of the earlier part of the century.

On the other hand the workingmen who continue to demand help from the Church thereby acknowledge their kinship, as does the son who continues to ask bread from the father who gives him a stone. I recall an incident connected with a prolonged strike in Chicago on the part of the typographical unions for an eight-hour day. The strike had been conducted in a

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most orderly manner and the union men, convinced of the justice of their cause, had felt aggrieved because one of the religious publishing houses in Chicago had constantly opposed them. Some of the younger clergymen of the denominations who were friendly to the strikers' cause came to a luncheon at Hull-House, where the situation was discussed by the representatives of all sides. The clergymen, becoming much interested in the idealism with which an officer of the State Federation of Labor presented the cause, drew from him the story of his search for fraternal relation: he said that at fourteen years of age he had joined a church, hoping to find it there; he had later become a member of many fraternal organizations and mutual benefit societies, and, although much impressed by their rituals, he was disappointed in the actual fraternity. He had finally found, so it seemed to him, in the cause of organized labor, what these other organizations had failed to give him—an opportunity for sacrificial effort.

Chicago thus took a decade to discuss the problems inherent in the present industrial organization and to consider what might be done, not so much against deliberate aggression as against brutal confusion and neglect; quite as the youth of promise passed through a mist of rose-colored hope before he settles in the land of achievement where he becomes all too dull and literal minded. And yet as I hastily review the decade in Chicago which followed this one given over to discussion, the actual attainment of these early hopes, so far as they have been realized at all, seem to have come from men of affairs rather than from those given to speculation. Was the whole decade of discussion an illustration of that striking fact which has been likened to the changing of swords in Hamlet; that the abstract minds at length yield to the inevitable or at least grow less ardent in their propaganda, while the concrete minds, dealing constantly with daily affairs, in the end demonstrate the reality of abstract notions?

I remember when Frederick Harrison visited Hull-House that I was much disappointed to find that the Positivists had not made their ardor for humanity a more potent factor in the English social movement, as I was surprised during a visit from John Morley to find that he, representing perhaps the type of man whom political life seemed to have pulled away from the ideals of his youth, had yet been such a champion of democracy in the full tide of reaction. My observations were much too superficial to be of value and certainly both men were well grounded in philosophy and theory of social reform and had long before carefully formulated their principles, as the new English Labor Party, which is destined to break up the reactionary period, is now being created by another set of theorists. There were certainly moments during the heated discussions of this decade when nothing seemed so important as right theory: this was borne in upon me one brilliant evening at Hull-House when Benjamin Kidd, author of the much-read "Social Evolution," was pitted against Victor Berger of Milwaukee, even then considered a rising man in the Socialist Party.

At any rate the residents of Hull-House discovered that while their first impact with city poverty allied them to groups given over to discussion of social theories, their sober efforts to heal neighborhood ills allied them to general public movements which were without challenging creeds. But while we discovered that we most easily secured the smallest of much-needed improvements by attaching our efforts to those of organized bodies,

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nevertheless these very organizations would have been impossible, had not the public conscience been aroused and the community sensibility quickened by these same ardent theorists.

As I review these very first impressions of the workers in unskilled industries, living in a depressed quarter of the city, I realize how easy it was for us to see exceptional cases of hardship as typical of the average lot, and yet, in spite of alleviating philanthropy and labor legislation, the indictment of Tolstoy applied to Moscow thirty years ago still fits every American city: “Wherever we may live, if we draw a circle around us of a hundred thousand, or a thousand, or even of ten miles circumference, and look at the lives of those men and women who are inside our circle, we shall find half-starved children, old people, pregnant women, sick and weak persons, working beyond their strength, who have neither food nor rest enough to support them, and who, for this reason, die before their time; we shall see others, full grown, who are injured and needlessly killed by dangerous and hurtful tasks.”

As the American city is awakening to self-consciousness, it slowly perceives the civic significance of these industrial conditions, and perhaps Chicago has been foremost in the effort to connect the unregulated overgrowth of the huge centers of population, with the astonishingly rapid development of industrial enterprises; quite as Chicago was foremost to carry on the preliminary discussion through which a basis was laid for like-mindedness and the coordination of diverse wills. I remember an astute English visitor, who had been a guest in a score of American cities, observed that it was hard to understand the local pride he constantly encountered; for in spite of the boasting on the part of leading citizens in the western, eastern, and southern towns, all American cities seemed to him essentially alike and all equally the results of an industry totally unregulated by well-considered legislation.

I am inclined to think that perhaps all this general discussion was inevitable in connection with the early Settlements, as they in turn were the inevitable result of theories of social reform, which in their full enthusiasm reached America by way of England, only in the last decade of the century. There must have been tough fiber somewhere; for, although the residents of Hull-House were often baffled by the radicalism within the Social Science Club and harassed by the criticism from outside, we still continued to believe that such discussion should be carried on, for if the Settlement seeks its expression through social activity, it must learn the difference between mere social unrest and spiritual impulse.

The group of Hull-House residents, which by the end of the decade comprised twenty-five, differed widely in social beliefs, from the girl direct from the country who looked upon all social unrest as mere anarchy, to the resident, who had become a socialist when a student in Zurich, and who had long before translated from the German Engel’s “Conditions of the Working Class in England,” although at this time she had been read out of the Socialist Party because the Russian and German Impossibilists suspected her fluent English, as she always lightly explained. Although thus diversified in social beliefs, the residents became solidly united through our mutual experience in an industrial quarter, and we became not only convinced of the need for social control and protective legislation but also of the value of this preliminary argument.

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This decade of discussion between 1890 and 1900 already seems remote from the spirit of Chicago of to-day. So far as I have been able to reproduce this earlier period, it must reflect the essential provisionality of everything; “the perpetual moving on to something future which shall supersede the present,” that paramount impression of life itself, which affords us at one and the same time, ground for despair and for endless and varied anticipation.

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