**Jane Addams:**

**From Civic Republicanism to Civic Housekeeping and**

**Environmental Justice**

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Peter F. Cannavò

Department of Government

Hamilton College

198 College Hill Road Clinton, NY

pcannavo@hamilton.edu

Jane Addams (1860-1935) was, with Ellen Starr Gates, the co-founder of Chicago’s Hull House, one of the most important sites of the late 19th and early 20th century settlement house movement. She was a political reformer, a feminist, a pacifist, a social philosopher, and an early environmental justice activist. In this paper, which is part of a larger study on the relationship between civic republicanism and environmentalism in the United States, I want to situate Addams with respect to these two traditions, while also discussing how she challenged the gendered exclusions of republicanism. Addams brought key civic republican values – communitarianism, participatory democracy, and character formation – into the distressed urban setting of a rapidly industrializing society. At the same time, she subverted the gendered boundary between the public sphere on the one hand and the private, domestic sphere on the other. Her notion of ‘civic housekeeping’ – a term she invoked in a 1906 speech[[1]](#footnote-1) – simultaneously politicized the household and also turned the concerns of the household into matters of the political common good. In so doing, she also challenged the geographic separation between the affluent and the poor that continues to mark our urban life. Civic housekeeping, with its emphasis on a holistic amelioration of the urban social and physical environment, and its democratic politics of recognition, also pointed to the contemporary environmental justice movement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Civic Republicanism**

Civic republicanism was prominent in the United States during the Revolutionary and Founding eras (1763–1824), though it eventually lost influence to liberalism (Wood 1969; Pocock 1975 and 1989; McCoy 1980; Sandel 1996). Republicanism was perhaps most fervently espoused by Thomas Jefferson and his followers. In later years, traces of republicanism persisted in the labor, civil rights and community organizing movements (Sandel 1996). Republican values in the U.S. have also found expression in the environmental movement (Cannavò 2010).

Republicanism emphasizes active, participatory citizenship and civic virtue as key components either of human flourishing in general or, at the very least, a healthy political society. Republicanism elevates the common good and self-sacrifice over negative liberty, private interest, and the pursuit of wealth and consumption.

Republicanism has democratic implications. A healthy republic depends on citizens coming together and collectively deliberating on the common good. If citizens are virtuous, then democratic self-government is a guarantor of the common good against special interests. Yet citizens’ virtue must not be taken as given. Republicanism urges a formative project of social and political practices, including political participation itself (Sandel 1996), to instill virtues conducive to civic engagement and pursuit of the common good.

As I have argued elsewhere, U.S. environmentalism[[3]](#footnote-3) echoes much of the republican perspective and, indeed, partly emerged from republicanism (Cannavò 2010). Commonalities with republicanism include an emphasis on civic responsibility and communitarian values, reliance on democratic self-government and active citizenship to defend the common good against powerful economic and political interests, and concern about the disruptive, alienating, and corrupting effects of capitalism.

**Republicanism’s Division Between Household and Political Life, and Environmentalist and Feminist Challenges To It**

One point of divergence between civic republicanism and environmentalism concerns the relationship between the household and political society. Traditionally, republicanism, going back to its Aristotelian roots, has regarded the household as separate from, though subordinate to, the realm of the political. Hannah Arendt thus notoriously regarded the reproductive and life-sustaining activities normally associated with the household as the realm of ‘labor’ and necessity, a realm she derisively termed “the social” (Arendt 1958, pp.38-49), in contrast to the political realm of “action,” which was characterized by freedom (Arendt 1958, p.177).

Environmentalism, by contrast, focuses on humanity’s life-sustaining, material interactions with nature and also with the survival of nature’s own productive and reproductive processes. It also considers the quality of our relationships with nature as central to any conception of the common good and the good life. Environmentalists invoke the term ‘ecology,’ coined by biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, and deriving from the Greek root, *oikos*, for household. For environmentalists, a focus on natural and human households and their biological processes is a key part of a politics of the common good.

It is worth noting here that the republican division between household and politics, between public and private, has also been frequently gendered and associated with a sexual hierarchy. Aristotle, who is arguably at the wellspring of the republican tradition, consigned women to a subordinate, domestic status outside the political realm.

More relevant for republicanism in the U.S., Jefferson explicitly inveighed against a role for women in public life. On January 13, 1807, he wrote to Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, who had suggested hiring women in response to a shortage of talented male applicants for government posts: “The appointment of a woman to office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I” (Appleby and Ball 1999, p.xxvii ). In a December 4, 1788 letter to George Washington, Jefferson, writing from Paris, condemned the influence of women on French politics and praised America for keeping women in the domestic sphere. Jefferson decried “the desperate state to which things are reduced in this country [i.e. France] from the omnipotence of an influence which, fortunately for the happiness of the sex itself, does not endeavor to extend itself in our country beyond the domestic line” (Jefferson 1829 [1788], p.410). To American socialite Anne Willing Bingham, he wrote from Paris on May 11, 1788, again criticizing the involvement of French women in politics and praising the domesticity of American women:

But our good ladies, I trust, have been too wise to wrinkle  their foreheads with politics.  They are contented to soothe & calm  the minds of their husbands returning ruffled from political debate.  They have the good sense to value domestic happiness above all other, and the art to cultivate it beyond all others.  There is no part of  the earth where so much of this is enjoyed as in America … Recollect the women of this capital, some on  foot, some on horses, & some in carriages hunting pleasure in the  streets, in routs & assemblies, and forgetting that they have left it  behind them in their nurseries; compare them with our own  countrywomen occupied in the tender and tranquil amusements of  domestic life, and confess that it is a comparison of Amazons and Angels … And as for political news of battles & sieges, Turks & Russians, I will not detail them to you, because you would be less handsome after reading them (Jefferson 1788).

The involvement of women in politics would lead to sexual license and moral corruption, Jefferson believed. Thus, to Thomas Appleton he wrote on July 18, 1816, “Women, who, to prevent depravation of morals and ambiguity of issue, could not mix promiscuously in the public meetings of men” (Jefferson 1899 [1816], p.46).

Wendy Sarvasy notes that within the republican tradition, the political exclusion of women was initially challenged by Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft “proposed a theory of gendered citizenship that turned the family into a space of civic engagement for citizen-mothers.” Quoting from *A* *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Sarvasy describes Wollstonecraft’s conception of gendered citizenship: “while the husband would perform his civic duties as a citizen-soldier or a political representative, ‘his wife, also an active citizen, should be equally content to manage her family, educate her children, and assist her neighbors.’” Women supposedly would have equal civic and political rights but a separate sphere (Sarvasy 2010, p.297). Addams, Sarvasy suggests, offered a republicanism that pushed beyond these gendered divisions and toward a true engagement of women as full citizens in public life. In so doing, I would also add, she pursued an urban environmentalism that anticipated the contemporary environmental justice movement.

**Hull House and the Settlement House Movement**

The settlement house movement involved well-to-do women and men moving into impoverished, industrial, often immigrant, urban communities to help ameliorate life there. A settlement house and its residents provided or hosted a variety of services, events, and facilities, including adult education classes, kindergartens, day care, playgrounds, gymnasiums, bathhouses, personal crisis counseling, social halls, public lectures and debates, art galleries, dances, theatrical performances, and meeting spaces; they also engaged in political advocacy to reform urban governance and improve public health, education, and environmental conditions, and they played a key role in organizing labor unions and other working class and civic associations. The settlement house movement, and notably Addams, Starr, and other Hull House residents like Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, and Julia Lathrop, also played a pivotal role in sparking Progressive Era governmental and regulatory initiatives. Indeed, the legacy of Addams and other reformers has sometimes come in for criticism from both right and left for fostering the growth of the administrative state, though such criticism may actually misrepresent Addams’ actual political practice (Jackson 2010).

**Civic Housekeeping**

Addams and Starr founded Hull House in 1889, and it eventually grew into a complex of thirteen buildings. Hull House was on Halsted Street, in Chicago’s Nineteenth Ward, located in the city’s Near West Side.

Addams’ civic housekeeping was premised on the idea of the city as an extension of the domicile. A key part of her argument concerned the fact that life-giving and reproductive functions of the household could not be maintained in a degraded urban environment. In her 1912 *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Addams provides vivid descriptions of the neighborhood surrounding Hull House and the environmental and political challenges faced by local inhabitants (Addams 1961 [1912], pp.64-66). The neighborhood was diverse, with large numbers of immigrants:

Hull-House once stood in the suburbs, but the city has steadily grown up around it and its site now has corners on three or four foreign colonies. Between Halsted Street and the river live about ten thousand Italians–Neapolitans, Sicilians, and Calabrians, with an occasional Lombard or Venetian. To the south on Twelfth Street are many Germans, and side streets are given over almost entirely to Polish and Russian Jews. Still farther south, these Jewish colonies merge into a huge Bohemian colony, so vast that Chicago ranks as the third Bohemian city in the world. To the northwest are many Canadian-French, clannish in spite of their long residence in America, and to the north are Irish and first-generation Americans. On the streets directly west and farther north are well-to-do English speaking families, many of whom own their own houses and have lived in the neighborhood for years; one man is still living in his old farmhouse.

Today we might call this a vibrant urban patchwork of ethnic neighborhoods. In fact, though, it was what Robert Gottlieb (1993, pp.64-65) terms “an urban environmental catastrophe.” Addams describes a pervasive environmental and infrastructural breakdown:

The streets are inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, sanitary legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the paving miserable and altogether lacking in the alleys and smaller streets, and the stables foul beyond description. Hundreds of houses are unconnected with the street sewer.

The neighborhood was subject to flooding, overflows of sewage, and dumping of city wastes in backyards and alleys (Platt 2000, p.196). As Addams also notes, the housing stock was appalling:

The houses of the ward, for the most part wooden, were originally built for one family and are now occupied by several. They are after the type of the inconvenient frame cottages found in the poorer suburbs twenty years ago … The little wooden houses have a temporary aspect, and for this reason, perhaps, the tenement-house legislation in Chicago is totally inadequate. Rear tenements flourish; many houses have no water supply save the faucet in the back yard, there are no fire escapes, the garbage and ashes are placed in wooden boxes which are fastened to the street pavements.

Along with these conditions came squalid sweatshops that exploited immigrants:

The Jews and Italians do the finishing for the great clothing manufacturers, formerly done by Americans, Irish, and Germans, who refused to submit to the extremely low prices to which the sweating system has reduced their successors. As the design of the sweating system is the elimination of rent from the manufacture of clothing, the “outside work” is begun after the clothing leaves the cutter. An unscrupulous contractor regards no basement as too dark, no stable loft too foul, no rear shanty too provisional, no tenement room too small for his workroom, as these conditions imply low rental. Hence these shops abound in the worst of the foreign districts where the sweater easily finds his cheap basement and his home finishers.

Addams sees these conditions as involving fundamental political failure. She cites the indifference of the affluent, a lack of social and political acculturation on the part of immigrants, and a dereliction of duty by public officials:

The older and richer inhabitants seem anxious to move away as rapidly as they can afford it. They make room for newly arrived immigrants who are densely ignorant of civic duties.

One of the most discouraging features about the present system of tenement houses is that many are owned by sordid and ignorant immigrants. The theory that wealth brings responsibility, that possession entails at length education and refinement, in these cases fails utterly. The children of an Italian immigrant owner may “shine” shoes in the street, and his wife may pick rags from the street gutter, laboriously sorting them in a dingy court. Wealth may do something for her self-complacency and feeling of consequence; it certainly does nothing for her comfort or her children's improvement nor for the cleanliness of anyone concerned.

The policy of the public authorities of never taking an initiative, and always waiting to be urged to do their duty, is obviously fatal in a neighborhood where there is little initiative among the citizens. The idea underlying our self-government breaks down in such a ward.

Addams proposes an ethic of civic housekeeping to address these failures. Civic housekeeping embraces several dimensions: 1) environmental and other physical improvement of neighborhood living conditions; 2) political reform; 3) cultivation of an ethos of communitarian interdependence, responsibility, and civic virtue; 4) the merging of the household and political life and the entrance of women into the public sphere; 5) democratic participation by both reformers and the local inhabitants in bringing about political change; and 6) a politics of recognition. It is through these efforts that Addams intertwines what we might identify as environmentalist, republican, and feminist themes.

**Environmental Improvement and Political Reform**

The efforts to improve local environmental conditions and secure better governance were revolutionary at the time. Based in part on the bacteriological work of Hull House resident and physician Alice Hamilton, Addams and others used a 1902 typhoid epidemic as a lever to publicize the city’s lack of adequate plumbing and sewage systems, expose corrupt city officials who failed to enforce existing codes, and push for public health legislation (Platt 2000). And, in another major public health campaign, Addams fought city officials to secure adequate sanitation:

The system of garbage collecting was inadequate throughout the city but it became the greatest menace in a ward such as ours, where the normal amount of waste was much increased by the decayed fruit and vegetables discarded by the Italian and Greek fruit peddlers, and by the residuum left over from the piles of filthy rags which were fished out of the city dumps and brought to the homes of the rag pickers for further sorting and washing (Addams 1961 [1912], p.185).

The putrid-smelling garbage also included animal carcasses, and the filthy conditions were a breeding ground for vermin (Elshtain 2002, pp.168-170). The prevalence of garbage created a public health hazard, especially for urban children starved for places to play:

The children of our neighborhood … played their games in and around these huge garbage boxes. They were the first objects that the toddling child learned to climb; their bulk afforded a barricade and their contents provided missiles in all the battles of the older boys ... We are obliged to remember that all children eat everything which they find and that odors have a curious and intimate power of entwining themselves into our tenderest memories, before even the residents of Hull-House can understand their own early enthusiasm for the removal of these boxes and the establishment of a better system of refuse collection (Addams 1961 [1912], p.185).

She warns: “in a crowded city quarter, if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed, a tenement-house mother may see her children sicken and die.” Lax or nonexistent garbage removal was again traceable to municipal corruption. Addams eventually got the mayor to appoint her garbage inspector for the ward. She also initiated various recycling efforts. Yet she notes wryly, “Perhaps our greatest achievement was the discovery of a pavement eighteen inches under the surface in a narrow street, although after it was found we triumphantly discovered a record of its existence in the city archives” (Addams 1961 [1912], p.189).

On these and other issues, such as securing better working conditions and hours, especially for women and children, Addams, the other Hull House residents, and their allies made concrete progress in improving basic quality of life and securing political change. They often did face significant pushback from public officials invested – not just figuratively – in the status quo. However, their work, both in its concrete impacts and the political changes achieved, constituted a significant chapter in the development of American environmentalism (Gottlieb 1993, pp.59-67). They anticipated many of the urban environmental issues addressed by the contemporary environmental justice movement. Not only did they fight environmental hazards, but Addams, like environmental justice activists today, also recognized the need for cities to provide outdoor recreational opportunities, especially playgrounds for children (Addams 1961 [1912], 1930). Addams’ reform agenda and the activities at Hull House also embodied a holistic view of the urban environment, embracing housing, infrastructure, public health, sanitation, recreation, workplace safety, social justice, education, social life, and the arts. Addams addressed all dimensions of the places where, to cite a phrase commonly associated with the contemporary environmental justice movement, “people live, work, and play.”

**Transcending the Gendered Division Between Household and Politics**

However, Addams’ political vision and its radicalism went a lot deeper. First of all, Addams challenged both the individualism and the geographic and class divisions that impeded the cultivation of a communitarian ethos. Her notion of civic housekeeping directly confronted what she saw as a fundamentally dysfunctional and self-destructive individualism in American life. And, prefiguring the contemporary environmental justice movement, she did this in a way that also challenged women’s subordination, by turning domesticity into a vehicle for radicalism, and broke down the distinction between the household and the public sphere. Addams, says Sarvasy (2010), offered “a gendered path” to women’s equal citizenship and engagement in the public sphere.

In a 1908 lecture at Ohio Wesleyan University entitled, “Women’s Conscience and Social Amelioration,” she begins by paying lip service to the atomized, gendered model of the isolated household maintained by women relegated to the domestic sphere:

We have been accustomed for many generations to think of woman's place as being entirely within the walls of her own household, and it is indeed impossible to imagine the time when her duty there shall be ended or to forecast any social change which shall ever release her from that paramount obligation (Addams 2002 [1908], p.252).

However, she immediately problematizes this view, showing its internal contradiction. A woman’s putative domestic role in fact requires her to enter the public sphere as an active citizen pushing for reform:

There is no doubt, however, that many women to-day are failing properly to discharge their duties to their own families and households simply because they fail to see that as society grows more complicated it is necessary that woman shall extend her sense of responsibility to many things outside of her own home, if only in order to preserve the home in its entirety.

One could illustrate in many ways. A woman's simplest duty," one would say, is to keep her house clean and wholesome and to feed her children properly. Yet, if she lives in a tenement house, as so many of my neighbors do, she can not fulfill these simple obligations by her own efforts because she is utterly dependent upon the city administration for the conditions which render decent living possible. Her basement will not be dry, her stairways will not be fireproof, her house will not be provided with sufficient windows to give her light and air, nor will it be equipped with sanitary plumbing unless the Public Works Department shall send inspectors who constantly insist that these elementary decencies be provided (Addams 2002 [1908], p.252).

At the same time, the very boundaries between household and the public sphere break down, especially in the modern urban environment. In modern industrial, urbanized society, the polity, including the household, can no longer rely solely on the ‘housekeeping’ processes of the natural world – indeed, if it ever could – but must collectively govern its own created ecology:

These same women who now live in tenements, when they lived in the country, swept their own dooryards and either fed the refuse of the table to a flock of chickens or allowed it innocently to decay in the open air and sunshine; now, however, if the street is not cleaned by the city authorities, no amount of private sweeping will keep the tenant free from grime; if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed, she may see her children sicken and die of diseases from which she alone is powerless to shield them, although her tenderness and devotion are unbounded; she can not even secure clean milk for her children, she can not provide them with fruit which is untainted, unless the milk has been properly taken care of by the City Health Department, and the decayed fruit, which is so often placed upon sale in the tenement districts, shall have been promptly destroyed in the interest of public health. In short, if woman would keep on with her old business of caring for her house and rearing her children, she will have to have some conscience in regard to public affairs lying quite outside of her immediate household (Addams 2002 [1908], pp.252-253).

The domestic ideal, and both its sexism and its atomized individualism, become obsolete:

The individual conscience and devotion are no longer effective … Women are pushed outside of the home in order that they may preserve the home. If they would effectively continue their old avocations, they must take part in the movements looking toward social amelioration (Addams 2002 [1908], p.253).

There are women who fail to heed this lesson, Addams notes. They “take no part in public affairs in order that they may give themselves exclusively to their own families, sometimes going so far as to despise their neighbors and their ways, and even to take a certain pride in being separate from them” (Addams 2002 [1908], p.253). Addams, who frequently made use of instructive anecdotes, offers a poignant, cautionary story relating to the aforementioned typhoid epidemic:

Our own neighborhood was at one time suffering from a typhoid epidemic … Among the people who had been exposed to the infection was a widow who had lived in the ward for a number of years, in a comfortable little house which she owned. Although the Italian immigrants were closing in all around her, she was not willing to sell her property and to move away until she had finished the education of her children, because she considered that her paramount duty. In the meantime she held herself quite aloof from her Italian neighbors and their affairs. Her two daughters were sent to an Eastern college; one had graduated, the other had still two years before she took her degree, when they came home to the spotless little house and to their self-sacrificing mother for the summer's holiday. They both fell ill, not because their own home was not clean, not because their mother was not devoted, but because next door to them and also in the rear were wretched tenements and because the mother's utmost efforts could not keep the infection out of her own house. One daughter died, and one recovered, but was an invalid for two years following. This is, perhaps, a fair illustration of the futility of the individual conscience when woman insists upon isolating her family from the rest of the community and its interests. The result is sure to be a pitiful failure (Addams 2002 [1908], pp.253-254).

In her criticisms of local residents’ lack of civic engagement, Addams seems to put the onus of responsibility on them for improving society outside their doors. However, mindful of her own experiences to break away from her family’s domestic expectations of her as a daughter (Knight 2005), she also criticizes a failure of civic responsibility on the part of the affluent, particularly in their efforts to limit their daughters’ civic horizons. In her 1902 book, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Addams notes:

We constantly see parents very much disconcerted and perplexed in regard to their daughters when these daughters undertake work lying quite outside of traditional and family interests. These parents insist that the girl is carried away by a foolish enthusiasm, that she is in search of a career, that she is restless and does not know what she wants. They will give any reason, almost, rather than the recognition of a genuine and dignified claim. Possibly all this is due to the fact that for so many hundreds of years women have had no larger interests, no participation in the affairs lying quite outside personal and family claims. Any attempt that the individual woman formerly made to subordinate or renounce the family claim was inevitably construed to mean that she was setting up her own will against that of her family’s for selfish ends. It was concluded that she could have no motive larger than a desire to serve her family, and her attempt to break away must therefore be wilful [*sic*] and self-indulgent (Addams 2010 [1902], pp.25-26).

In fact, “It is always difficult for the family to regard the daughter otherwise than as a family possession” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.28). Addams argues that the daughters of well-off families are encouraged to go to college and travel, cultivating themselves and learning about larger social needs and problems, but are then stifled – emotionally, intellectually, and morally – when their education attunes them to a “social claim” outside the home:

The modern woman finds herself educated to recognize a stress of social obligation which her family did not in the least anticipate when they sent her to college. She finds herself, in addition, under an impulse to act her part as a citizen of the world. She accepts her family inheritance with loyalty and affection, but she has entered into a wider inheritance as well, which, for lack of a better phrase, we call the social claim. This claim has been recognized for four years in her training, but after her return from college the family claim is again exclusively and strenuously asserted (Addams 2010 [1902], pp.28-29).

Consequently, “When, however, she responded to her impulse to fulfil [*sic*] the social or democratic claim, she violated every tradition” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.26).

Addams says that we need to acknowledge two claims: “we are called upon now to make [an] adjustment between the family and the social claim, in which neither shall lose and both be ennobled” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.26). It is essential to cease regarding a woman’s response to the social claim as selfish: “the suspicion constantly remains that woman's public efforts are merely selfish and captious, and are not directed to the general good. This suspicion will never be dissipated until parents, as well as daughters, feel the democratic impulse and recognize the social claim” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.26).

But this involves transforming family life itself: “Our democracy is making inroads upon the family, the oldest of human institutions, and a claim is being advanced which in a certain sense is larger than the family claim” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.27). The ability of daughters to step outside of family life and act as full citizens is something sons have long had: “The grown-up son has so long been considered a citizen with well-defined duties and a need of ‘making his way in the world,’ that the family claim is urged much less strenuously in his case, and as a matter of authority, it ceases gradually to be made at all” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.28). The son’s duty outside of the family has been most striking in times of war; correspondingly, the daughter’s duty to address peacetime societal needs can no longer be denied: “The claim of the state in time of war has long been recognized, so that in its name the family has given up sons and husbands and even the fathers of little children. If we can once see the claims of society in any such light, if its misery and need can be made clear and urged as an explicit claim, as the state urges its claims in the time of danger, then for the first time the daughter who desires to minister to that need will be recognized as acting conscientiously.” She adds, “The family, like every other element of human life, is susceptible of progress, and from epoch to epoch its tendencies and aspirations are enlarged, although its duties can never be abrogated and its obligations can never be cancelled … The family in its entirety must be carried out into the larger life. Its various members together must recognize and acknowledge the validity of the social obligation” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.27).

Both Shannon Jackson (2010) and Sarvasy (2010) point out that this embrace of the social claim was not merely, as Jean Bethke Elshtain’s (2002) conservative, essentialist reading of Addams suggests, an extension of traditional maternal care to the wider society. Addams was transforming the household itself, as evidenced not only by her theorizing about young women’s emancipation, but also by the communal, nontraditional ‘family’ of resident-activists and neighborhood adults and children at Hull House (Jackson 2010). Addams’ example of military service as an instance of the social claim – an interesting example given her pacifism – also underscores Sarvasy’s argument that for Addams, “family ethics and social ethics were quite distinct” (2010, p.299). Household management might become intermixed with political life, but this also involved for women the adoption of new norms, concerns, and activities that could not reduced to merely an extension of the familial. Unsurprisingly, Addams also campaigned for women’s suffrage. Her public health efforts also brought her into electoral politics, as she unsuccessfully fielded two reform candidates to unseat a powerful, corrupt local alderman and machine boss, John Powers. In this context of women’s entrance into the public sphere, the military example has additional significance. In evoking the republican ideal of the citizen-soldier (Sarvasy 2010, p.296), Addams elevated the citizen engaged in social justice to a similar or, likely, more exalted status.

When Addams undertook garbage inspection, the break with traditional gender roles was not unnoticed by women in the Nineteenth Ward: “Many of the foreign-born women of the ward were much shocked by this abrupt departure into the ways of men” (Addams 1961 [1912], p.189). Addams tried to reassure them that this was a mere extension of traditional feminine care: “it took a great deal of explanation to convey the idea even remotely that if it were a womanly task to go about in tenement houses in order to nurse the sick, it might be quite as womanly to go through the same district in order to prevent the breeding of so-called ‘filth diseases’” (Addams 1961 [1912], p.189). However, as Jackson argues, Addams may have “made use of a strategic essentialism whose public incarnation actually involved behaviors that were far from traditional and that kept them outside the walls of the ‘house’” (Jackson 2010, p.173). Indeed, even Addams’ supporters in the community were unconvinced by this invocation of tradition: “While some of the women enthusiastically approved the slowly changing conditions and saw that their housewifely duties logically extended to the adjacent alleys and streets, they yet were quite certain that ‘it was not a lady's job’” (Addams 1961 [1912], p.189).

Today, the leading role of women, motivated by supposedly female and maternal (as opposed to human and parental) concerns like children’s health, in the anti-toxics and environmental justice movements is oft cited (Gottlieb 1993, pp.207-234). In many cases, these women have experienced political empowerment and radicalization. Lois Gibbs, who led the late 1970s battle to get public officials and industry to address a hazardous waste crisis the Niagara Falls, New York neighborhood of Love Canal, went from being a local homemaker to founding the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste. Gibbs, who remains a national environmental leader, remarked in 1980 about the transformative impact of the Love Canal battle on women in the area: “Women who at one time looked down on people picketing, being arrested and acting somewhat radical are now doing these very things” (Gottlieb 1993, p.232).

**Communitarian Values and Civic Virtue**

Addams not only challenged the gendered, atomized isolation of the household from civic life, but she also took on the often geographically inscribed class divisions – divisions that today continue today – and she urged a more communitarian perspective. She criticized capitalist individualism for being insufficiently democratic and communitarian:

A growing conflict may be detected between the democratic ideal, which urges the workmen to demand representation in the administration of industry, and the accepted position, that the man who owns the capital and takes the risks has the exclusive right of management. It is in reality a clash between individual or aristocratic management, and corporate or democratic management. A large and highly developed factory presents a sharp contrast between its socialized form and individualistic ends (Addams 2010 [1902], p.44).

Yet, though Addams and Hull House helped to organize labor unions – several were actually organized at Hull House – she criticized not only capital, but also labor, for putting class interests ahead of the common good (Addams 2002 [1895]). Though the settlement house movement helped rebalance the scales of power to give more a voice to labor, Addams saw the settlement’s ultimate role as affirming cross-class communitarian interdependence:

The settlement is pledged to insist upon the unity of life, to gather to itself the sense of righteousness to be found in its neighborhood, and as far as possible in its city; to work towards the betterment not of one kind of people or class of people, but for the common good. The settlement believes that just as men deprived of comradeship by circumstances or law go back to the brutality from which they came, so any class or set of men deprived of the companionship of the whole, become correspondingly decivilized and crippled. No part of society can afford to get along without the others (Addams 2002 [1895], p.59).

Such a “unity of life” also meant overcoming the geographic divisions that exacerbated class conflict and concentrated urban squalor. Much as contemporary environmental activists engaged in epidemiological research and documentation of environmental hazards, Hull House residents, notably Florence Kelley, also documented socioeconomic, housing, and sanitation conditions through comprehensive research and mapping of the neighborhood (Platt 2000, p.196). They developed important, pioneering insights into what Harold Platt calls the “social geography of inequality” (Platt 2000, p.198) and publicized the presence of slums in Chicago and the role of landlords, corrupt officials, and an indifferent public in fostering urban squalor (Platt 2000, pp.200-201). In a striking insight into the nexus of political corruption, class domination, and geographic environmental injustice, Addams remarks:

… the positive evils of corrupt government are bound to fall heaviest upon the poorest and least capable. When the water of Chicago is foul, the prosperous buy water bottled at distant springs; the poor have no alternative but the typhoid fever which comes from using the city's supply. When the garbage contracts are not enforced, the well-to-do pay for private service; the poor suffer the discomfort and illness which are inevitable from a foul atmosphere (Addams 2010 [1902], p.77).

The affluent thought they could spend or relocate themselves out of broader social problems. As noted earlier, Addams thus remarked on how the richer inhabitants deserted the Nineteenth Ward as immigrants and the poor moved in.

But Addams and her Hull House colleagues were not content to document the geographic isolation and neglect of the poor. As activists who themselves had rejected geographic separation from the poor by going to live in the Nineteenth Ward, they went the next step and showed how the slum conditions in Chicago’s riverfront poor neighborhoods impacted the rest of the city, including the affluent who thought themselves geographically shielded. Platt, in part quoting a 1903 Hull House report on the typhoid epidemic, notes, “The study hammered home its goals on behalf of the poor by linking their fate to the general welfare of the community. Playing on middle-class fears of infection by the lower strata of society, it warned that ‘the river wards cannot be isolated from the other residence portions of the town.’ The Nineteenth Ward, readers were informed, served as the city’s central distribution point for home delivery vehicles and produce peddlers. ‘With all these go the houseflies,’ the report ended ominously, ‘bearing, as we may believe, the typhoid germ’” (Platt 2000, p.207). This message about the futility of geographic separation was reinforced by further events involving sewage contamination of the city’s drinking water supplies. “In August [of 1903], an outbreak of typhoid fever in the suburban enclaves along the North Shore hammered home Addams’ frightening warning that there were no safe havens from the infectious diseases breeding in the filth and squalor of the riverfront slums. Once again, pollution-laden storm water had been flushed from sewers into the lake [i.e. Lake Michigan], contaminating drinking supplies” (Platt 2000, p.212). Thus, Addams, quoted earlier, emphasized, “No part of society can afford to get along without the others.”

Addams saw such geographic, environmental, and societal interdependence at a national level as well. Hull House residents pushed for federal legislation to regulate sweatshops, which were notoriously unsanitary. Her rationale for federal legislation is worth noting:

… we had realized that the sanitary regulation of sweatshops by city officials, and a careful enforcement of factory legislation by state factory inspectors will not avail, unless each city and State shall be able to pass and enforce a code of comparatively uniform legislation … [M]any of the national representatives realized for the first time that only by federal legislation could their constituents in remote country places be protected from contagious diseases raging in New York or Chicago, for many country doctors testify as to the outbreak of scarlet fever in rural neighborhoods after the children have begun to wear the winter overcoats and cloaks which have been sent from infected city sweatshops (Addams 1961 [1912], p.139).

Addams’ focus on both the geographic segregation of visible environmental insults and the underlying reality of shared geographic and environmental fate ties in with notions of ecological interdependence and with the contemporary politics of environmental justice. Platt says that “her legacy of political activism continued to inform contemporary movements for environmental justice in the city. Recent concerns about ecoracism raise similar, troubling questions about the institutionalization of discrimination in political and bureaucratic decision making on land use and urban services.” Importantly, he adds, “Another one of Addams’s tactics that continues to resonate among environmentalists is her educational campaign to situate notions of community within broader, more inclusive contexts. She warned the middle classes that their protected suburban enclaves posed no barrier against the spread of invisible germs. Modern scientific concepts of ecology also underscore the close interdependence of humans and nature in today’s global village” (Platt 2000, p.216). The cross-class, cross-ethnic, and cross-geographical coalitions built by Addams and her Hull House colleagues are also echoed in the environmental justice movement’s networked, coalitional politics (Schlosberg 1999).

Yet in keeping with the republican tradition, Addams aimed to move beyond sheer physical, ecological interdependence and even coalitional politics. She urged a shared sense of communitarian identification (though, it should be noted, Addams’ concerns were ultimately cosmopolitan and went beyond the more localist orientation of republicanism). In describing the widening of the individual’s horizons beyond mere enlightened self-interest, she explicitly invokes the language of civic virtue:

Upon this foundation it ought not to be difficult to build a structure of civic virtue. It is only necessary to make it clear to the voter that his individual needs are common needs, that is, public needs, and that they can only be legitimately supplied for him when they are supplied for all. If we believe that the individual struggle for life may widen into a struggle for the lives of all, surely the demand of an individual for decency and comfort, for a chance to work and obtain the fullness of life may be widened until it gradually embraces all the members of the community, and rises into a sense of the common weal (Addams 2010 [1902], p.79).

But how does one build such a sense of the political, social, and ecological common weal? This raises the issue of republicanism’s formative project, which raises the red flag of paternalism. Some of his Addams’ language is indeed paternalistic. The above remark, “It is only necessary to make it clear to the voter that his individual needs are common needs,” is no isolated instance. She frequently expresses disdain and moral condemnation toward the recreational activities of the urban working class (see Addams 1930). She comments, as quoted earlier, on “sordid” immigrants “densely ignorant of civic duties.” Southern Italian immigrants often bear the brunt of her disdain: “Possibly the South Italians more than any other immigrants represent the pathetic stupidity of agricultural people crowded into city tenements” (Addams 1961 [1912], p.154).

However, as Louise Knight (2005) brings out in her biographical treatment, Addams’ perspective evolved from aristocratic benevolence to a democratic orientation in keeping with the more progressive, participatory aspects of the republican tradition. Addams, and the Hull House residents in general, ultimately sought to work with and learn from their neighbors rather than just minister to them. Though Addams and Hull House always emphasized adult education and exposure of immigrants and the poor to high culture, they also pursued the formative project not just through top-down education but also through mutual education and the democratic mobilization and empowerment of their neighbors. Indeed, Addams prefigured a politics of participation and recognition that animates the environmental justice movement today.

**Democratic Participation and Recognition**

Though Hull House brought educated young women and men into a neighborhood of largely uneducated, poor immigrants, the resident-activists ultimately adopted a more democratic orientation toward their neighbors. As Addams describes in *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Hull House sought to maintain and transmit the cultural practices of first-generation immigrants and prevent them from being lost through succeeding generations’ Americanization. Addams also wished to shore up children’s respect for their immigrant parents. Thus, Hull House established a Labor Museum at which immigrants displayed their artisanal skills, educating their own children and the Hull House residents and visitors. Addams says:

An overmastering desire to reveal the humbler immigrant parents to their own children lay at the base of what has come to be called the Hull-House Labor Museum.

This was first suggested to my mind one early spring day when I saw an old Italian woman, her distaff against her homesick face, patiently spinning a thread by the simple stick spindle so reminiscent of all southern Europe. I was walking down Polk Street, perturbed in spirit, because it seemed so difficult to come into genuine relations with the Italian women and because they themselves so often lost their hold upon their Americanized children. It seemed to me that Hull-House ought to be able to devise some educational enterprise which should build a bridge between European and American experiences in such wise as to give them both more meaning and a sense of relation (Addams 1961 [1912], pp.155-156).

Even more significantly, the Hull House residents mobilized their neighbors to battle for democracy on their own behalf. Hull House provided a site for the organization of labor unions and mutual aid societies, including the Jane Club, a self-governing association of young women and girls employed in factories. The Jane Club provided rent money and cooperative housing to shield workers from the economic impacts of going on strike (Addams 1961 [1912], pp. 90-91; Hamington 2010). People from the neighborhood also became involved in numerous Hull House initiatives. For example, they helped with teaching and day care (Addams 2002 [1893], p.41), and helped enforce child labor and sanitation laws. Adams thus rejected the notion that the settlement houses were charities (Addams 2002 [1893], p.45; Hamington 2010, p.257). In her well-known criticisms of industrialist George Pullman and his practice of authoritarian benevolence, she criticized the self-anointed benefactor who is “good ‘to’ people rather than ‘with’ them,” who “allows himself to decide what is best for them instead of consulting them” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.48).

As Jackson (2010) thus notes, Addams’ reform work entailed greater state regulation but she did not seek an administrative state governing a relatively passive citizenry. She criticized reformers of her day as creating top-down bureaucracies that “put more and more responsibility upon executive officers and appointed commissions at the expense of curtailing the power of the direct representatives of the people” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.67). She conceded that powerful individuals generate quicker results than a democratically engaged citizenry. However, she noted, a democratic “effort toward social progress, although much more awkward and stumbling than that same effort managed by a capable individual, does yet enlist deeper forces and evoke higher social capacities” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.67). The implication is that an effective formative project to “evoke higher social capacities” must be pursued not through top-down paternalism, but through the widespread practice of democratic participation.

This emphasis on democratic participation extended to the economy as well. As indicated by Addams’ invocation of “the democratic ideal” that “urges the workmen to demand representation in the administration of industry,” she favored a transition to a democratically run, socialized economy (Hamington 2001).

In fact, Addams’ democratic orientation led her to at least the hints of a politics of recognition. Again, there are connections with the environmental justice movement. As David Schlosberg (2003) argues, the environmental justice movement is about more than distributive equity. It is also about political empowerment and participation on the part of environmentally impacted individuals and communities, a theme we already seen in our discussion of Addams. Moreover, environmental justice is about these individuals and communities gaining recognition of their dignity, their difference, and their identities. Schlosberg notes how when taking action against environmental insults like incinerators or hazardous waste dumps, women, people of color, and the poor have often been treated with condescension by industry, public officials, and experts. Cora Tucker, an African-American activist, attended a town board meeting at which “white women were addressed as ‘Mrs. So and So,’ while she was addressed simply as ‘Cora’ by the all-white, all-male board” (Schlosberg 2003, p.89). “During the campaign to halt a proposed incinerator in South Central Los Angeles, women’s concerns were often dismissed as irrational, uninformed, and disruptive” (Schlosberg 2003, p.90). Moreover, in many cases, communities perceive the dumping of pollution in their midst as not only a public health issue, but as a threat to collective identities, to cultural survival, and to a sense of place (Schlosberg 2003, pp.90-91). The environmental justice movement has responded to such misrecognition through further political mobilization and assertion of individual and collective identity and dignity.

The efforts of Hull House to encourage local immigrants to maintain and transmit their cultural heritages and reaffirm their own dignity, as well as Hull House’s facilitation of labor and mutual aid organization fit in with the notion of recognition. So do Addams’ attacks on paternalistic approaches to charity and reform. She says, “It is possible to cultivate the impulses of the benefactor until the power of attaining a simple human relationship with the beneficiaries, that of frank equality with them, is gone, and there is left no mutual interest in a common cause. To perform too many good deeds may be to lose the power of recognizing good in others” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.46). Addams recognizes even the good in boys who engage in acts of juvenile delinquency, chalking it up to a desire, frustrated in the modern city, for outdoor play and adventure (Addams 2010 [1902], p.19).

Misrecognition is a hallmark of the sort of charity Addams eschewed. She criticizes the ignorant condescension of the well-to-do who visit the poor on behalf of traditional charitable organizations:

The charity visitor, let us assume, is a young college woman, well-bred and open-minded; when she visits the family assigned to her, she is often embarrassed to find herself obliged to lay all the stress of her teaching and advice upon the industrial virtues, and to treat the members of the family almost exclusively as factors in the industrial system. She insists that they must work and be self-supporting, that the most dangerous of all situations is idleness, that seeking one's own pleasure, while ignoring claims and responsibilities, is the most ignoble of actions. The members of her assigned family may have other charms and virtues—they may possibly be kind and considerate of each other, generous to their friends, but it is her business to stick to the industrial side (Addams 2010 [1902], p.10).

She refers quite naturally to the “horrors of the saloon,” and discovers that the head of her visited family does not connect them with “horrors” at all. He remembers all the kindnesses he has received there, the free lunch and treating which goes on, even when a man is out of work and not able to pay up; the loan of five dollars he got there when the charity visitor was miles away and he was threatened with eviction. He may listen politely to her reference to “horrors,” but considers it only “temperance talk” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.14).

With the democratization of society, Addams envisions cognitive dissonance on the part of the charity worker and greater possibilities for recognition across class and ethnic lines:

As she [i.e. the visiting charity worker] daily holds up these standards, it often occurs to the mind of the sensitive visitor, whose conscience has been made tender by much talk of brotherhood and equality, that she has no right to say these things; that her untrained hands are no more fitted to cope with actual conditions than those of her broken-down family (Addams 2010 [1902], p.10).

She remarks, “[T]he visitor is continually surprised to find that the safest platitude may be challenged” (Addams 2010 [1902], p.14). Similarly, the cognitive dissonance or contradiction between traditional, gendered domestic ideals and the new reality of urban, industrial life had forced a rethinking of “the safe platitudes” that had deprived of women of recognition in public life and isolated the household from the political.

**Conclusion: A Historical and Conceptual Inflection Point**

In taking on the environmental, social, economic, and political challenges of a rapidly industrializing society, Jane Addams was one of several 19th and early 20th century figures who stood at an historical and conceptual inflection point between the earlier republican tradition and an emerging set of perspectives, including environmentalist and feminist. Addams was also a key figure in the emergence of American pragmatism and in the development of a cosmopolitan, pacifist perspective. Here, I have limited my focus to her negotiation among republican, environmentalist, and feminist perspectives. In this latter role, she stands alongside Henry David Thoreau, who reconceptualized wilderness as a site for republican virtue (Cannavò 2012a); Frederick Law Olmsted, who overcame an earlier Jeffersonian anti-urbanism to develop a theory and practice of urban green space as a site for virtue (Cannavò 2011); and Aldo Leopold, who advanced a notion of virtuous citizenship in a larger biotic community (Cannavò 2012b). Unlike the other three, Addams, with her conception of civic housekeeping, took on gender and the household and their connection to civic virtue. In so doing, she brought republican values into a conversation with both feminist and environmental concerns, and foreshadowed the democratic politics of recognition that is a hallmark of today’s environmental justice movement.

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1. Jane Addams, “The Modern City and the Municipal Franchise for Women,” National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention, Baltimore, Maryland, February 7-13, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In situating Addams as a forerunner of environmental justice, I follow both Gottlieb (1993) and Platt (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the purposes of this paper, I use terms like ‘environmentalism,’ ‘feminism,’ and even ‘republicanism’ advisedly, as they in fact each denote large, complex collections of perspectives, movements, and ideologies. David Schlosberg (1999, p.3) thus says, not without justification, “There is no such thing as environmentalism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)