

John Louis Recchiuti. *Civic Engagement: Social Science and Progressive-Era Reform in New York City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 311 pp. \$59.95.

Reviewed by Matthew Hartley

There are moments in history that are powerfully instructive because they offer both parallels with and important contrasts to the challenges we face. The circumstances faced by New York City at the advent of the twentieth century—a diverse urban populace, an economic system that provided few workers' rights and forced families into near-impossible working arrangements in the interest of survival—mirrors many of the daunting challenges facing our urban centers today. In this book John Louis Recchiuti describes the remarkable flowering of individual and collective efforts by an interconnected network of public intellectuals, social scientists, and activists that produced far-reaching social change and laid the groundwork for many national progressive policies.

Recchiuti's book describes a moment in history, from the late eighteen hundreds until the 1912 presidential election. The central premise advanced by the pantheon of scholars and activists he introduces us to, such as Charles Beard, W. E. B. DuBois, Florence Kelley, and Josephine Shaw Lowell, is that the core purpose of social science should be improving the lives of people, especially the disenfranchised. How this was to be accomplished—by combating injustice and confronting those responsible or working alongside and positively influencing monied and political interests—is a key tension explored in the book.

A key weapon employed by these individuals in their fight against poverty, the exploitation of children and women, and (in the case of DuBois) racial injustice was research. A significant strength of the book is its citation of numerous examples where the pursuit of knowledge fed the conviction that change was needed—insight wedded with action. For example, Isabel Eaton, one of the many college-educated volunteers at College Settlement house, conducted a comprehensive qualitative study of the poor (often using an interpreter to speak with immigrant families) that smashed the prevailing view that people faced privation because they were morally unfit—fundamentally lazy. Instead, economic and social conditions doomed portions of the city's population to lives of privation. Her work was published in numerous scholarly venues. It also fanned the fires of activism.

People of various backgrounds were drawn to this work. Josephine Shaw Lowell, the scion of a Boston Brahmin family, was unable to attend college because of her gender. Nevertheless, she had a powerful intellect (she was said to have read John Stuart Mill's *Principals of Political Economy* three times during her honeymoon) and she directed it toward founding the Charity Organization Society (also widely referred to as "Mrs. Lowell's Society"). In 1898 the society opened the Summer School in Philanthropy, promoting what we would now recognize as social work. The book describes the various innovations the society introduced, including its efforts to help individuals and families resolve difficult circumstances through "friendly visits." The society established a bureau of fraudulent claims to prevent individuals from abusing the system. It sold tickets that citizens could purchase and hand out to "street beggars," which they could trade in for meals in return for work at the society's wood yard and for access to its employment agency. The data gathered by the society convinced Lowell that the existing social order served the wealthy while it destroyed the lives of the poor.

In how many ways do not employers contribute directly to their degradation! By overwork, driving them to the use of stimulants; by unhealthy surroundings, sapping their strength; and by these and other means of depriving them of all chance of being free and independent men . . . Employers are responsible for the deterioration of the race because they allow such things. (p. 53)

Instances like these, of knowledgeable men and women standing up to confront a despicable status quo, offer compelling insights into what it might mean to be a public intellectual.

Indeed, the central project of the scholars to whom we are introduced is never the advancement of the discipline for its own sake, though they certainly made important contributions to their various fields. They sought to bring about a freer, more enlightened, and more humane society. In the words of a college student volunteering at the Bureau of Municipal Research, whose research efforts challenged Tammany Hall: "How would I sum up what we were doing? . . . We were fighting to make democracy work, that's what we were doing!" (p. 105).

A key question that these individuals faced, that engaged scholars today will find hauntingly familiar, is, "Was social science to be a herald of a reinvigorated democracy or an instrument of

technocracy, or both?” (p. 12). Put another way, was the goal societal change or disciplinary refinement? It is a question not easily resolved. Recchiuti’s book reveals some of the key constraints to fulfilling this democratic vision.

First, there is an inherent imbalance in power between those in the position to devote time to studying or addressing social problems and those experiencing them. This skewed arrangement allows for all manner of more or less obvious expressions of noblesse oblige. One of the recurring phrases in the book is summed up in historian Charles Beard’s observation that New York City represented “the greatest social science laboratory in the world” (p. 3). The notion of a city as a social science “laboratory” where elite experts descend to study and impose solutions is the very soul of technocracy. Though Beard was careful to note that the metaphor was inexact and should be treated with caution, it is not clear that his nuanced understanding was shared by others.

Second, the academy is generally an indifferent partner in societal change efforts. The instances of it producing political and social activism aimed at countering a problematic status quo are rare, which is what makes the time and place described in the book so compelling. Though Columbia University at the turn of the century was the largest university in the nation, and its president, Seth Low, not only championed the notion of Columbia as a partner with the larger community but in 1901 was elected mayor of the city, this commitment was all too easily reversed by Low’s politically and socially conservative successor, Nicholas Murray Butler. By 1917 many progressive academics concluded they were no longer welcome. As Charles Beard observed, “It was the evident purpose of a small group of trustees (unhindered, if not aided by Mr. Butler) to take advantage of the State of War [World War I] to drive out or humiliate or terrorize men who held progressive, liberal, or unconventional views on political matters” (p. 42). Beard was called before a board committee, asked to explain his activism, and summarily fired. (It was incidents like these that led to the formation of the American Association of University Professors [AAUP] in 1913.) While such bold and discreditable actions are relatively rare today, it is also lamentable that so are the instances where the activism of scholars threatens to upend the status quo. One can’t help but wonder what sort of impact a truly engaged professoriate dedicated to advancing our democracy might have and what kind of threat it might represent to existing entrenched interests.

Finally, democratic engagement is hindered by poisonous societal conventions that are slow to change. While noble minded,

many of the individuals profiled by Recchiuti harbored prevailing sentiments of their times. Among those who held a desire to intimately work in the community were those who also sought to make decisions for it. The group of men who supported radical societal change and who formed the influential X Club did not admit women to the group. The persistent legacy of racism constrained and distorted people's views about social problems and the likelihood of addressing them. Edward T. Devine, Columbia's professor of social economy and Lowell's successor as leader of the Charity Organization Society, openly championed the scholarship of W. E. B. DuBois. He also was sympathetic to views supporting Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. He noted, "There is much to this eugenics program with which social workers may sympathize and in which they should clearly cooperate" (p. 179). Recchiuti does a fine job describing the conflicting characteristics and ideals of this impressive cast of characters.

Despite the shortcomings of the individuals and the prodigious challenges they faced, the book ultimately demonstrates the powerful influence a comparatively small group of committed individuals achieved in shaping social policies and positively impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Their struggle to create forms of scholarship that combined disciplinary acumen with real-world results should inspire us to reconsider the mental, attitudinal, and professional constraints we are laboring under today that may prevent us from realizing our democratic ideals.

About the Reviewer

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