

Tichi, C. (2009). *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America (and What They Teach Us)*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Review by John Louis Recchiuti

We Americans express our civic passions—our passions for improving society—in a variety of ways. We act—locally, regionally, nationally, and globally—through government agencies, religious organizations, economic initiatives, and in other ways to make the world a better place. And since we hold competing views about what constitutes a good life and a good society, we are at odds not only about what good citizens ought strive to achieve, but also about the means by which they ought strive to achieve it. Politics in our free and open society is a contentious affair; we battle both in the marketplace of ideas and in the arena of practical politics about the ends and means of our civic engagement.

In the Preface to *Civic Passions*, Cecilia Tichi notes that following the Civil War “momentous change in material conditions” (p. xii) gave rise to a “new consumer culture” (p. xii) as the American economy took off on a century and more of breathtaking technological innovation, including “mass electrification, indoor plumbing, appliances, automobiles, supermarkets, highways, commercial aviation, credit cards, television, computers, e-mail, the worldwide web,” and more (pp. xii–xiii).

Indeed, “momentous change in material conditions,” in the context of what historian Eric Foner and others have called the second industrial revolution, did occur. For it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the United States became the world’s richest country, a position it continues to hold today. Economic historians are generally agreed that competitive market capitalism was the engine that drove that dynamic material growth. Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714) and Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) contributed to the earlier radical idea that people’s selfish passions, in particular the powerful motive of self-love, could, in a competitive marketplace, yield expansive economic growth. And it works. Measured in 2005 dollars, real per capita GDP in the United States in 1800 was about \$1,400; in 1900 about \$5,500; in 2010 about \$42,000. Since 1880, life expectancy has almost doubled, and medical advances have combined with ongoing revolutions in transportation,

communication, and information to improve the lives of millions. In consequence of this economic growth the United States has long been celebrated as the land of opportunity. Millions, drawn by rising standards of living, have immigrated to our shores and borders; the twenty-five million who did so between 1870 and 1920 constitute one of the largest mass migrations in human history. Entrepreneurship and a hard-driving work ethic in the context of free markets have been important expressions of civic passion—as measured by the material improvements that have issued to society from them—though it is not clear that Tichi would agree. She refers to “the economic myth” in her Postscript, and I would have enjoyed hearing more about this.

Yet, amid this plenty, millions of Americans lived and continue to live in poverty. The distribution of wealth is highly skewed; the Gini coefficient has been on the rise over the last forty years. And, as Tichi writes, “the term *public*” has “become pejorative, whether . . . applied to schools, hospitals, or recreational facilities” (p. 277). “Public funds for public purposes—taxes—were no longer seen as civic membership dues but as theft” (p. 276). And “a gap in life expectancy widened” as “disparities in life expectancy for richer and poorer Americans” grew, even as all groups lived longer (p. 278).

“[L]egatees of corporate wealth,” Tichi notes, have sometimes expressed their civic passions by becoming “primary sources of funding for various humanitarian causes” (p. 277). Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller in the early 20th century, and Bill Gates and Warren Buffett early in the 21st century did not squander their fortunes in riotous living, but instead took up the responsibility of philanthropy. “Carnegie donated libraries all over America and John D. Rockefeller supported medical research” (p. 278), impressive acts of philanthropic civic passion. Today, in the largest act of philanthropic civic engagement in world history, the wealthy “donate impressive sums to medical science, to HIV/AIDS treatment, to literacy and many other causes” (p. 278). To illustrate this point, in 2010, the year after the publication of *Civic Passions*, led by Gates and Buffett, some 57 billionaires pledged to donate half their fortunes to philanthropy during their lifetimes. Tichi reminds us, however, that “[t]he sums involved, while impressive, are small fractions of the monies needed for important public purposes” (p. 278).

In Tichi's text readers of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* will find food for thought, and, possibly, inspiration. At the center of *Civic Passions* are biographical sketches of four women and three men born in the 1850s and 1860s. Each, at a time when less than 3% of Americans attended college, was a member of the college-trained intelligentsia, and each was a leading figure in his or her chosen profession.

- Alice Hamilton, educated at University of Michigan and Johns Hopkins University, became a professor of medicine at Harvard University, and was a leading expert in the field of occupational health.
- John R. Commons, a graduate of Oberlin College and Johns Hopkins University, was a professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin.
- Julia Lathrop, a Vassar College graduate who trained as a lawyer in her father's firm, became founding director of the U.S. Children's Bureau.
- Florence Kelley was educated at Cornell University, University of Zurich, and in Northwestern University's school of law, and she subsequently headed the National Consumers' League.
- Louis D. Brandeis was an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, and was a graduate from Harvard Law School.
- Walter Rauschenbusch, a student and then professor of theology at the Rochester Theological Seminary, became a leading figure in the social gospel movement.
- Ida B. Wells-Barnett, born in slavery, attended what is today Rust College and later Fisk University. She became a journalist and anti-lynching civil rights activist.

Indeed, the seven came of age at a time when industrial capitalism was new, raw, and brutal, the wrenching barbarities of American slavery only a recent memory, and the modern civil rights and women's movements were in their generative infancies. Each of the seven contributed importantly to Progressive Era America. And, as with many college-trained Americans in their day, each had ideas, and engaged in political actions in aid of the weak and downtrodden.

The defining characteristic of political progressivism is its commitment to an active national state. Though, to be sure, along with the active national state progressive government in the United States also encompasses active state-level government initiatives. Progressive activism of the state is undertaken through administrative agencies of government (often called bureaus, agencies, administrations, or commissions). These government agencies are a principal means by which federal and state-level governments regulate the economy and society. Elements of the modern progressive administrative state first emerged during the Civil War and during Reconstruction with the founding of administrative agencies such as the U.S. Sanitary Commission (created 1861), and the Freedmen's Bureau (1865–69). With the taking off of the second industrial revolution following the Civil War (and influenced by Bismark's Germany), administrative agencies of government in the United States increasingly focused on the regulation of the emerging industrial economy. The key distinguishing feature of Progressive Era progressivism is its call for an expansion in the number and size of such administrative agencies administered by "social science" expertise.

The seven individuals Tichi profiles were indeed sympathetic to this core element of progressivism—and some were leading figures in the effort—though they sometimes sharply differed on the ends they sought to achieve. Florence Kelley championed a new Illinois Factory Inspections Law in 1893, and Governor Altgeld appointed her chief of the administrative agency the law created. Throughout her life Kelley worked tirelessly to grow the regulatory and administrative power of the state. Her goal: to transform capitalism into socialism. In contrast, Louis Brandeis sought to use the administrative agency of government to help capitalism flourish. He believed that administrative government—in the guise of such agencies as the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Federal Reserve—would strengthen and improve capitalism by making competitive markets fairer, more transparent and more efficient, for example, by regulating the role played by investment bankers on industrial corporate boards. He is famous also for his 1908 Brandeis Brief—a brief largely written by Josephine Goldmark and others at Florence Kelley's National Consumers' League—which shaped U.S. case law favorable to placing state regulatory controls on business.

Julia Lathrop contributed to the growth of administrative agencies of government by taking up leadership in the United States Children's Bureau. Appointed in 1912 to head the new agency by President Taft, Lathrop was the first woman to head a federal

administrative bureau. Economics professor John R. Commons was a central figure in developing the cooperative effort between academics and state legislators in what came to be called the Wisconsin Plan, and was a founder of the American Association for Labor Legislation. And, as Tichi notes, Alice Hamilton, the first woman on Harvard's faculty, "laid the groundwork for a historic expansion of the administrative state," (p. 55) in the field of occupational health, and died only months before the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1970. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, as a journalist and public speaker, risked her life to report on and speak out against the brutalities of racism and lynching. In her U.S. and European travels, Wells-Barnett urged citizens and their governments to intervene to stop the barbarism.

In the Postscript Tichi notes that a powerful legacy of Progressive Era progressivism is the range of government administrative "agencies at the state and federal levels" (p. 275) that serve "as centers of professional expertise" and regulatory reform (p. 276). "The longer trajectory" of this effort that began at the turn of the 20th century, as she writes, finds "Progressive ideas put in place along a timeline that includes child labor and workplace safety legislation, civil rights laws, clean air and water legislation, and automobile safety legislation" (p. 276).

Today, at a time when progressivism is under attack—debate about the role of government regulatory administrative agencies headed and staffed by university-trained social scientists heating up, and organized labor's influence in decline—Civic Passions is timely.

References

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About the Reviewer

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