



In the tenements, all the influences make for evil; because they are the hotbeds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; the nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts; . . . because, above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion . . . What are you going to do about it? is the question of today.

—**Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)**

Not until the mid-19th century, writes the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The Idea of Poverty* (1983), did the existence of want and destitution come to be viewed as “a matter for social action rather than the exercise of private virtue.” But what kind of social action? Americans today are running out of answers. The poverty rate has bobbed stubbornly around the 13 percent mark since the late 1960s. The underclass—the incorrigible poor, who have abandoned all thought of advancement—seems to be growing. Perhaps, Howard Husock suggests in this essay, it is time to remember an answer that was given a century ago, one that insisted on personal involvement of rich and poor alike as a component of successful social action.

Fighting Poverty the Old-Fashioned Way

by Howard Husock

It is difficult to exaggerate the dread and sense of crisis that the urban poor inspired in most citizens of the United States a century ago. The phenomenally rapid industrialization that had been underway since the Civil War was attracting millions of eastern and southern Europeans to America's sweatshops, steel mills, and railyards. The influx of these "more foreign foreigners," more alien in language, customs, and religion than the Irish and German immigrants who preceded them, was climbing inexorably toward a one-year peak of 1,285,000 in 1907. Middle-class Protestant America recoiled in fear as entire districts of Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York, and Philadelphia were taken over by what one writer in New York called "the dangerous classes." An early history of this new immigration noted that "districts passed in a few years from the Irish, who were typical of the early influx, to the Russian Jews, who, as they landed represented the extreme of all that was in contrast with the American way of life."

The new masses were not only different but wretchedly poor, and poverty soon began to emerge as a political issue. As early as 1888, President Grover Cleveland warned that "oppressed poverty and toil, exasperated by injustice and discontent, attacks with wild disorder the citadel of rule." Jacob Riis, drawing on his years as a police reporter and photographer on New

York's Lower East Side, lent popular urgency to the problem of urban poverty with the publication in 1890 of *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis attracted national attention with his descriptions of "unventilated and fever-breeding structures," of gangs meeting in "dens" to plan "raids," willing to saw a peddler's head off "just for fun." Nor were such accounts isolated. In Philadelphia, another account, sounding much like a late 20th-century description of the ghetto drug culture, described "boys and girls idling away their time on the street, their characters weakened so that they are liable to the contagion of all kinds of vice."

In his classic 1904 treatise, *Poverty*, reformer Robert Hunter estimated that 10 million of America's 82 million people lived in poverty. In an era without unemployment insurance or workers' compensation, even those with jobs were often but a missed paycheck or an industrial accident away from destitution. "Upon the unskilled masses," wrote Hunter, "want is constantly pressing." He warned, furthermore, of an emerging "pauper" class—an underclass of dangerous and demoralized poor people. On Armour Avenue in Chicago, in Cincinnati's Rat Hollow, in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen, and in dozens of similar neighborhoods around the country, wrote Hunter, there "lives a class of people who have lost all self-respect and ambition, who rarely if ever work, who are aimless and drifting, who like drink, who have no thought for

their children and who live on rubbish and alms.”

Today, the astounding upward mobility of this generation of immigrants (or at least of their children) and their assimilation into the American middle class is seen as somehow inevitable—the by-product of an expanding economy, strong demand for unskilled labor, and an immigrant work ethic. By implication, middle-class America today is limited in its ability to deal with the poor and underclass because both labor conditions and the character of the poor have changed. Yet the upward mobility of the poor hardly appeared inevitable to the contemporary observers of a century ago. Bringing the urban poor into the cultural and economic mainstream was viewed as a challenge requiring extraordinary steps.

Out of the reform maelstrom of the turn-of-the-century Progressive era emerged a movement that undertook to bring the poor both hope and the tools of advancement. The settlement-house movement unabashedly promoted bourgeois values and habits—instructing the poor in everything from art appreciation and home economics to the importance of establishing savings accounts. To children in poverty, it offered recreation, books, clubs, as well as a sense of the history of American democratic institutions. It approached thousands of the urban poor, particularly children and teenagers, with a message of inclusion in the larger world beyond the slum. It *expected* them to make it. To make good on that promise, relatively well-to-do Americans, inspired both by religious conscience and fear for the American social fabric, “settled” in poor neighborhoods, there to experience the lives of the poor firsthand, to offer guidance to their

neighbors and, in time, to be inspired to suggest policy prescriptions to the nation: child labor laws, industrial safety laws, and old age and unemployment insurance.

Settlements developed in the aftermath of a decades-long debate—in many ways reminiscent of that which has engaged the United States since the early 1960s—over how best to provide financial support to the needy without destroying their incentive to work. Not content with any relief system alone, Jane Addams and other settlement-house founders saw a need for a communitarian movement to bring rich and poor together. Their goal was both to broaden the horizons of the poor and to humanize the classes in each other’s eyes. The movement, wrote Addams in 1892, rested on three legs. “First, the desire to interpret democracy in social terms; secondly, the impulsive beating at the very source of our lives, urging us to aid in the race progress; and thirdly, the Christian movement toward humanitarianism.”

By attending settlement clubs and classes, the poor would be exposed to middle-class values and be given, it was hoped, the tools of self-betterment. The volunteer residents themselves were thought likely to profit as well. Still, the movement indulged neither the personal nor the political whims of youth. Nor did it veer toward wholesale rejection of the American economic system. It sought redistribution not of wealth per se but of “social and educational advantages.” Moreover, although it helped put on the public agenda the social insurance programs that were finally passed during the New Deal, it never believed that these could substitute for individual efforts by rich and poor alike.

The American roots of the settlement-house movement date to the practice of

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“friendly visiting” of the poor, which arose in response to the breakdown of the traditional social-welfare system during the early 19th century. The traditional system, dating to the Elizabethan “poor laws,” had provided financial support for community residents (strangers were pointedly excluded) who were sick, widowed, or temporarily down on their luck. By the 1820s, this community-oriented system was growing increasingly unworkable. Cities were becoming too big, workers too transient, and the poor too concentrated in certain urban neighborhoods. Many towns and cities resorted to poorhouses as an economy measure, requiring the poor to live in them in exchange for support.

These changed conditions also inspired new efforts by men such as the Unitarian minister Joseph Tuckerman of Boston. In 1819 he began his ministry to the poor in their own neighborhoods, where, he believed, they were “living as a caste, cut off from those in more favored circumstances.” In New York during the 1840s, Robert Hartley, the English-born son of a woolen-mill owner, founded the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. He fought for temperance (alcohol was the drug menace of the day) and began a system of friendly visiting in which male volunteers took responsibility for the poor in a given political precinct, bringing such offerings as copies of Benjamin Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth*. (“It depends chiefly on two words: industry and frugality,” Franklin declared.)



Boys at play on a New York street, 1890.

Among Hartley’s successors was Charles Loring Brace, a seminarian first drawn to social action through visits to New York City prisons. Convinced that inmates were often beyond help, he founded the Children’s Aid Society in 1853 and concentrated his efforts on the 10,000 orphaned or abandoned children then thought to be living on New York’s streets. Like the settlement-house workers who came after him, he was persuaded that “formative” efforts were far more effective than “reformatory” ones. In language foreshadowing Jane Addams, he wrote: “These boys and girls will soon form the great lower class of our city. They will influence elections . . . they will assuredly, if unreclaimed, poison society all around them. They will help to form the great multitude of robbers, thieves, vagrants and prostitutes who are now such a burden upon the respecting community.” Brace offered reading rooms, vocational training, and “news-boy lodging houses.” He also “placed out” thousands of children with farm families in

the Midwest and West.*

It was with the settlement-house movement, however, that the uplift impulse peaked. Notwithstanding the example of Hartley and Brace, settlements were most immediately inspired by ideas and events in Britain. With its head start on industrialization, England had been forced during the mid-18th century to confront the need to create a new social welfare system suited to a capitalist economy. In his history of the settlement-house movement, *Spearheads of Reform* (1967), Allen Davis traces the genealogy of settlements to London. There, in 1854, a Utopian clergyman and academic named Frederick Denison Maurice founded the Working Men's College, aiming to use education to erase class distinctions and mitigate the Dickensian social inequities of the era. His faculty included charismatic fine arts professor John Ruskin, England's leading art critic, and a critic as well of 19th-century industrialization. Like the settlement residents he would inspire, Ruskin was reform-minded, calling for a social-security system, minimum wage, and higher housing standards.

His disciples included Arnold Toynbee, an economist (and uncle of the famed historian) who moved to London's East End slums to teach and to learn. He died there at age 32 in what a history of the settlement movement would call an atmosphere of "bad whisky, bad tobacco, bad drainage." In 1884, Toynbee Hall was created in the same neighborhood to honor the memory of the reformer. Its founder, a minister named Samuel Barnett, took some of his inspiration from an 1883 church publication entitled *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. It described a "gulf daily widening

*This effort was violently opposed by the Catholic Church, which suspected Brace's motives in placing Catholic children with Protestant families in the Midwest. But Miriam Langsam concludes in her history of the effort, *Children West: A History of the Placing-Out System of the New York Children's Aid Society, 1853-90* (1962), that most of the children benefited.

which separates the lowest classes of the community . . . from all decency and civilization." To bridge that gap, Barnett brought college students to his Toynbee Hall, where they mounted art exhibitions, gave lectures, and lobbied local officials for a public library and for park and playground improvements.

Many of the leaders of the American settlement-house movement were directly inspired by visits to Toynbee Hall: Stanton Coit, an Amherst graduate with a doctorate from the University of Berlin, went on to found the nation's first settlement, New York's Neighborhood Guild, in 1886; Jane Addams, the daughter of a small-town Illinois Quaker banker, became co-founder of Chicago's Hull House in 1889; and Robert Woods, a graduate of the Andover Theological Seminary, served as "head resident" at Boston's South End house, founded in 1891. Smith College graduate Vida Scudder studied with John Ruskin in Britain, and along with a group which included Katherine Lee Bates, a Wellesley College professor (and the author of "America the Beautiful"), founded the College Settlement Association in 1889, with houses in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston.

The beliefs of the people who started the settlement movement cut across many of the divides which have since developed in American social-welfare philosophy. They were religious women and men inspired to a secular mission. They were political crusaders who never forgot the importance of maintaining direct contact with the poor and providing them with personal attention ("mentoring," to use today's term). They were youthful (under 30) cultural radicals who rejected middle-class comforts but saw themselves as mediators between the classes rather than simply as critics of the established order. They were social experi-

WHAT THE SOCIAL CLASSES OWE EACH OTHER

In 1889, Hull House was "soberly opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal," Jane Addams later recalled. Yet she was anything but confident that Hull House could encourage the spirit of reciprocity. The dire commentary below, which she reprinted in her memoir, was written when Hull House opened its doors.

The social organism has broken down through large districts of our great cities. Many of the people living here are very poor, the majority of them without leisure or energy for anything but the gain of subsistence.

They live for the moment side by side, many of them without knowledge of each other, without fellowship, without local tradition or public spirit, without social organization of any kind. Practically nothing is done to remedy this. The people who might do it, who have the social tact and training, the large houses, and the traditions and customs of hospitality, live in other parts of the city. The clubhouses, libraries, galleries, and semi-public conveniences for social life are also blocks away. We find workingmen organized into armies of producers because men of executive ability and business sagacity have found it to their interests thus to organize them. But these workingmen are not organized socially; although lodging in crowded tenement

houses, they are living without a corresponding social contact. The chaos is as great as it would be were they working in huge factories without foreman or superintendent. Their ideas and resources are cramped, and the desire for higher social pleasure becomes extinct. They have no share in the traditions and social energy which make for progress. Too often their only place for meeting is a saloon, their only host a bartender; a local demagogue forms their public opinion. Men of ability and refinement, of social power and university cultivation, stay away from them. Personally, I believe the men who

lose most are those who thus stay away from them. But the paradox is here; when cultivated people do stay away from a certain portion of the population, when all social advantages are persistently withheld, it may be for years, the result itself is pointed to as a reason and is used as an argument, for the continued withholding.

It is constantly said that because the masses

have never had social advantages, they do not want them, that they are heavy and dull, and that it will take political or philanthropic machinery to change them. This divides a city into rich and poor; into the favored, who express their sense of the social obligation by gifts of money, and into the unfavored, who express it by clamoring for a "share"—both of them actuated by a vague sense of justice. This division of the city would be more justifiable, however, if the people who thus isolate themselves on certain streets and use their social ability for each other, gained enough thereby and added sufficiently to the sum total

of social progress to justify the withholding of the pleasures and results of that progress, from so many people who ought to have them. But they cannot accomplish this for the social spirit discharges itself in many forms, and no one form is adequate to its total expression.

—from *Twenty Years At Hull-House (1910)*.



Jane Addams in 1930.

menters who nonetheless championed bourgeois values. They were reformers, not revolutionaries. (This earned them the scorn of writers who were further to the left. Socialist Jack London wrote that settlements "do everything for the poor except get off their backs." Upton Sinclair derisively summed up settlement programs as "lectures delivered gratis by earnest advocates of the single tax, troutfishing, exploring Tibet, pacifism, sea shell collecting, the eating of bran and the geography of Charlemagne's empire.")

The settlement houses followed in the wake of the so-called "scientific charity" movement. Scientific charity was designed to achieve some of the same ends as the state and federal welfare initiatives of the past two decades. Its advocates, such as Josephine Shaw Lowell (author of *Public Relief and Private Charity*, 1884), sought to centralize both private and public assistance to guard against fraud and to limit support for the able-bodied, lest the incentive to work be diminished. It is important to note that the settlement movement was not a reaction to scientific charity's callous-sounding agenda. It emerged as an organized supplement to the relief system, designed chiefly for the children of poor families, whether they were receiving relief payments or not. Wrote Jacob Riis: "We have substituted for the old charity coal chute that bred resentment . . . the passenger bridge we call settlements, upon which men go over not down to their duty."

Doing their duty was high on the list of these reformers. They used a vocabulary that seems distant from mainstream social-welfare discussion today. "The impulse to share the lives of the poor, the desire to make social service," wrote Jane Addams in 1892, "to express the spirit of Christ, is as old as Christianity itself Certain it is

that spiritual force is found in the Settlement movement, and it is also true that this force must be evoked and must be called into play before the success of any Settlement is assured." The settlement workers were not missionaries in the literal sense. If anything, they encouraged the kind of non-denominational religion which has come to typify American life. Theirs was the religion of the social gospel, the belief that social conditions, as well as individual beliefs and practices, come properly under the purview of religion.

The movement believed, too, that there was what Jane Addams called a "subjective necessity" for settlements. "We have in America a fast-growing number of cultivated young people," she wrote, "who . . . hear constantly of the great social maladjustment, but no way is provided for them to change it, and their uselessness hangs about them heavily."*

Movement advocates believed that personal contact between the classes was, as Robert Woods wrote, "not merely a means to some worthy end but, with its implications, as the end above all others This fresh exchange, continuously growing and deepening, stimulated by the surmounting of barriers of race and religion, was more than anything else to give form and body to the human democracy of the settlement."

The nature of relations between the classes varied. Jane Addams was exhilarated by experiences as mundane as informing a neighborhood woman of the existence of a park several blocks away in a

*Most volunteers were children of privilege. Annual reports of the College Settlement Association during the early 1890s, for instance, show that most volunteers were students or graduates of the elite women's colleges: Smith, Wellesley, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, and Mount Holyoke. The 1891-92 report of the College Settlement Association's house on New York's Lower East Side notes that "eighty applications have been received during the year. Many of these it has been necessary to refuse, as the house cannot be crowded beyond a certain point." The length of commitment varied. The New York house had 20 residents between September 1, 1891, and September 1, 1892, each staying an average of four months. Other "visitors" stayed less than one month.

direction the woman had never thought to venture. But Cleveland reformer Frederick Howe found his time in a settlement “anything but fruitful.” He felt awkward trying to dance with immigrant women, uncomfortable as a friendly visitor to tenements.

In their early years, the settlements’ reach was relatively short, their offerings not that extensive. What activities there were, however, were clearly in the uplift tradition. In the 1892 College Settlement Association’s New York house, activities included clubs for boys and girls, establishment of children’s savings accounts, a choir for neighborhood men, and home economics classes for neighborhood women. On weekdays, activities did not begin until 3:30 in the afternoon and were over by 9:30 or 10 p.m. A day in the life of the house included a surprising array of activities:

College Settlement Association
New York House, 1892

3 to 5 p.m. Library: Two hundred boys and girls, from ten to 14 years old. Exchange of books and games.

3:30 to 5 p.m. Rainbow Club: Two residents. Twenty girls from ten to fourteen years old. Sewing, singing, gymnastics, and games.

7 to 8 p.m. Penny Provident Bank (Savings account deposits): Two residents. From fifty to one hundred children.

7:30 to 9:30 p.m. Hero Club: One resident, one outside worker. Sixteen boys, fourteen to eighteen years old. Business meeting, talks, music and games. (Discussion of life stories of successful people.)

8 to 9 p.m. The Young Keystones: Ten boys, ten to fourteen years old. Talks on history, music.

Descriptions of even simple programs—carpentry for boys, cooking classes for girls—make it clear that the settlement vision was laden with aspiration for the children of the poor. “The goal of a social programme based on personal interest is to help individuals to the highest level of which each is capable,” wrote Lillian Wald

of New York’s Henry Street Settlement, who was second only to Jane Addams as a voice of the movement. The 1892 report of the College Settlement Association’s Philadelphia house stressed what we might now call “empowerment”: “Here and there a boy has felt the pleasure, unlike all other pleasures, of creating with the mind and hand that which was not before, and that which was goodly to look upon, even though that something was but a loaf of well-baked bread, a well proportioned step-ladder, or a little clay-modeled apple. When once the boy or girl has felt this pleasure, something of that which inspires our great mechanics or poets has become theirs, and the character transformation begins.”

By the turn of the century, the number of settlements had increased (from six in 1891 to 74 in 1897), and their activities had expanded. The activities of houses changed as residents took stock of their environs. Driven by powerful idealism, many settlement workers became political advocates for the poor. Hull House, which had introduced itself to Chicago’s Halstead Street in 1889 with an art exhibit, soon opened a kindergarten to make up for the shortage of places in the public schools.* Then the settlement residents took demands for a new school to the Chicago school board. Dismayed by the garbage overflowing in the stables and crowded frame buildings of the 19th ward—with its 50,000 residents of 20 nationalities—Jane Addams and Hull House itself bid on the ward’s garbage collection contract. A Hull House resident was eventually appointed garbage inspector.

The settlement impulse also led to ef-

*Settlement leaders were strong believers in public education, but the public school systems of the day were limited both in size and what they taught. When the philosopher John Dewey created his famous “laboratory school” in 1896 to test his theories of progressive education, he did so in association with Hull House. In her devastating critique of the progressive education movement, *The Troubled Crusade* (1983), Diane Ravitch nevertheless praises Dewey (and Jane Addams) for seeking to end student “passivity” and “teachers’ excessive reliance on rote memorization and drill.”



The Comets, one of dozens of neighborhood clubs at Hull House, sat for this portrait in the '20s. The clubs sponsored games and dances; they were meant to forge lifelong bonds among members.

forts beyond the ward. Hull House resident Julia Lathrop organized a campaign to clean up the Cook County poorhouse; Addams and others signed on with a wide variety of reform causes. Hull House resident Florence Kelley was hired by a state commission to investigate child labor conditions. The inquiry (inspired by a Hull House encounter with a 13-year-old Jewish girl who committed suicide rather than admit she had borrowed \$3 she could not repay from a coworker at a laundry) led to state legislation banning the employment of children under 14. Settlements even took up the drug abuse issue. Hull House pushed for a 1907 state law banning the sale of cocaine after one of its former kindergarteners fell victim to the drug. "When I last saw him," Addams wrote of the boy, in a line that sounds like countless others being written today, "it was impossible to connect that haggard, shriveled body with what I had known before."

The scope of settlement concerns broadened to the point that by 1904, Robert Hunter, the head resident at New York's University Settlement, wrote his book, *Pov-*

erty, to lay out an ambitious national social welfare program: "Make all tenements and factories sanitary; prohibit entirely child labor; compensate labor for enforced seasons of idleness, old age or lack of work beyond the control of the workman." Such demands were not the mere conceits of a political fringe. By the first decade of the 20th century, leading settlement residents had gained the ear of President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1903, Lillian Wald called for the establishment of a federal children's bu-

reau to monitor and investigate such matters as infant mortality, child labor, and education. Invited to Washington to see the president, her efforts led, though slowly, to the 1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children. That gathering led to a spread of state-supported mothers' pensions—intended to allow widows and the wives of the disabled to stay at home to raise their children—and to the establishment in April 1912 of the federal Children's Bureau. Its first director, appointed by President William Howard Taft, was Julia Lathrop of Hull House.

Historians have portrayed this as the movement's zenith. At last, they say, the settlement residents emerged as advocates for reform during the Progressive era and as harbingers of better things to come. But even as settlement leaders became national figures—Jane Addams regularly appeared on lists of the most admired Americans—they remained committed to helping individual poor people get ahead. Settlement leaders did not become directors of interest advo-

cacy groups with offices in Washington, far from the poor. They were representatives of neighborhood organizations who also happened to have an important voice in the national debate over poverty.

Between 1900 and 1920, even after reaching their supposed peak, settlements continued to grow and diversify. No longer did volunteers come strictly from upper-middle-class backgrounds; some settlements even added paid staff in certain specialized areas, such as nursing. In their 1913 *Handbook of Settlements*, Robert Woods and Albert Kennedy of Boston's South End House listed 413 settlement houses, concentrated in New York, Boston, and Chicago, but present in some form in 32 states and the District of Columbia. It was a network of bourgeois outposts in the American Calcuttas, boasting tenements refurbished as community centers, programs of education and recreation, and resident volunteers from the nation's best schools, all directed toward poor children and their parents.

Hull House itself grew to encompass eight buildings, including a music school, theater, and gymnasium. It operated a large day nursery for the children of the neighborhood's many working mothers. Major settlements such as Pittsburgh's Kingsley House developed elaborate programs of "manual training," kindergartens for children of slum families, and a summer "country home" where children and their families could gain a brief respite from the tenements. In a single week in January 1904, the house was attended by 1,680 children and teenagers. The 13 Kingsley House residents were assisted by 80 "non-resident volunteers" who came to the house for one month or more. Typical days ran from nine in the morning to 10:30 at night.

The annual reports of the house paint a picture of an institution thoroughly integrated into its neighborhood. "To many

boys," said the 1905 annual report, "Kingsley is a place where they may spend their evenings—their club house. They know the people who live here are always glad to see them—that the books, the magazines, the games, the warmth of the fire place is for them as for us." There can be no doubt that settlements such as this were predicated on the belief that the development of ambition and a work ethic in the children of the poor could not be left to chance. Wrote head resident William Mathews: "We cannot begin too early. Life changes quickly from one of instincts to one of habits. The child should be given fair opportunities to master the difficulties that have in many cases already crushed the parents.

"What means the work to the boy hammering, chiseling, planing away on the bookshelf, the table, the sled? It means the calling into eager and enjoyable activity the whole power of his being, and the consequent crowding out of the lower passions that ever find their root in idleness and inactivity."

After the turn of the century, settlements became a high-profile cause, attracting generous donations from the well-to-do. In 1906, Kingsley House boasted not only more than 900 individual financial supporters but its own endowment. Unlike the super-rich of today, who often flatter themselves with glittering gifts to museums, fashionable environmental causes, and the like, many of the wealthy during this earlier era felt a duty to provide the poor with means of advancement: libraries, schools, and settlement houses. One of Kingsley's supporters was Andrew Carnegie, who also endowed, among many other institutions, more than 2,800 libraries to help poor people improve themselves.

At its height, the settlement movement was a center not only of uplift efforts but a range of social services, including "milk

stations" and vocational education, many of which have been assumed (with varying degrees of effectiveness) by government and those under contract to it. Jane Adams, for one, anticipated and approved this prospect. She thought of settlements as places where experiments could be tried and then adopted by government.

How deeply did settlement efforts penetrate? What were the results? Can settlements truly be credited with having an effect on the poor?

The numbers of those touched by settlement houses sometimes seem impressive. In 1906, Pittsburgh's Kingsley House claimed weekly contact with some 2,000 children from the neighborhood around its 14-room building at Bedford and Fulton Streets. But it is undoubtedly true that, in general, settlements reached a minority of their neighbors. New York's East Side House, in the city's Yorkville section, described itself in 1914 as "a radiant center of spiritual, moral and intellectual light in a thickly settled neighborhood of 150,000." Its clubs enrolled 1,346 children.

Almost inevitably, the settlement workers found themselves focusing on those with the best chance to get ahead. In New York, Vida Scudder found reaching the Italian "peasant" so difficult—despite her own knowledge of Italian—that she frankly admitted that she would concentrate her work on those she identified as intellectuals. "The primary function of the settlement house," observed sociologist William Whyte in *Street Corner Society* (1943), "is to stimulate social mobility, to hold out middle-class standards and middle-class rewards to lower-class people. Since upward mobility almost always involves movement out of the slum district, the settlement is constantly dealing with people on their way out The social workers want to deal with 'the better element.'"

One can speculate as to whether reach-

ing the right people can change the tone and social fabric of an entire neighborhood. Settlement workers believed it possible. Wrote Robert Woods: "Interaction of residents, volunteers, and supporters with neighbors has its sure effect on local opinion. As working people come to know men and women of culture and organizing power, they understand the responsible and humanizing use of the resources of life and are less moved by irresponsible and railing criticism." Settlement workers were convinced they had succeeded in changing at least the course of lives they touched directly. Reflecting on more than 30 years at the Henry Street Settlement, Lillian Wald wrote: "Frequent on musical and dramatic programs are the names of girls and boys whom we have known in our clubs and classes. Not a few are listed in the ranks of the literary. Some have been elected to public office, others drafted into the public service." Among those who passed through the houses were Frances Perkins, secretary of labor under President Franklin Roosevelt, union leader Sidney Hillman, and comedian George Burns. Benny Goodman received his first clarinet lesson at Hull House. A gymnastics lesson at New York's Union Settlement House inspired Burt Lancaster to seek a career in show business—as an acrobat. Even today, decades after the heyday of the settlement-house movement, it is possible to make a long list of prominent people whose lives were touched by a settlement house: Nate Archibald, a former professional basketball player, novelist Mario Puzo, actress Whoopi Goldberg, and Robert P. Ritterer, who was president and chief executive officer of the old E. F. Hutton brokerage firm (and one of a trio of extremely successful brothers who acknowledge a large debt to Manhattan's East Side House).

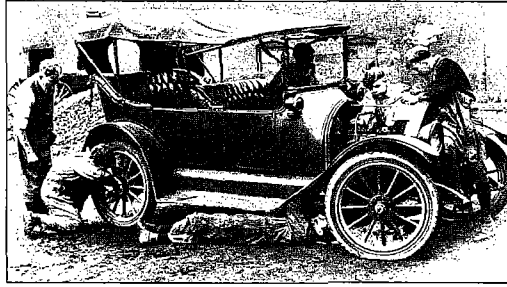
By the early 1920s, settlement houses seemed likely to become a permanent fix-

ture of American life. Although their pacifism cost Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and some other settlement-house leaders public favor during World War I, Robert Woods and Albert Kennedy could still confidently assert in their 1922 survey, *The Settlement Horizon*, that “the strong claims of so thoroughly an established tradition of leadership, and the breadth and momentum of the cause, furnish ample guarantees for the future.”

It was not to be. In part, settlement houses fell victim to their own success. During the boom years of the 1920s, many of the poor headed up and out of the old neighborhoods. “There are many ‘empties’ [vacant apartments] in our neighborhood,” wrote Lillian Wald, “because, as standards of living have been lifted, the uncrushable desire for a bathroom has increased, and the people have moved away.” Meanwhile, restrictive federal legislation in 1924 ended mass immigration, thus limiting the number of newcomers in settlement neighborhoods.

Some settlement houses closed down; many merged and became part of the group of charities served by local United Way and Community Chest drives, losing their financial independence and public profile. By 1963, in *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan described the settlements’ role in elegiac terms: “The Puerto Rican has entered the city in the age of the welfare state. Here and there are to be found the settlement houses of an earlier period, in which a fuller and richer concern for the individual was manifested by devoted people from the prosperous classes.”

There are remnants of the movement today in the major settlement cities—Boston, New York, and Chicago, where Hull House celebrated its centennial last year. Although aspects of the



Teaching what public schools could not: Boys at Cleveland's Hiram House learn auto mechanics.

original impulse are still to be found—New York’s Henry Street Settlement operates youth clubs, Boston’s United South End settlement runs a fresh-air camp—settlements today are run mostly by paid professionals, social workers whose training has its roots in psychiatric casework. Many settlements are really little more than health and counseling centers, which, like all manner of other institutions today, simply deliver impersonal social services to the poor. Government reimbursement provides the bulk of funding. It turned out, contrary to the expectations of Jane Addams and others, that government was simply incapable of doing what the settlements did—and was not really interested in trying, either.

The settlement idea also suffered as a result of the Depression, which, more than any other event in American life, made clear the limits of private charity. The incontrovertible importance of the 1935 Social Security Act, which established the form of the national social insurance system, has overshadowed a dubious assumption that accompanied it: that as pension programs grew to cover the elderly, the blind, and the families of maimed or disabled workers, poverty, over time, would “wither away.” Nobody anticipated the massive influx of unskilled workers from outside the industrial system after World War II, workers who had not been covered by the new social insurance. Poverty did

not disappear. Yet the persistence of the withering away fallacy discouraged volunteer activities. Poverty, it had been decided, would and should be taken care of by government.

The affluence of the postwar era and the expansion of government responsibility for management of the economy made government solutions to the poverty problem seem all the more appropriate. The need for federal intervention to break down the legal barriers to the entry of blacks into the mainstream of society reinforced the focus on Washington. The settlement-house philosophy—which embraced the need both for a social insurance safety net below *and* a helping hand from above—was largely forgotten.

Inaugurating the War on Poverty in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson spoke of a “hand, not a handout,” but the new federal antipoverty programs were captured by people who sought to mobilize the poor to effect a redistribution of wealth and power through political activism. Although VISTA workers and New Left activists followed the settlement example of taking up residence among the poor, few were driven by the idea of assisting the poor in self-improvement. Indeed, many of them rejected the very notion that the poor needed improvement; “the system” was the problem. To these latter-day settlement workers, the “hero club” and the summer camp seemed pathetically inadequate next to the class action suit and the sit-in at City Hall.

By far the most important response to the new urban poverty was the growth of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program—a descendant, ironically, of the “widows’ pensions” for which settlement residents had lobbied Teddy Roosevelt in 1909. Never meant as a large-scale welfare program when it was created under the Social Security Act, AFDC was pushed along by the growth of single-par-

ent families until it became the nation’s most important relief program. From \$194 million in 1963, annual outlays for AFDC grew to \$2.5 billion in 1972. As welfare payments grew, so did the unease of a society historically loathe simply to provide alms for the poor. As early as 1962 and as recently as 1988, Congress attempted to build uplift into the AFDC system. Some of these efforts, such as job training programs for welfare recipients in the 1988 Family Support Act, have shown promise. All of these efforts, however, owe more to such antecedents as the scientific charity movement than to the settlement impulse. They are more “reformatory” than “formative.” They target the “welfare-eligible,” those who have a demonstrated difficulty joining the economic mainstream, not those on the margin who might have a better chance of getting ahead with a little help.

It is difficult to suggest that there may be ways to go back to a better future for American social-welfare initiatives. Because the United States delayed providing basic social insurance for so long, historians have cast the pre-New Deal era as a Dark Age of Social Darwinism. Surveying this era in his acclaimed book, *In The Shadow of the Poorhouse* (1986), Michael Katz asserted that the 19th-century social-welfare system “reflected the brittle hostility and anger of the respectable classes and their horror at the prospect of a united, militant working class.”

Although the American welfare state has never been as generous as such critics might like, times have changed. Having survived the political assault of Ronald Reagan and the intellectual critique of Charles Murray in *Losing Ground* (1984), the American welfare state is in no immediate danger of being rolled back. At the same time, it is clear that there is no political consensus for its expansion. Left and Right seem

to agree only that the current social-welfare system is unsatisfactory. A renewed emphasis on the active promotion of upward mobility offers a way out of this paralysis.

The day of the settlement house itself as the major link between the social classes has passed. Too many of its functions have been taken up, however imperfectly, by other institutions, ranging from the public schools to public television. But the need for a such a bridge has not been adequately met. Large numbers of Americans cannot find their way into the economic mainstream and are not spurred on to reach "the highest level of which each is capable." Without knowledge of how the world beyond the neighborhood works—that one can become an engineer, that good colleges are eager to accept black students with potential—the poor will not reach the highest level of their ability. Hard questions must be asked before such bridge building can begin. First, which values are to be taught to the poor? Second, who will teach them? Educators such as Joseph Clark, the controversial black high school principal from Paterson, New Jersey, have come to symbolize a return to an emphasis on bedrock values as part of schooling. People from beyond the neighborhood can help. Potential middle-class volunteers may not feel the tug of religious commitment as strongly as the Jane Addams generation did, but there are still affluent youths whose "uselessness hangs about them heavily."

In poor neighborhoods throughout the nation, thousands of voluntary wars on poverty are already underway. But overall, too

few are being won, and most are being waged without much help from middle-class whites. Perhaps the biggest impediment to the growth and success of such efforts is the lingering belief among liberals and others with the means to provide help that they are somehow beside the point, or even dangerous. Today's reformers pay tribute to impulses like those of the settlement workers—as when New York's Governor Mario Cuomo invokes the image of society as family—but only as prelude to calls for expanded social-welfare programs. They dismiss every pre-New Deal response to poverty—and every new proposal reminiscent of such measures—as paltry and mean-spirited. Thus President George Bush's talk of "a thousand points of light" inspires nothing but liberal satire, apparently out of the belief that any private effort to ameliorate poverty is meaningless, intended only to undermine government social-welfare programs. To that, too, the settlement tradition offers an answer.

"The conditions of life forced by our civilization upon the poor in our great cities are undemocratic, unchristian, unrighteous," wrote Vida Scudder of the College Settlement Association in 1900. But efforts to improve them, she said, must be "wholly free from the spirit of social dogmatism and doctrinaire assertion As we become more practical, we also become better idealists As we become more useful here and now, we strengthen and deepen all those phases of our common life that vibrate with the demand for a better society to be."