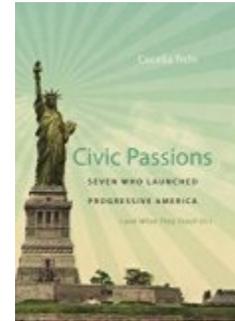


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Cecelia Tichi. *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America*. Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2011. 400 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-3300-1; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7191-1.

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Learning from the Progressives

In presenting profiles of seven representative Progressive Era social reformers, Cecelia Tichi provides an excellent broad introduction to many aspects of that era and the Gilded Age that preceded it, focusing particularly on efforts to address the harsh social conditions of those times. Tichi, who is the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English at Vanderbilt University, portrays her characters through an engaging narrative designed to inspire people in the present day to work for social justice in the face of trends that have turned our period into a “second Gilded Age” of harsh social injustice (p. xii). Drawing her readers in by presenting absorbing details about the life experiences of the figure under consideration in each of the seven core chapters, she gently interweaves abstract concepts related to the work of each reformer, as well as solid explanations of more general aspects of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era—from John Dewey’s views on education to the issue of political patronage—all of which allow the reader to understand a great deal about those times. Moreover, Tichi demonstrates that Progressive Era reformers largely established the groundwork for the social reform agenda of the rest of the twentieth century.

Alice Hamilton, MD is the first figure profiled by Tichi. Hamilton, like two other women featured among Tichi’s seven, gained experience working at Hull House, Jane Addams’s pioneering Chicago settlement. Hamilton’s research, writing, and teaching established her as a pioneer in the public health sector devoted to workplace safety issues. Her efforts helped raise public aware-

ness that workers sickened or disabled by toxic materials or other occupational hazards were not simply a regrettable matter of concern to their own families, but rather that these conditions constituted a broad social problem that could largely be prevented through governmental regulations. Her work helped spark historic expansions of governmental responsibility for occupational safety and health. She died at age 101 in 1970, just short of the establishment of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)—an agency which, when not hobbled by appointments geared toward undermining its agenda, has brought oversight of workplace conditions to every state of the Union.

John R. Commons, an economics professor at the University of Wisconsin, produced research data that helped undermine the myth that laissez-faire and Social Darwinist theories were derived from unalterable laws of the universe. He showed how these theories resulted in iniquities such as unconscionably low wages, inadequate housing, and the use of child labor. Commons encouraged academics to enhance a faltering American democracy by producing factual data based on empirical research into real-world socioeconomic conditions. His work served as a model for research in the emerging fields of social work and sociology. And his graduate students went on to make significant contributions, most notably in providing guidance for the development of the Social Security Act of 1935—a law which, Tichi emphasizes, countered the thrust of Social Darwinism by guar-

anteeing “survival not only for the fittest but for the people at large” (p. 88).

At Hull House, Julia Lathrop worked with other women activists to establish the world’s first juvenile court in 1899. A few years later, she helped establish one of the first graduate schools of social work, and ensured that such institutions would emphasize not only practical work but also research into issues such as juvenile delinquency. Lathrop worried about the state of American democracy, believing it was undermined by failing to address problems of massive poverty. She was appointed to direct the newly formed U.S. Children’s Bureau in 1912, the establishment of which represented a significant step in the recognition of federal government responsibility to address social problems. During her eight years there, she directed the bureau to develop research-based data on the causes of high rates of infant mortality and childhood disability. These and related efforts helped inspire legislation in future years instituting maternal and child health care services. The bureau continues its work in the present day as an arm of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Another veteran of Hull House, Florence Kelley moved to New York in 1899 to direct the newly formed National Consumers’ League, which sought to educate the public and organize consumer boycotts of manufacturers profiting from inadequate wages, adverse working conditions, and the use of child labor. The league faced the fierce headwinds of general antipathy toward the immigrants who toiled in the sweatshops, public relations campaigns that portrayed corporations as admirable contributors to American life, and a quasi-Calvinist tendency to equate pleas for adequate leisure time with slothfulness. For the groundbreaking *Muller v. Oregon* Supreme Court case (1908), the league provided attorney Louis Brandeis with research-based data proving that excessive work undermined women’s health. The unyielding opposition of some states, particularly in the South, to the league’s pleas to enact workplace legislation convinced Kelley that federal legislation was needed. Her efforts helped lay the foundation for the passage, six years after her death, of the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which mandated minimum wages, placed controls on maximum work-hours, and banned most forms of child labor.

In opposing transit and gas company executives who colluded with politicians to maintain unnecessarily high prices, and in leading a campaign against life insurance company practices that defrauded working-class clients,

Louis Brandeis gained a national reputation as the “People’s Attorney” (p. 186). Powered by a strong sense of civic duty, he worried that democracy was threatened by the imposition of an “oligarchy” controlled by powerful corporations (p. 184). Fearing that abject poverty undermined the ability of citizens to act vigorously on their own behalf, he encouraged the formation of labor unions as a voice for the voiceless to help counterbalance corporate power. In the *Muller v. Oregon* case, which validated maximum work-hours legislation for women, Brandeis pioneered the use of empirical socioeconomic data in constitutional litigation, thereby lessening the reliance on rigid legal precedence as a guide to justice.

Tichi relates that Walter Rauschenbusch took a passage of the Lord’s Prayer (“Thy will be done on earth”) as evidence that “the Kingdom of God was meant to arrive not only in the afterlife but here on earth” (p. 221). Rather than emphasizing the need to engage in a personal relationship with Christ in order to gain entrance into heaven, he urged that “the moral power generated by the Christian religion” should be used to help the poor gain a share of the Kingdom of God in the form of decent working conditions, housing, health care, education, and leisure time—factors that would, in turn, bring out the best in people demoralized by oppressive social conditions (p. 211). Rauschenbusch helped popularize this “Social Gospel” message, which provided inspiration for social legislation from the Progressive Era to the New Deal to the Great Society, and provided a pillar sustaining Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of the mid-century African American civil rights movement.

Sadly, most white reformers did not endorse the movement for African American civil rights during the Progressive Era—a period marked by tightened restrictions on blacks that were often enforced by the threat of violence. The lynchings of three of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s friends in Memphis in 1892 sparked her crusading work, in which she sought to rouse the public’s conscience through investigating and publicizing the facts about America’s lynchings. Forced to leave Memphis under threats of violence, Wells-Barnett moved north, where she penned newspaper articles widely syndicated in the African American press and at times in the white press as well. She interwove her anti-lynching campaign with efforts to publicize the socioeconomic oppression experienced by African Americans, and with appeals to her people to assert themselves concerning this oppression. Thus, in addition to “awakening the conscience of the nation,” as W. E. B. Du Bois remarked in reference to her anti-lynching crusade, Tichi also credits Wells-Barnett

with providing an important foundation for the broader African American civil rights movement that flowered by the mid-twentieth century (p. 272).

Alice Hamilton, Julia Lathrop, and Florence Kelley not only shared the experience of residence at Hull House but also remained important allies in their subsequent work. Tichi notes many other points of intersection among her seven figures—from the assistance Kelley provided Louis Brandeis in *Muller v. Oregon* to the similarity of social science and Social Gospel works influencing John R. Commons and Walter Rauschenbusch—all of which provide the book a sense of continuity and coherence. All seven grew to maturity during the Gilded Age, and, responding to the period's oppressive social conditions, came into their own as reform advocates during the latter part of that period and the ensuing Progressive Era. Generally, they were morally repulsed by the often callous disregard of poverty and related social problems, and by the laissez-faire and Social Darwinist justifications for ignoring those problems. They recognized the importance of the social and physical environment in influencing one's life trajectory, and, rejecting simplistic blame-the-victim theories, they asserted the need for governmental action to address social problems.

Many of Tichi's seven hoped that their proposed reforms would help reinvigorate American democracy, and they maintained that a democracy cannot function well if it ignores the interests of the disadvantaged. In sync with their hopes for democracy, the seven saw their role to a large extent as educative, using empirical research to publicize conditions that they hoped would wake up the public to social injustices, to the potential for change, and to the illogical nature of arguments defending the status quo.

The social reformers hoped that their emphasis on empirically derived data would shield them against charges of being motivated by "feminine sentimentality for the poor," as Alice Hamilton remarked, and they believed that their empiricism would show the public that they were impartial and above politics (p. 49). But given that Tichi's express purpose is to provide lessons to those who may wish to struggle against social injustice in this second Gilded Age (the harsh conditions of which she eloquently describes in her postscript), perhaps it would have been useful to remind readers more often that it was the Progressives' expression of moral concern

about poverty and related social problems that was key in breaking through to the public's consciousness. Certainly their emphasis on research bolstered their case, but their data and the arguments they used in relation to that data were expressed in terms meant to stimulate emotional response as well as logical agreement. Progressives of the present day are not losing battles in the public arena because they fail to present enough facts. Rather, all too often their overreliance on logic and facts blinds them to the need to present emotionally saleable arguments as well—moral arguments that can compete against the fear-based contentions of those taking us deeper into a second Gilded Age. Tichi's seven do indeed make moral appeals in her book, but her persistent emphasis on their fact-based approach sometimes obscures this important element of their appeal.

Tichi's book is an accurate and thoughtful synthesis, steeped in impressive research in both primary and secondary sources. It is not geared to proving new scholarly points to academics, to addressing historiographical controversies, to providing a portrayal of Progressive Era reform outside of its social reform wing, or to pointing out the many faults of the era's social reformers. She does at times refer to historiographical issues and to criticisms of the Progressives, but only when integral to help understand the seven and their work—rather than making the presentation of historiographical points or the Progressives' warts ends in themselves. She portrays the overarching truth that there was a great deal to admire about her seven. There are plenty of scholars who pick at Progressive Era reformers' faults, or feel obliged to emphasize the negative at least as much as the positive, until the overall impression gained by an undergraduate student being introduced to those reformers is a negative one. That is not an accurate overall portrayal of Progressive Era social reform for an introductory undergraduate context. Students go away from courses taught in such a manner believing, wrongly, that there are few if any model standard bearers of social justice to look up to for inspiration from that period of U.S. history. Tichi clearly believes that history can be valuable when we glean from it that which will help make a better world. She does not try to hide her outlook, and is frank about hoping that her work helps inspire people to address the social injustices of the second Gilded Age. As an introductory work for undergraduate courses or for the general reader I highly recommend this book.

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