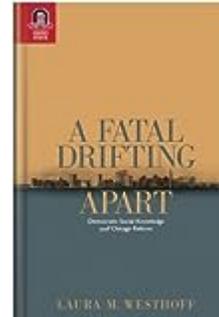




**Laura M. Westhoff.** *A Fatal Drifting Apart: Democratic Social Knowledge and Chicago Reform.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. xiii + 309 pp. \$47.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-1058-1.



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**Published on** H-Urban (January, 2008)

## **Mending the Great Chasm: Chicago Progressives and Urban Crises**

As the nineteenth century ground to a halt, the problems presented by the new industrial order seemed overwhelming in their intensity. Chicago stood at the center of the national debate over both the opportunities and problems presented by the growth of industrial capitalism. From the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 through the Haymarket Affair and culminating in the Pullman Strike of 1894, the city seemed to be a laboratory of social and economic life not only in the United States, but also in the industrial West in general. Laura M. Westhoff has written an interesting account of the response of Chicago's middle- and upper-class reformers to these issues as they attempted to heal a rift that Jane Addams referred to as a "fatal drifting apart" in the very social fabric of the nation. Addams had witnessed a great deal of change brought about by industrial capitalism even before she and Ellen Gates Starr had come to Chicago's West Side to open Hull House in 1889. Corporations had changed the meaning of both individualism and equality of opportunity in post-Civil War United States. Large numbers of immigrants from the "other" Europe entered the country, and the intimate relationship between owner and artisan in the manufactories of the nation was long gone. Mas-

sive industrial cities with vast immigrant working-class slums sprang up across the country and seemed to shape America's future.

The emphasis in *A Fatal Drifting Apart* is on the Progressive response to these changes and especially the idea of democratic social knowledge as understood by various Progressive reformers from the 1890s through the failed struggle for a new Chicago charter (1907). The anxieties and motivations of Chicago reformers in the 1890s revolved around what they saw as the cultural fragmentation of society into competing classes, ethnic groups, genders, and races, as well as the political corruption that seemed to plague U.S. cities. Addams hoped to recreate the community that she had experienced as a child by fostering a truly democratic understanding among the diverse people involved in the new industrial order. This desire to revive a "golden age" of community has been especially pronounced at times of great technological and economic change.

Westhoff's book examines the Chicago reform community as it wrestled with the meaning of democracy and the form of democratic purpose in cities. Liberal republic-

licanism dominated Chicago ideologically at the end of the nineteenth century, promoting the idea of the city as one of self-made men on the frontier. What was good for business was good for Chicago and the nation. The market would act as the final arbiter of social issues. There certainly was a reason that such authors as Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Hamlin Garland portrayed Chicago as a cold capitalist city without a heart. In the wake of the 1894 Pullman Strike, Addams and other reformers reacted against this view of the world.

Westhoff properly points to the impact of the 1893 Columbian Exposition as well as sociology on middle-class Progressive reformers. Addams saw the new social science as a way of opening dialogue and mutual self-knowledge between social classes. Progressives championed the role of labor arbitration, and its successes in the garment industry seemed to prove their point. Reformers hoped arbitration would lead to democratic understanding between management and workers. Many had condemned George Pullman for refusing adjudication during the strike that shook the nation in 1894.

In 1893, the same year as the World's Columbian Exposition, reformers gathered at a mass meeting in Chicago called by the British journalist and social reformer William Stead, who hoped to bring various segments of society together to discuss social issues. One result of this meeting was the formation of the Chicago Civic Federation (CFC), which provided Chicagoans with an unusual opportunity to experiment with the processes of social knowledge and reinvigorate democratic participation to avert the "fatal drifting apart" of which Addams warned. Unfortunately, while Addams hoped to promote dialogue among classes, genders, and racial groups, the CFC quickly accepted older conceptions of liberal republicanism, which eventually undermined the Progressive reform effort.

The CFC originally included working-class representatives and embodied a new definition of society as composed of interest and reform groups and classes rather than a moral hierarchy of the best men. This inclusiveness recognized the new sociological theory regarding social groups and a reorientation of Chicago politics in recognition of ethnic and class changes in the city's demography after the Civil War. As Westhoff points out, the growing authority of social science resulted in the rise of the expert. The priority given to professional expertise in the long run diminished Addams's hope for a new democratic social knowledge that would heal the chasm forming between her neighbors.

The CFC's reliance on experts ignored the day-to-day experiences of women and workers and revealed the organization's elitism. This undermined its connection with working-class, women's, and ethnic organizations. Tensions quickly emerged between the desire for social harmony and the potential for coercive social control. It is this cleavage that is at the heart of Westhoff's study.

Increasingly, expert reports were privileged over input from the grassroots. Nowhere did this become as obvious as during the struggle over education reform in Chicago during the Progressive Era. The CFC turned to William Rainey Harper to report on the state of education in the city and pushed for legislation based on the Harper Report. The CFC did not take into consideration the experiences of female teachers or working-class activists. While the bill ultimately failed in the Illinois legislature, the CFC continued to push for the reform, creating a rift between the organization and the Chicago teachers' union. This example has much to tell us about reform in general in twentieth-century United States. The use of experts without grassroots input has had a dramatic and largely negative effect on the U.S. city. While it is beyond Westhoff's study, the creation of massive highway systems, high-rise housing projects, and urban renewal programs in general at mid-century privileged experts at the expense of residents and proved to be dramatically undemocratic in both their process and result.

It quickly became obvious that the CFC had become an elitist institution dedicated to preserving order in the industrial city. The dream of social dialogue that Addams and other reformers had hoped to create was easily destroyed. Even in its earliest manifestation, the CFC ignored working-class concerns in regard to unemployment relief and agreed with the model of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society regarding the "worthy and unworthy" poor. The CFC's Central Relief Association (CRA) gave out supplies and not money as payment for work sponsored by the organization during the economic crisis of the 1890s. The CRA largely rejected workers' ideas and therefore undermined CFC's ability to construct a democratic social knowledge based on the experience of multiple social classes.

Westhoff's study looks at various other issues and shows how reform women and working-class leaders left the CFC and eventually worked for an activist state. Much of the book places Hull House in the larger context of the Chicago reform movement and desire for an activist social science. Mary Jo Deegan's portrayal of Addams's impact on the development of sociology in *Jane*

*Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918* (1986) covered much of this territory. Machine in Chicago in 1931.

Westhoff rightly stresses that white racism was a major flaw of the Progressive movement. Despite the good intentions of most middle-class white reformers, racism won the day. By examining the relationship of Ida B. Wells to the reform movement, the author traces the emergence of a new style of politics based on collective subjectivity to African American activists, such as Wells. She also looks at the development of the United Societies for Local Self-Government as part of this movement, especially in its struggle against elitist charter reform in Chicago. Unfortunately, she does not carry the history of the United Societies as well as African American activism to its logical conclusion in the creation of the Democratic

Finally, Westhoff attempts to draw conclusions about later political reform developments in Chicago and the nation. In her epilogue, she endeavors to recover a populist strain of reform that would create a framework for Addams's dream of democratic social knowledge that reveals the potential for a more participatory and transformative politics. Westhoff sees this as an alternative to what she calls "democratic realism" that placed technocrats in charge. *A Fatal Drifting Apart* is a fine study of a crucial time in the creation of twentieth-century liberalism. Westhoff's synthesis introduces new areas of study as well as contributes to the understanding of Progressivism within the context of Chicago and urban reform.

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**Citation:** Dominic Pacyga. Review of Westhoff, Laura M., *A Fatal Drifting Apart: Democratic Social Knowledge and Chicago Reform*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14033>

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