Addams, Race, and Social Evolutionary Theory

On this, the 150th anniversary of Addams’s birth, the 100th anniversary of Twenty Years at Hull House, and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the NAACP, it is fitting to reflect on Addams’s writings on black-white race relations in the United States. Historical accounts of Chicago’s African-American community, biographies of leading African-Americans of the Progressive era, and the sizeable correspondence between Addams and African-Americans suggest that Addams’s efforts to engage with African-American individuals and organizations were more extensive and varied than contemporary scholars have recognized.¹ This story has not yet been written, and awaits a skilled biographer. In this paper I examine two of her essays, “Respect for Law” (1901), an analysis of lynching, and “Has the Emancipation Act Been Nullified by National Indifference” (1913).

Some scholars have politely criticized Addams for occasionally letting racist phrases and attitudes slip into her writings. Sometimes the gentle critique is accompanied by the observation that she was, after all, a woman of her time.² In this paper I want to take these untoward phrases and attitudes and place them center-stage. To understand Addams’s writings on black-white race relations I start with the fact that Addams was absolutely a woman of her time, and read her essays from that standpoint. George Stocking, a historian of anthropology, writes, “Turn-of-the-century social scientists were evolutionists almost to a man (sic), and their ideas on race cannot be considered apart from their evolutionism.”³ These theorists viewed human history as a progression from savagery to civilization. They thought Africans in Africa existed in a still-savage state; they characterized immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as “primitive”; and they
considered white Europeans and Americans to be well-along civilization’s path. This perspective functioned as a conceptual frame within which beliefs were proposed, tested, reconstructed, or abandoned. Many theorists used this frame for imperialist purposes; Addams also used this frame in her theorizing. The untoward phrases and attitudes are not asides, but glimpses of bedrock.

Today, close on the heels of the bloodiest century on record, grand historical narratives and the idea of progress make us nervous. We place “modernity” in scare-quotes, add ‘post’ as a prefix, or use the term ironically. Before World War I so tragically revealed that “a civilization is as fragile as a life,” various versions of social evolutionary theory’s grand narrative of progress were ubiquitous among British and American intellectuals. These held dominance from the latter part of the 19th century until knowledge of modern genetics and Franz Boas’s anthropological cultural relativism took hold.

Social evolutionary theory drew on the work of Darwin and Spencer to bring a biological dimension to earlier discussions of progressive human development. Defined narrowly and technically, the theory’s skeletal frame placed savage tribes as hunter-gatherers, primitive peoples as having agriculture and pottery, and alphabetic writing as a sign of civilization. “Race,” “culture” and “civilization” were conflated through the Lamarckian assumption that cultural practices could over time become heritable. Theorists fleshed out the skeleton with an astonishing array of variations. American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan thought there was one path to civilization, while James Pritchard’s view is better represented by a tree’s many branches. Spencer and Morgan claimed that brains and minds evolved, making civilized people capable of more
complex, rational thought. Edward B. Tylor disagreed, positing that brain structure had stayed the same throughout history. The image of savages as impulsive, cruel, and prone to criminal behavior underlies Nathaniel Shaler’s analysis of race relations in post-Civil War era. John Wesley Powell disagreed, writing, “Consider the savage not as a man of cruelty, but as a man who takes part in a regularly organized government, with laws, that are obeyed and enforced.” Responses varied as well on the questions of moral evolution, and whether people from savage tribes could adapt quickly if placed in civilized settings. Lester Ward said yes; T.M. Cattell said no. Gender and class only confused matters, as many British theorists thought that the lower classes along with upper class women and the Irish, were closer to primitive peoples in mind and morals than to civilized British males.

Within this frame, outdated and false though it be, theorists reasoned and emoted about non-Anglo-Saxon peoples. Many used the frame in offensively racist ways; others tried to adapt the frame toward democratic and humanitarian ends. The frame itself has been thoroughly and correctly criticized for its universalizing, hierarchical assumptions that place whites at civilization’s pinnacle. The damage it did in supporting denigrating stereotypes in the popular imagination is incalculable. Nonetheless, it was the reigning intellectual frame in the U.S. in the two decades surrounding the turn of the century. Addams worked within it, as did Dewey, Royce, DuBois and many others. We need to be cautious: knowing that theorists used it tells us very little about how they fleshed out its skeletal frame. In the two essays I examine in this paper, Addams uses social evolutionary theory to condemn white racial practices in exceedingly strong terms, although the frame’s racist skeleton persists in casting its shadow.
Respect for Law

In “Respect for Law” Addams gives a resounding condemnation of lynching. Historian Paula Giddings writes, “The fact that such a figure as Addams would seriously engage the issue was significant. No northern white woman reformer had done so.” The essay appeared in the January 1901 issue of the *Independent*, which, according to historian David Southern, was “the only progressive magazine that did not equivocate, did not excuse, and did not retreat a single inch on negro rights.” In this essay Addams gives extensive arguments for why extra-legal violence is an ineffective method for preventing crime. The *Independent*’s May 1901 issue contained Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s response, “Lynching and the Excuse for it.” Wells-Barnett states her appreciation for Addams’s strong indictment of lynching, but focuses her essay, not on Addams’s arguments, but on what she calls Addams’s “unfortunate presumption,” that lynching was whites’ response to black men who raped white women. Of the thousands of newspaper reports Wells-Barnett had collected, 99% contained that presumption. She gave statistics published in the *Chicago Tribune*, proving that rape was the alleged crime in less than 20% of the lynchings in the preceding five years.

Theorists responding to this exchange have followed Wells-Barnett in focusing on this “unfortunate presumption.” In 1977 Bettina Aptheker gave a Marxist analysis of lynching as a terrorist method for sustaining capitalist hegemony. She contrasted Addams’s “courageous, even radical activities” on behalf of civil rights with her “chauvinist assumptions,” criticizing Addams for not questioning the southern defense of lynching as a response to black rape of white women and for letting pass the claim that blacks were ‘underdeveloped’ and hence inclined toward criminality.
Maurice Hamington, in his 2005 essay, “Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells on Lynching,” carefully develops the appreciative relationship that Addams and Wells-Barnett had over the many years they both lived in Chicago. Unlike some, Hamington does not suggest that Addams thought the “unfortunate presumption” was true. He sides with Wells-Barnett, though, arguing that by not refuting the assumption directly, Addams “violates her own feminist pragmatist method of inquiry, resulting in the perpetuation of a racial myth,” and thereby she “unwittingly perpetuated a racist assumption.” In a similar vein, Giddings records many of the fruitful collaborations between Addams and Wells-Barnett, but sides with Wells-Barnett in concluding, “Addams’s fundamental error was her failing to take into account the falsity of the rape charge.”

These authors are careful and fair-minded. However, their stress on lynching as a response to rape appears tangential when we consider the essay’s first audience, and read it for how social evolutionary theory structures Addams’s argument. Their critiques keep us from seeing that Wells-Barnett’s article was not so much a reply to what Addams wrote, as an occasion to do what she had been doing consistently for eight years: using published data to rebut the charge of rape.

On December 12, 1899, a little over a year before publication, Addams delivered “Respect for Law” as an address at the Bethel AME Church in Chicago, to a predominantly black audience. The meeting was called in response to the particularly gruesome lynching of Richard Coleman in Maysville, Kentucky, on December 7. Wells-Barnett presided, and spoke on recent history of lynchings in the US. Anti-lynching meetings had been held at the church before. Wells-Barnett had selected it for the August 1899 annual meetings of two African-American organizations of national importance, the
African-American Council and the National Association of Colored Women, precisely because it was a setting conducive to an open, militant discussion of lynching. DuBois, Addams, and many others participated in these meetings. The church’s pastor, Reverend Reverdy C. Ransom, in 1900 founded Institutional Church and Social Settlement, patterned after Hull House. Addams’s audience knew the “unfortunate presumption” was false; there was no need for her to address it further. In the speech and essay, Addams does not presume a link between lynching and rape; nor does she ask the audience to presume such for the sake of argument. What she does do is ask the audience to begin with the assumption that white Southerners who advocate lynching “honestly believe that this is the only successful method of dealing with a certain class of crimes.” Addams calls their notion, “that criminality can be suppressed and terrorized by brutal punishment; that crime can be prevented by cruelty,” a “time-honored false theor(y)” of conduct. This was a typical move for Addams. In A Modern Lear, her 1894 analysis of the Pullman strike, she began with the assumption that George Pullman honestly believed he had the best interests of his workers at heart; she did not castigate him as a greedy capitalist. Addams wanted to get beyond the personal in order to uncover the beliefs’ theoretical underpinnings. Like many of her contemporaries, Addams viewed the broad sweep of history as an evolution from savagery to civilization. In “Respect for Law” she steps inside social evolutionary theory, using it as the organizing spine of her argument. Throughout time, means of sustaining political order evolved from savagery where order was maintained through force, toward democratic self-government based on justice and the rule of law. Civilization and self-government are achievements, hard-won and tenuous; regression is
always possible. Addams argues that lynching is a particularly gruesome regression. The lynchers’ acts threaten progress toward self-government and rule of law, and place civilized society on regression’s path back toward savagery. She adds that attempting to protect women by this method also enacts the savage practice of regarding women as possessions. The women of the South might well ask themselves if they are willing to accept the status that this sort of protection brings.  

Addams offers historical examples as evidence from the past of the falsity of the lynchers’ theories of punishment. Not sparing graphic details, she reminds the audience of how the nobility right before the French Revolution, in their zeal to protect their own inherited privilege and property, used “torture, strangling, and burning” on those who dared to assert democratic rights. Their barbaric acts brought about “the moral degradation of all concerned.” Just as such actions acclimated the French populace to the brutality of the guillotine, so slavery and the Civil War hardened whites to the brutality of lynching.  

Viewed from within the social evolutionary paradigm, Addams’s condemnation of whites’ actions is powerful: lynchers are replicating feudal patterns of using violence to enforce class privilege, their justifications functioning as a cover for vengeance. Lynchers are hardening in themselves and their observers those sensitivities required to carry out self-government based on law and justice. The social evolutionary frame gives Addams a way to starkly reveal the heavy price the practice exacts: not only are lynchers regressing below the level of civilization, they are also destabilizing civilization itself.  

We can read “Respect for Law” as arguing against those who used social evolutionary theory to justify lynching, as they claimed that American blacks, still close
to savagery, only understood the language of force, and were incapable of controlling their behavior in response to legal and juridical procedure. It is clear from the context that Addams regarded African-Americans as fully capable of civilized behavior, and as having the restraint and self-control needed for the rule of law. This is evident in the final paragraph of the speech, which Addams cut from the published version. Addams said,

There is much else that might be said, but I can only add one word to this audience, made up as it is largely of the race who are the victims of this false theory of conduct. You, above all, must learn that restraint and self-control and the understanding of the Southern situation, is the only possible way for you to remedy it. That to indulge in furious denunciation, in anger against the race among whom you live, is but to exhibit the same spirit which this meeting has been called to deplore. Your race has suffered a great wrong the consequences of which will last for many generations, not only with you but with the race of the wrong-doer, whose punishment is perhaps always the greater. I would beg of you to remember that the situation is filled with perplexities for both races, that only forbearance, mutual understanding and public spirit can help either of us to find the way out.²⁹

Adams’s message here parallels the one she gave earlier to Pullman’s striking workers, reminding them to include employers in their quest for social justice. In the above paragraph Addams both acknowledges that blacks are victims of heinous crime, and holds them responsible for how they respond. To ask them to respond with restraint implies that Addams regards them as capable of so responding with the moral and intellectual capacities of people fully equipped for the responsibilities of democratic
citizenship. Whether this paragraph was courageous in countering those who advocated violence in response to lynching, or foolishly insensitive—how could a white woman presume to tell this audience how to respond to heinous crimes against them—it was consistent with Addams’s overall argument in the speech. For all citizens, progress toward democratic civilization had to be based on consent, the rule of law, and non-violent, judicious responses to allegations of criminal misconduct.

Hamington claims that, by not questioning the “unfortunate presumption” Addams “unwittingly perpetuated a racist assumption.” Out of social evolutionary theory’s many variables, Addams selects some that are not benign. She identifies “savage” with acting on impulse and lacking self-control, as linking lust and anger, and ruling by force. Other associations are ambiguous. In the paragraph describing blacks as undeveloped, childlike, and imitative, it is hard to tell if she is endorsing the view, or merely reporting Southerners’ opinions.

Conceptual frameworks permit some angles of vision while excluding others. Social evolutionary theory does the same, whether used for hateful or for more benign purposes. We see clues in “Respect for Law” that later theorists used in forming critiques of grand narratives of civilization’s progress. Early in the speech Addams uses the common construction of noting that southerners “must deal with that most intricate of all problems—the presence of two alien races.” The task was then to figure out how these alien races could be brought into adjustment. Now Addams frequently used history in her reasoning; she thought it was an important source of experiential content. Defining blacks and whites as alien races made it very hard to attend to the 300 years of intimate, continuous interaction between them. How many centuries of working and mixing does it
take before groups with little previous contact are no longer alien? Framing groups as alien races blocks consideration of how the very concepts of “white” and “black” were simultaneously and mutually constructed. It also makes it hard to imagine lynching, not as regression from the path toward civilization, but as a particularly vivid manifestation of how much whites’ so-called civilization was achieved and sustained by continual violence and practices of oppression.\textsuperscript{33} Addams was a recognized, public intellectual. Her speeches and essays mattered. With “Respect for Law” Addams perpetuated some racist assumptions while also powerfully condemning racist actions.

\textbf{“Has the Emancipation Act Been Nullified by National Indifference.”}

To commemorate the 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birth and the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Emancipation Proclamation, the February 1913 issue of \textit{Survey} contained seven essays issuing strong calls for social justice for African-Americans in government, education, housing, the economy, and so on.\textsuperscript{34} Addams, DuBois, and Wells-Barnett were among the contributors.

Addams’s contribution, “Has the Emancipation Act Been Nullified by National Indifference?” does not contain the obvious racial stereotypes found in “Respect for Law.” The decade between the two essays made a difference; Addams added considerable experience with local and national interracial organizations, and during that interval, social evolutionary theory fell out of favor with sociologists and anthropologists.\textsuperscript{35} Her essay is a stirring indictment of both southern and northern whites, and presents the fruits of their indifference as crimes against the Great Emancipator’s spirit. Written many decades before whiteness studies entered the academy, Addams here
lays out the costs of whiteness for whites. The spirit of DuBois is evident throughout, as Addams analyzes ‘the souls of white folks’ and draws from “The Sorrow Songs,” that gorgeous chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* that describes the gifts black people offer to America. In a heartfelt letter to Addams, showing his appreciation for the article, Abraham Lincoln Lee wrote, “The Negro is passing through a desperate crisis these days, caused from racial prejudice, and to have a person of your note, strength, and ability use you (sic) valuable space and make appeals in our behalf, we have no words at our command sufficient to express to you our heartfelt thanks.” He notes what recent historians have confirmed, “The door of opportunity is closed against us . . . . Conditions now are worse than before the Emancipation proclamation was signed.”

Abolitionists and Lincoln began the work of emancipation; Addams chides her generation for its indifference in failing to carry out its obligation to sustain that work. “Indifference” is a strong charge indeed, as it corrupts whites and perverts democracy itself. The result of this indifference is reaction, as blacks lose citizenship rights and economic opportunity, and suffer the horrors of lynching. How to account for this national indifference, this “spiritual bondage”? She squarely lays blame on whites. Loyalty and memory block southern whites’ ability to see the situation clearly. Their “loyalty to a lost cause” keeps them from admitting how wrong had been the cause for which their loved ones suffered and died in the war. Memories of caste relations of intimacy, false at the time, continue to fog their perceptions. Northern whites are also implicated. “The white North,” Addams writes, rather than carrying on the responsibility to sustain emancipation’s work, “submits to the chains forged . . . by its own indifference.” Northern whites have put blacks “behind the veil,” at great loss to
themselves and to the health of democracy. Instead of demanding that the morality of equal respect for all voices undergird democracy, northerners had fallen into the crude logic of government by “political necessity.” The underlying theme of this essay is essentially the same as in “Respect for Law.” By not taking on their duties to continue the work of emancipation, whites are reversing progress toward democratic civilization and regressing away from it.

On first read, social evolutionary theory is not present, until we notice the “patchwork plagiarism,” as my colleague calls it. In the first line Addams mentions British philosopher L.T. Hobhouse’s 1904 book, *Democracy and Reaction*, and attributes a short quote to him. Readers may not notice how closely three of the essay’s eight paragraphs match passages in Hobhouse’s text. Hobhouse there presents his version of social evolutionary theory, and locates the social Darwinian version as attendant to late nineteenth century imperialism’s meteoric rise. His version is in many respects the same as Addams used explicitly in *Newer Ideals of Peace*, and implicitly in *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Hobhouse begins with pre-nineteenth century aristocratic rule, where the few, deeming themselves superior, ruled autocratically, using force to uphold their privilege. Mid-nineteenth century liberalism brought progress through free trade, expanded suffrage, abolition of slavery in the colonies, and some industrial reforms. Further evolutionary progress came with late nineteenth-century “new liberalism,” or social democracy. Government was re-envisioned as “the organ of the community as a whole” and used to further social justice. The direction was toward humanitarianism based on social justice, cooperation, and peace, which Hobhouse calls “the highest product of healthy evolutionary growth.” Citizens’ obligations widen out to include all of
humanity, overcoming what Hobhouse calls “primitive divisions of class, caste, race, or nationality.”

“Reaction” is Hobhouse’s term for the late 19th century period of aggressive European imperialism into Africa and Asia. This “reaction” abandoned the evolutionary path toward humanitarianism, and exhibited repressive patterns of earlier evolutionary phases. Referring primarily to British actions in Africa, he writes, “After all, the white man’s claim to rule the black because he is wiser and more capable is essentially the same as the noble’s claim to rule the commonalty for their good as much as for his own.” With improved material conditions for the middle-classes, fervor for social justice diminished, and “indifference” set in. Middle-class young men found employment in imperial service. They raised little protest as native peoples in the colonies were forced to labor under slave-like conditions. A new version of social evolution theory developed, pieced together out of social Darwinism, hardened race-categories, and the manifest destiny of the white man to rule the earth.

When we read Addams’s essay alongside Democracy and Reaction, certain phrases stand out. Her quick reference to “that world-wide yielding to race antagonism” gains prominence. Here Addams uses social evolutionary theory to locate slavery and its aftermath in the U.S. within the context of international imperialism. Black-white race relations in the U.S. are an internalized form of imperial aggression, a local manifestation of a world-wide phenomenon. As in “Respect for Law,” Addams uses the social evolutionary frame to powerfully condemn the racist practices of so-called civilized people.

Conclusion
Addams’s essay, read in the context of *Democracy and Reaction*, shows how the grand narrative of progress structured her thinking in 1913 as well as in 1901. Here is it appropriate to adapt Hamington’s claim that in “Respect for Law” Addams violated her own feminist pragmatist method of inquiry. In continuing to frame her thinking within the grand narrative of progress, even as hopeful a version as Hobhouse’s, did she violate her feminist pragmatist method?

Yes, Addams was a pragmatist feminist. She based her theorizing on sympathetic understanding and direct local experience, keeping the voices of women and oppressed groups at the center of her concern. However, Addams also used many other theoretical perspectives in tandem. She thought scientific investigation and theorizing were important and used them in her work. The relationship among these conceptual tools needs to be worked out before evaluating Hamington’s claim. My inclination at this point is to say that at least before World War I the grand narrative of progress was the frame within which Addams used feminist pragmatist method. It was deeply embedded in her thought and in the intellectual air she and her contemporaries breathed. While using it in the way she did affirmed its validity, her activism and theorizing on behalf of interracial comity also contributed to its downfall.

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3 Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*. 112.


5 Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, 112, *Delimiting Anthropology*, 22-23


10 Shaler, “‘‘Science and the African Problem.’”


12 Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, 251,132.

13 Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* 213, 229.


15 Giddings, 429; Southern, 62.

16 “Lynching and the Excuse for It,” 1133;1134-1135.
Aptheker, *Lynching and Rape*, 7, 9-10.


Hamington, “Jane Addams,” 168, 173. Hamington also argues that by not questioning the presumption, Addams revealed the “experiential gulf” between herself and Wells-Barnett, and a lack of “sympathetic understanding on the lynching question. He hypothesizes that she did not “test” the essay with Wells before publishing it, and may have been trying to appeal to southern audiences. As I argue in this essay, these hypotheses are misguided, given the essay’s first audience at Bethel AME Church in Chicago, with Wells-Barnett in attendance.


On the lynching of Richard Coleman, see George C. Wright, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Vol. 2: In Pursuit of Equality, 1890-1980*, p. 81, “Negro Burned at Stake,” and “The Kentucky Lynching.” For coverage of the meeting at Bethel AME Church, see “Women on Burning at Stake,” and “To End Negros’ Wrongs.”


In “A Modern Lear,” Addams describes Pullman as an “unusually generous employer,” whose “sense of duty . . . represents the ideal in the minds of the best of the present employers” (132). She wrote the essay in 1894, although it was not published until 1912.


Ibid., 19.


Ibid., 18.

The blocks on the imagination are appallingly demonstrated in University of Chicago anthropologist Frederick Starr’s article, “The Degeneracy of the American Negro.” He argues that racial degeneracy accounts for the disproportionate percentage of blacks in prison, for the high crime rate among them, and as explaining why they congregate in unsanitary neighborhoods. It is a waste of resources to educate them, he claims, and concludes, “But we may expect the race here to die and disappear; the sooner perhaps the better.”

The seven essays were by Addams, George Burman Foster, George Edmund Haynes, W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, and George Packard. Survey, 565-581. Excerpts from these essays were reprinted in the “Opinion” section of the March 1913 issue of the NAACP’s journal, Crisis, 229-230.

Addams worked with a number of interracial settlement houses in Chicago, participated in the founding of the NAACP, and was president of its Chicago chapter. See Philpott, The Slum and the Ghetto, 318-322; and Giddings, Ida, 492, 499, 529. For the
decline in social evolutionary theory between 1900 and 1914, see Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, 258-264. His analysis of how W.I. Thomas changed his views during this interval illustrates the point clearly.


37 Addams, “Has the Emancipation Act…” 565-566.

38 The first two paragraphs of Addams’s essay closely resemble passages from pages 61-63 of *Democracy and Reaction*. The final paragraph borrows from pages 58-59, 60, 63, and 122 of that text.

39 See Fischer, “The Conceptual Scaffolding of *Newer Ideals of Peace*.”

40 Hobhouse, *Democracy and Reaction*, 57-58.


Works Cited

Note: Materials by Jane Addams marked as “JAPM” are in the microfilm collection of the Jane Addams papers. The first number is the reel; the number following the colon is the frame number. In *The Jane Addams Papers, 1860-1960*, ed. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International), 1984.


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