Interpretation and Social Transformation: Reading Addams Through Mead

Marilyn Fischer, Ph.D., University of Dayton

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On many occasions, Addams described a social settlement’s function in terms of interpretation. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, describing how Hull House residents helped recent immigrants navigate city and social services, she wrote, “The Settlement is valuable as an information and interpretation bureau.” Recalling how Hull-House’s involvement with labor unions led some people to associate the settlement with labor violence, Addams commented, “The attempt to interpret opposing forces to each other will long remain a function of the Settlement, unsatisfactory and difficult as the role often becomes.”¹ In these and similar passages “interpretation” involves clarifying and making accessible American institutions to immigrants, and explaining immigrant customs and experiences to non-immigrant Americans. The activities of Hull House, as well as Addams’s speeches and writings can thus be understood as forms of interpretation. Her aim throughout was to encourage sympathetic understanding among disparate groups and thereby foster growth toward social democracy. Addams understands interpretation here to be part of citizenship, writing that the task of interpretation is “the straightforward obligation which one citizen owes to another citizen.”²

Some sociologists place Addams’s construction of social knowledge in the interpretive tradition of sociology, blending Weberian *verstehen* with symbolic interactionism.³ Dorothy Ross, a historian of the social sciences, also places Addams within the tradition of interpretive sociology, and calls *Democracy and Social Ethics* “an exemplar of her interpretive approach.”⁴ While the disciplinary vocabulary is different,
these accounts are similar to accounts of Addams’s methods and commitments in terms of philosophical pragmatism. Interpretation is thus a central concept of Addams’s philosophy.

In her 1908 essay, “The Chicago Settlements and Social Unrest,” Addams gives a particularly explicit discussion of interpretation. The press attacked Hull House and Addams with being champions of anarchy for their interventions on behalf of the alleged anarchist, Lazarus Averbuch. In the essay Addams defends her actions in terms of carrying out the professional obligation of settlement workers to engage in interpretation. This essay is a particularly rich resource for exploring Addams’s understanding of interpretation, because here she is not just describing interpretation or locating it philosophically; she is actually doing it. She demonstrates the philosophical responsibility Dewey refers to when he writes that “philosophy must in time become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life, and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis.” Exploring Addams’s concept of interpretation will add to the work of other pragmatists, such as Peirce and Royce, for whom interpretation is a major category. Finally, the essay is richly suggestive for today’s concerns as in it Addams explores appropriate responses to terrorism and to immigration, the meaning of civil liberties and due process, and the moral responsibilities that knowledge brings to knowledge holders.

After briefly explaining what the Averbuch affair was, I will set out the interpretive moves Addams makes in the essay. Addams was a deliberate and skillful writer; I make the prima facie assumption that the essay is both a defense of and a
demonstration of interpretation. I am particularly interested in where Addams locates herself as the interpreter, and how at times interpretation takes the form of deliberate, active, and non-neutral intervention in events. For each interpretive move I will raise some concerns. I then read Addams’s presentation of interpretation through Mead’s account of social transformation. Doing so will illuminate her thinking as well as Mead’s, and provide a way to respond to the concerns I raise.

The Averbuch Affair

Haymarket Square in 1886 and President McKinley’s assassination in 1901 were just the highpoints; as the century turned, the country was terrified of anarchy and anarchism. Whatever the actual threat, the charge of anarchy was effective in mongering fear, selling newspapers, and spreading political propaganda. Chicago was known as the “headquarters of anarchism in the U.S.” On March 2, 1908, an 18-year old, recent immigrant went to the home of Chicago’s police chief, George Shippy. Ten minutes after being admitted to the house, the young man was dead; Shippy, his son, and driver were wounded. In his statement to the press, Shippy claimed that the young man was an anarchist, intent on assassinating him as a public official. City officials accepted Shippy’s account that he had killed the man in self-defense, and declared there would be no an official investigation. The Chicago press was immediately full of sensationalistic stories. When it was established that the young man was Lazarus Averbuch, a recent Russian-Jewish immigrant, xenophobia was added to anti-anarchist hysteria. Two settlement houses quickly became involved, Maxwell House, located directly in the Russian-Jewish immigrant neighborhood, and Hull-House, which in addition to working with immigrants
of many nationalities, had long-established ties with the more established and influential Jewish citizens of Chicago. These groups were concerned about the level of community tension, and worried that the case was not being given a thorough investigation. The press was not kind to Addams’s and the settlement houses’ involvement in this matter. Hull-House was known for welcoming anarchists; Peter Kropotkin and Emma Goldman had visited, and anarchist ideas were debated there. Shippy at one point had said, “Social settlements are the first cousins to the anarchists.” The press quickly linked Averbuch to Emma Goldman, who was scheduled to give public lectures in Chicago later that week.  

Addams’s essay, “The Chicago Settlements and Social Unrest,” was published in *Charities and The Commons* exactly two months after Averbuch was killed. In the first sentence, Addams declares that settlements had “come to regard . . . interpreting foreign colonies to the rest of the city in the light of a professional obligation." She quickly states her credentials for her authority to act in this capacity. She and other settlement workers had spent years interacting with immigrant communities, acquiring information about, and participating in social and collegial relations with them. They thus had the knowledge and experiential basis from which to carry out interpretation, and so to counter press sensationalism and to critique responses of the police and city officials.

**Addams’s Interpretive Moves**

In this essay Addams does not locate herself as a neutral, third party, mediating among the other parties. Instead, she moves among and within the various groups, explaining, defending, and sometimes intervening directly. Here I will track where she locates herself and the range of activities that interpretation entails.
Identification with the audience: While Addams claims authority to interpret immigrant customs, attitudes, and experiences, she begins her interpretation by identifying herself with the audience—primarily white, middle-class, and non-immigrant. She recalls her own ancestors settling on William Penn’s land in the seventeenth century. Using the first person plural, she tells how “our own ancestors” cared deeply for freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. Her move here is to identify herself with the audience in terms of their shared immigrant heritage and shared commitment to civil liberties. She then points out that recent immigrants share these same commitments, as well.11

Having located herself with the audience, Addams then interprets the public’s frantic, panicked reaction of “horror and recoil” to charges that Averbuch was an anarchist. She frames the public’s fear reaction, not as irrational, but as deeply rooted in human experience. Referring obliquely to widely accepted ethnological theories of “race memory” and “survivals,” Addams links the community reaction back to early days of tribal life, where government’s basic function was military protection against outside attack. It is a short imaginative step to identify the anarchist with the traitor, i.e., as someone to whom protection has been granted, who then attacks the community from within.12

In light of the actual threat, the public’s response was irrational and xenophobic. We can ask, why did Addams explicitly refuse to denounce these reactions, and what distinction is she drawing when she states that she wants “to interpret rather than denounce?”13 This question is important because here Addams is making what for her is a typical move. For example, in “A Modern Lear” she does not attack Pullman as a greedy,
exploitive capitalist; in her essay on lynching she does not directly denounce people who believe that lynchings are justified responses to black men who rape white women. Why does she not denounce when denunciation seems justified?\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Narratives and Evaluations: the Response of the Russian Jewish Community}: In conveying to the audience the effect of their “horror and recoil” on members of the Russian Jewish immigrant community, Addams does not present information straight out, but employs rhetorical devices through which the audience can hear the immigrants’ voices directly and feel the emotional impact that events had on them. For example, one Russian Jewish immigrant had said to her, “No one tries so hard as we do, to be Americans. To attach anarchy to us means persecution, plain Jew-baiting and nothing else.”\textsuperscript{15} In the next paragraph she gives a vivid litany of what the community experienced in the wake of the Averbuch’s killing: a promised land sale contract was withdrawn, “children were hooted and stoned upon the streets,” students were forced to withdraw from college because of persecution from their peers.\textsuperscript{16}

In this section Addams moves seamlessly between conveying the impact of the charge of anarchy on the Russian Jewish community, and assessing the legitimacy of that response. The Russian Jewish community had doubted Shippy’s version of the story; he had at first thought Averbuch was Italian, and no evidence that Averbuch was in fact an anarchist had been uncovered. In noting the distance between the press version and that of the Russian Jewish community, Addams tucks in the editorial comment that the Russian Jewish version is “certainly possible.”\textsuperscript{17}

She begins the next paragraph with “It seemed to the Russian colony…” and again slides from conveying information about the Russian Jewish immigrants’
perspectives, to stating strongly how public officials should respond. Because the charge of anarchy is “so hideous an affront” on society’s “most precious of its inherited institutions,” justice demands that the facts be “carefully ascertained” and that a way of handling the situation “be soberly considered,” before the immigrant colony as a whole is stigmatized as anarchist. Is she giving the view of the Russian colony here or is she giving her own view, based on her authority as an interpreter? Is making assessments of this sort part of the interpreter’s function?

Addams also devotes a great deal of time to presenting the belief of many members of the Russian Jewish community that the Czar’s agents in the United States manipulated the whole affair. They claimed that the police had unwittingly aided Russian government agents in the U.S., whose aim was to foment so much fear of anarchism, that the U.S. government would extradite back to Russia the very people that the Russian government wanted to persecute. These agents manipulated a naïve, unsuspecting Averbuch to go to the police chief’s house, perhaps, as his sister, Olga believed, in keeping with the Russian practice of asking the police chief to attest to his good character for a job application. These agents may well have planted the rumors about assassination plots in Shippy’s ears. The public played right into these Russian agents’ hands, by believing the police reports.

Did Addams think these rumors were plausible? She hedges, sprinkling the passage with “The Russian colony says…”, “The Russian colony insists…”, “The Russian colony believes…”, hypothesizing that the immigrants may be “most unjustly suspicious.” Yet she deems this rumor worthy of her most florid rhetorical passage: “Would it not provoke to ironic laughter that very Nemesis which presides over the
destinies of nations, if the most autocratic government yet remaining in civilization should succeed in pulling back into its own autocratic methods the youngest and most daring experiment in democratic government?" Since Addams critiques the press for spreading unfounded rumors, why does she go into so much detail on this rumor, rather than waiting for an investigation?

*Action as Interpretation: by the Police and by Addams:* Many members of the Russian Jewish community had experienced recent pogroms in Russia. By bringing these experiences to the audience’s attention, Addams is trying to elicit sympathetic understanding for the immigrants. But she does more. Here, interpretation takes the form of action. She states that in Russia, “government is interpreted to (Russian Jews) by a series of unjust and repressive measures” and that in Russia the police, backed by the military “are the final executors and interpreters of autocracy.” This is the lived, first-hand experiential background the immigrants brought with them, and the lens through which they experienced the Chicago police response to Averbuch’s killing. In one long, torrential sentence, Addams lists how Chicago police subjected Averbuch’s sister, Olga, and others to Russian-style police practices—raiding, ransacking, arresting, interrogating harshly, and more. Addams gives her assessment: “The only sane, the only possible cure for such a state of mind, the only method by which a reasonable and loyal conception of government may be substituted for the one formed upon such an experience, is that the actual experience of the refugees with government in America shall gradually demonstrate what a very different thing government means here.”
Where is Addams as interpreter located here? She moves between conveying information, providing background context, making pointed and strong social critiques, and playing legal theorist. Do all of these roles fall under “interpretation?”

Addams’s own actions enter the story here. She wrote this essay in part to explain and defend her own and the settlements’ actions regarding the Averbuch affair. She recounts how members of the Russian Jewish community came to her “in the moment of their perplexity and distress” Those she identifies as “younger and more radical” and “hot-headed” wanted to call a massive demonstration, timed to coincide with Averbuch’s reburial, this time with a proper Jewish ceremony. The “older and more conservative” members thought that this would only further enflame the situation, and wanted at all costs to avoid the demonstration, while still giving the body a proper Jewish burial.25

Addams sided with the older, more conservative members and used her contacts in various city offices to carry out their plan. This was not easy to do. They needed permits from three different city offices; the radical hot-heads positioned themselves in the hallways by these offices. Everything had to happen between 9 a.m. when the offices opened and noon when the next edition of the papers would signal the demonstrators. Addams said that obtaining the permit from the coroner involved “almost insuperable difficulties” and that this was a “delicate and extremely difficult affair” to pull off, one that the older, conservative members could not have accomplished without settlement help.26

Thus, according to Addams, the Russian police interpreted their government to the people through repression, the Chicago police interpreted their government to the people through similarly repressive actions, and she, by her actions, interpreted her
understanding of just citizenship to the immigrants. We need a way of framing how interpretation can include action, especially since such interventions often entail judging on whose behalf one should act.

Addams’s actions here raise questions regarding transparency. With her concern for due process, I assume she valued transparency as part of the process that is due. Yet there are two respects in which Addams’s actions were not transparent. The fact that she did her utmost to carry out the reburial in secret, was only the first. The second respect is in the way Addams tells the story in this essay. She does not disclose the full extent of her involvement, or the identities of these older, more conservative members. Unless there was another group of whom I am not aware, these older, more conservative members were not Russian, and while they were Jewish, their demographic profile was very different from that of immigrants who recently escaped Russian pogroms. This older group included Julius Rosenwald, board chair of Sears and Roebuck and one of the wealthiest people in the U.S.; Julian Mack, a Chicago judge and Zionist leader; S.S. Gregory, a former president of the American Bar Association; and Rabbi Emil Hirsch, a leader of Reform Judaism. These people were highly educated and integrated into Chicago elites. They had long established relationships with Addams, and were financial contributors to Hull House. At their request, Addams formed a committee, collected funds, found a trustworthy coroner for a second autopsy, and hired attorney Harold Ickes, who later became Secretary of the Interior under Franklin Roosevelt. Do interpreters have obligations of full disclosure? I suppose it is in some sense true that these people came to Addams “in the moment of their perplexity and distress,” but saying this
obfuscates who they were, what their relation to Addams was, and the full extent of her interventions.

**Interpretation as fantasy: the hypothetical interview.** Here Addams makes a curious, if not bizarre, rhetorical move. Mid-paragraph, Addams shifts her own location from settlement worker to whom the Russian Jewish community could appeal in time of crisis, to addressing “the unknown members of the community” who are seeking moral guidance on how to think about these events. How to reach such an audience? Seeking “an organ which appeals to the entire people,” she poses a hypothetical interview to a hypothetical reporter from a “ten-cent magazine,” such as McClure’s. To this most inclusive audience Addams conveys what she promised at the beginning of the essay, her “mature convictions” drawn from “the sober results of (her) experience.”  

This is in striking contrast to the press hysteria, and to President Theodore Roosevelt’s statement in the *New York Times*, “When compared with the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance. The anarchist is the enemy of humanity, the enemy of all mankind, and his is a deeper degree of criminality than any other.”  

To the hypothetical reporter Addams counters with her sociological assessment that the appeal of anarchism as a philosophy is diminishing, and that the real danger is from those immigrants, who, having suffered genuine and extensive persecution, justify violence against their persecutors. A “moral twist,” she calls this form of terrorism, apt to be replicated by less conscientious imitators, and not far removed from the terrorism of lynching, which was far more prevalent in the United States.

**Interpretation and the wider implications for “homeland security”:** At issue were public safety and security; the public had reason to worry about its own safety if those
who provided security were themselves subject to assassination. To this question of security, Addams speaks vigorously in her own voice and offers an expansive notion of citizenship. Here she uses the voice of Professor Albion Small, who stated in a *Chicago Evening Post* article, “The settlements are doing that which the whole city should have done.” Addams believes that moral responsibility grows out of concrete experience; because of their long and close engagement with immigrants, settlement workers had a particular responsibility to speak and act on their behalf.

The duties of citizenship she articulates here go beyond even proper legal procedures that respect civil liberties and due process. Many press reports had characterized Averbuch as mentally deranged. Some members of the Russian Jewish community preferred this diagnosis, thinking it would spare them the reflective glare of a charge of anarchy. Addams makes clear that legal channels cannot stop “a half-crazed creature bent upon destruction in the name of justice.” The only source of security is to welcome such people with compassion and understanding, drawing them into fellowship within the community. In this essay she demonstrates this wisdom with a story from an anarchist turned wise; in life she demonstrated this wisdom everyday with Hull House’s open door.

In the short span between the event and publication of the essay, the Averbuch affair was being used in Congress as evidence that U.S. immigration restrictions needed to be tightened. If passed, these laws would “interpret” Constitutional freedoms and protections far more narrowly than Addams advocated. In human terms, such restrictions would be catastrophic. Addams points out that they would “close up the last loophole of
escape for thousands of people who are living under an oppression and a persecution which are simply intolerable.”

How expansive is interpretation’s scope? If Addams is justified in considering her remarks about lynching, welcoming “half-crazed creatures,” and U.S. immigration law as interpretation, we need a theory with which to frame these extensions. I propose that Mead’s theory of social transformation gives us such a frame. While I think that based on her own writings Addams could respond to the concerns I have raised, I would like to use Mead’s conceptions of self and society and his views on social transformation to frame Addams’s concept of interpretation and to offer ways of responding to the concerns raised above.

**Mead on Social Transformation**

Mead was active in civic and social reform movements in Chicago, for example he and Addams served as vice-presidents of the Immigrant Protective League. He heard Addams present a version of “The Chicago Settlements and Social Unrest” at the University of Chicago’s Quadrangle Club on April 11, 1908. The next day he wrote her, “I presume that you could not know how deep an impression you made last night by your very remarkable paper. My consciousness was, I presume, in the same condition as that of the rest of your audience—completely filled with the multitude of impressions which you succeeded in making, and the human responses which you called out from so many unexpected points of view. . . . I want to express my own very profound appreciation of the human document you read to us.”
We can understand why Mead was so struck by Addams’s approach here. He believed that ethics cannot proceed by applying abstract rules to a given problem, but that the values pertaining to a given situation emerge out of that situation. What is most important is to identify all of the various interests involved and take them into account.\(^{36}\) Addams’s analysis of the Averbuch affair is just the sort of analysis that Mead would think needed to be carried out in order to resolve ethically problematic situations. Using Mead, we can understand “interpretation” as those processes and activities that bring about personal and social transformation toward a more adequate generalized other, and thus a more well-functioning community.

*Mead on Self, Community, Reason, and Social Change:* For Mead, self and society are intimately intertwined. He writes, “The unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole.”\(^{37}\) The self is thoroughly social. One comes to be a self, and to know oneself as a self by acting with others in socially organized settings and coming to view oneself through the perspectives of the others. Mead’s well-known example is that of children playing a structured game such as baseball. To know how to play as the team’s catcher, the child must internalize all of the other positions. To function as a catcher is to function as catcher-in-relation, i.e., to anticipate how another child in a given position will respond, and then shape one’s gesture accordingly. As applied to a community in general, Mead calls this taking on “the attitude of the generalized other.”\(^{38}\) Communication is possible because members share a discourse in which the meanings of words, symbols, and gestures are functionally the same for each member.\(^{39}\) Mead writes, “Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, cooperative social
activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed. To act socially, one must know what one’s gestures mean from others’ points of view, one must be able to grasp the social meaning of one’s acts, and then use that meaning to shape one’s gesture or response.

A given self participates in a variety of social groups, and so in that sense contains multiple selves. Mead writes that some of these groups are concrete—social clubs, one’s family or neighborhood, and so on, and some of these groups are abstract, that is, based on definite social organization, yet indirect, for example, the groups of creditors and debtors. Because these groups can change and enlarge, because selves can enter into new social relations, selves and society can undergo continual reconstruction, opening the possibility for positive social transformation. Socially problematic situations indicate that the structure of the generalized other is inadequately formed. Resolving the problematic situation calls for selves to enlarge and for the generalized other to be reconstructed.

Mead considers thinking and intelligence as critical tools for reconstructing self and society. He defines thinking as “the internalized conversation of gestures,” and as “taking the attitude of the generalized other toward himself.” Essentially, thinking or reflection is a matter of delaying one’s reaction to a situation to give oneself time to anticipate what others’ responses to one’s action or gesture will be, and then modifying one’s action or gesture accordingly. The quality of one’s thought reflects how widely and carefully one can anticipate the responses of others. This is a process for enlarging the self, and bringing about social reconstruction as well.
Some people are able to function as social change agents in particularly notable ways, more so than others. How is this possible? Mead describes these people as “of great mind and great character.” They strongly embody principles and values that are already present in the community, but only partially expressed in institutions and in other people’s actions. These community leaders are able to call on members of the community to more fully express these principles, to widen their own selves, and concomitantly to strengthen the generalized other.46

Using Mead to Respond to Concerns

Who and where is the interpreter?: Mead speaks of social change agents as members of the community who have a wider vision, based on community principles and values that are present in the community, but inadequately expressed. I propose that the image Mead had in mind was not that of an impartial spectator or mediator, but a social settlement worker.47 Mead was involved with Addams at Hull-House, and even more intimately involved in the University of Chicago settlement, headed by Mary McDowell, who trained under Addams and worked closely with her. In his essay, “The Social Settlement: Its Basis and Function,” Mead’s description of settlement workers fits well with his discussion of social change agents and his approach to ethics as summarized above. He writes, “It is the privilege of the social settlement to be a part of its own immediate community, to approach its conditions with no preconceptions, to be the exponents of no dogma or fixed rules of conduct, but to find out what the problems of their community are and as a part of it to help toward their solution.” That settlement residents dwell in their neighborhoods, Mead thinks, is an enormous strength and source
of intelligence. Because the neighborhood is their home, their knowledge and motivation for change grow out of the relationships they form there. Their neighbors to them are not souls to save or objects to study, but full human beings with whom to dwell and work collaboratively.\textsuperscript{48}

We can map Addams’s claims for the authority to interpret onto Mead’s image of a moral leader. Because she was deeply engaged with many different social groups in Chicago—various ethnic immigrant communities, civic associations, women’s clubs, labor organizations, professional and business elites—and because she reflected on her experiences with all these groups, she had a wider social self than did many other Chicagoans at that time. Because she had internalized these various forms of social organization and forms of discourse, she could occupy multiple roles and thus move easily among these groups. Her essay reflects such movement.

Mead writes, “The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community.”\textsuperscript{49} We can think of Chicago in 1908 as having an underdeveloped generalized other. The general public was not able to anticipate the response of the Russian Jewish immigrant community to press reports or to the public’s own response of “horror and recoil.” In “The Chicago Settlements and Social Unrest,” Addams conveyed information, attitudes, and previous experiences of the immigrant community upon which the public could begin to reconstruct their reactions and their own selves.

Mead writes that each person functionally is made up of multiple selves. Also, he writes that social reconstruction presupposes a basis of common social interests. Addams’s essay exemplifies these statements when she identifies immigrant heritage and commitment to civil liberties as held in common by the audience and the Russian Jewish
immigrant community alike. We can think of immigrant heritage and civil liberties as examples of Mead’s “abstract social classes,” that is, as providing a common basis for reconstruction in which xenophobic responses can be dampened or eliminated.50

This perspective gives a clue as to why Addams sought “to interpret rather than denounce.” Granted, many audience members were xenophobic, but that is not all they were. Denunciations often have a global impact on the self; one feels that all of one’s multiple selves are being condemned, even though some of those selves are praiseworthy. Denunciation is apt to further polarize a community, rather than leading toward personal and social reconstruction.

**Why Narratives?:** The essay is full of voices, full of characters, full of stories. Why include all of these? One could claim that the “bottom line” of the essay is that public officials should act in a manner consistent with civil liberties and due process. In that case, why does Addams tell so many stories rather than making this point in a straightforward way? Do the stories play a philosophical role, in addition to being rhetorically interesting?

On Mead’s definition of rationality, these multiple narratives provide materials with which people think. Mead writes, “If the individual can take the attitude of the others and control his action by these attitudes, and control their action through his own, then we have what we can term “rationality.”51 Thinking takes place in the form of internalized conversations; one thinks by taking in the response of others to one’s anticipated gesture and adjusting one’s gesture accordingly. If the audience members knew how the Russian Jewish immigrant community would respond to their “horror and recoil” at charges of anarchism, if they knew the experiences of persecution and anti-
Semitism that lay behind the immigrants’ responses, then the audience members would have had material with which to slow down their responses and adjust them from ‘horror and recoil’ to sympathetic understanding. The same could be said of police and public officials. Addams calls for restraint; public officials should not judge the case or make unsubstantiated accusations before a thorough investigation has been made. To exercise this restraint, these officials also need to think. That is, they need in their imaginations to hold conversations with all of those parties whose interests are affected, to anticipate their various responses, and take all of these into account.

*How to think about civil liberties:* It is easy to think of the Constitution and the law as providing rules that public officials are to apply in official conduct, and citizens are to follow in daily life. Mead gives us another way to think about civil liberties and due process that help make sense of how they function in Addams’s interpretive moves. Mead would think of civil liberties as shorthand expressions for some of the community’s principles and values that are inadequately expressed in the society’s institutions and modes of cooperation and not fully incorporated into society’s selves or in the generalized other. Simply asking people to “play by the rules” does not in itself aid in social or personal reconstruction. Providing the rich array of narrative voices does aid in this reconstructive process.

*What of Action?:* For Mead, meanings are established through the responses people make. The generalized other is constructed out of how people play their roles in their society. Thus actions are potent interpreters of what social institutions are and what they mean. Legal documents and organizational charts can be helpful, but action is a more definitive indicator of meaning.
Addams’s writings are consistent with this view. In a 1899 essay, “A Function of the Social Settlement,” she defines a settlement as “an attempt to express the meaning of life in terms of life itself, in forms of activity,” adding, “There is no doubt that the deed often reveals when the idea does not…” She reflects this sentiment near the beginning of “The Chicago Settlements and Social Unrest” when she comments that settlement houses’ many classes in citizenship had a far less potent pedagogical effect than actual current events. The Chicago police Russian-style investigative techniques demonstrated the meaning of due process with a force that citizenship classes could never counterbalance.

If action interprets more loudly than speech, what do we make of Addams’s role in acting on behalf of the older, more conservative members of the Jewish community? If we discard the impartial spectator and the mediator as images of the interpreter and substitute the settlement worker, then Addams’s interventions make good sense. Her interventions were made in the spirit of concretely enacting her vision of civil liberties and due process, a vision based on her multiple involvements in multiple social groups. Her actions contributed to revising the generalized other and to social transformation. The point to realize here is that she reached her position as an authoritative interpreter through activity—not in the library or the laboratory—but through years of action with people, as she fostered the relationships through which coordinated social action is possible. Trust and obligations to respond are part of the fabric of enduring relationships. Because of her on-going relationships with various Jewish communities, she had to respond.
Now I do not have enough information to assess whether she chose wisely in this case. One could interpret her choice as siding with Chicago’s elites, rather than with the most vulnerable. Also, doubts linger about her lack of transparency in bringing about Averbuch’s reburial. She did want to avoid the risk of violence, inherent in tense public demonstrations. From her years of work with labor conflicts, she knew that violence further polarizes communities and never heals them. A charitable reading would use Mead’s caution that values emerge from the situation itself, and cannot be imposed from an abstract height. This also might be an instance of the “sickening sense of compromise” that Addams so often found to be unavoidable in dealing with concrete cases. In not revealing the identities of the older, more conservative members, she may have been protecting them from anti-Semitic attack, another instance of unavoidable trade-offs inherent in concrete action.54

How can we think about the expansive scope of Addams’s interpretation? Again, Mead’s theory is helpful. Calling up the perspective of others can in effect function as a mirror on one’s own experience. Horror at the behavior of Russian police can become a way of interpreting police behavior at home. Hearing of rumors in another community may help one identify how rumors function in one’s own social group. Terrorism in Russia, if reflected upon, can lead one to see the terrorism of lynching at home. These reflections can aid in constructing a more comprehensive and just generalized other. Mead’s theory of social transformation gives a frame within which it makes good sense to include evaluation, action, and tracing wider implications as elements of interpretation.

Notes
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.

1 Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House, 99, 134.


3 Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, The Women Founders, 84, 75.


5 See for example, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, Pragmatism and Feminism, and her “Introduction” to the Illinois reprint edition of Democracy and Social Ethics.

6 In the portions of this essay that appear in the chapter on the Russian 1905 revolution in Twenty Years at Hull-House, the explicit, deliberate focus on interpretation is diminished.


8 Roth and Kraus, An Accidental Anarchist. 7.

9 Ibid., 7, 24-25.


11 Ibid., 156.

12 Ibid., 156. For an account of race memory see Carpenter, “Gods as Embodiments of the Race-Memory.” For an account of survivals, see Tylor, The Origins of Culture, Chapter 1.

For Addams’s analysis of Pullman, see “A Modern Lear.” For Addams’s analysis of lynching, see “Respect for Law.” Ida B. Wells criticized Addams for not challenging this belief directly. See Wells, “Lynching and the Excuse for It.”


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 160.


Ibid.

Ibid.

For an account of the pogroms see Shlomo Lambroza, “The Pogroms of 1903-1906.” The first and most well-known of these took place in Kishinev, where the Averbuch family lived.

Addams, “Chicago Settlements,” 158.

Ibid.

Addams, “Chicago Settlements,” 159.

Ibid.

Roth and Kraus, An Accidental Anarchist, 61-62.

Ibid., 73-76.


New York Times, April 10, 1908; quoted in Roth and Kraus, An Accidental Anarchist, 171.

Letter from G.H. Mead to Jane Addams, April 12, 1908, (JAPM 5:368).


Aboulafia sees affinities between Mead’s view and Adam Smith’s notion of the impartial spectator. See *The Cosmopolitan Self*, especially 37-39, 72-73, and 108-110.


Ibid., 157.

Ibid., 334.

Addams, “Chicago Settlements,” 155-56. Emma Goldman commented on this point in her March 6, 1908 “Letter to the Public of Chicago.” She wrote, “We further wish to know whether the police department of this city have taken it upon themselves to interpret the constitutional rights of the American people, to whom free speech and a free assembly still seem the most important bulwark of this country.” 282.

Addams uses the phrase, “sickening sense of compromise” in Democracy and Social Ethics, 69. On the pressure to remain anonymous that some members of the older, more conservative Jewish community felt, see Roth and Kraus, An Accidental Anarchist, 100-105.

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