“The Common Roots of Abundance and Scarcity in a Globalized Economy”

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Under the rather bland title of “The Philosophy of a New Day,” Jane Addams addressed technological, social, and economic issues of great concern to her contemporaries. Written late in life, her short speech to the 1933 International Congress of Women exemplifies the centrality of morally guided social reconstruction to pragmatic theorizing. Addams was responding to what was expected to be an era of abundance in which enough resources to satisfy the needs of the whole planet would be produced by fewer people. In contrast, we are struggling to respond to present disasters and projected scarcity induced by global warming, itself a result of the technological revolution that seemed so promising at its inception. I argue that--oddly enough--Addams’s analysis has relevance to both transitional crises.

The setting provides an important context. The fact that Addams begins by questioning whether a new day will actually happen is a direct challenge to the motivations behind the World’s Fair of 1933-34. It took place during Chicago’s centennial year while the Great Depression was going on. “In a significant break with the Columbian Exposition and all earlier fairs,” according to Cheryl R. Ganz, “the 1933 exposition reflected the business-military-engineering model fundamental to the professional careers of its primary organizers, Rufus and Charles Dawes and Lenox R. Lohr. . . . Exhibits also emphasized science and technology’s application to everyday life, leading viewers to imagine a better future” (2). While the fair was set up to celebrate the second industrial revolution, Addams’s approach is more cautious and critical.

She begins, not with one, but two industrial revolutions that took place in her lifetime. Both caused severe social upheavals. The first one involved the waves of immigrants torn from their rural environments and forced to make a new life in a foreign, urban, and often hostile environment. The second caused the increasing obsolescence of workers due to technological advancement, specifically that more assembly line workers were being displaced through the latest inventions of automation.

Addams sees her role as a philosopher to be one of drawing attention to unjust social, economic, and political conditions, explaining why they are unjust despite the fact that they often appear to be the normal and acceptable way of organizing society. This includes motivating people to create a more just and equitable society as the best expression of their efforts to lead a good and fulfilling life. This is in direct opposition to the intent of the fair organizers, who, “influenced by the war and early twentieth-century distrust of humankind’s capacity to produce a better world, replaced orthodox views with their belief that progress rides on the swell of technological innovation. . . . In the fair’s robot-dominated Fountain of Science they boldly expressed their philosophy that science and technology, independent of human agency, drive progress, a philosophy succinctly articulated in the fair’s theme, ‘Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms’” (Ganz, 3).

Having gone through two industrial revolutions in her lifetime, Addams feels called upon to analyze the latest difficult period of transition and perplexity. She points out three aspects of the situation to address: (1) Inequality in the rate of progress for different people and countries; (2) The obsolescence of certain social concepts because they are no longer useful but that are nonetheless being clung to because of fear of new concepts not yet in place, and (3) The widespread spirit of conformity leading to intellectual apathy and mental incapacity.

(1) We are diversified, not only in the goals we, as a society, should seek, but even when we sometimes agree, it takes place at different speeds. Think of access to high quality education, economic resources, safe neighborhoods, and freedom from harassment.

(2) The obsolescence of certain social concepts, such as nationalism. Although born of liberty and free development, it now threatens them. Our economics and politics are in conflict everywhere. Economics is making nations more interdependent, but it is being thwarted by more intense nationalism. Where international trade is promising wider distribution of goods, it is being strangled by national restrictions.

(3) Widespread impatience with differences of opinion results in conformity, on the one hand, and fear of radicalism on the other. When just having differing opinions is seen as radical, the conditions for intolerance and persecution are present. Stifling the proliferation of different points of view that are so necessary in a free society for generating new approaches to social problems becomes especially dangerous in periods of worldwide maladjustment. Failure to think for oneself opens the way to the demagoguery of those who claim to have solutions.

In a direct riposte to the fair organizers’ belief that at most, humankind could contribute to world progress through consumerism, Addams says that a better analysis of current conditions, undistorted by self-serving and inherited traditions, is needed. Addams asks how, in the light of acknowledged disparities, we should respond. Challenging the philosophy behind the world’s fair, she appeals instead to “our philosophy.” She intimates it is a philosophy that is or should be shared by her audience. Addams says that certain things are obvious, such as that women’s organizations will fulfill their high ambitions only insofar as they keep “their philosophy more or less pragmatic.” They will be useful only to the extent that they learn from unfolding events what lessons are worthwhile to pass on. Back of this injunction is the pragmatic method of experiential and experimental learning.