

## Embracing a Politics of Educated Hope as Engaged Public Intellectuals: Lessons From Jane Addams, Myles Horton, and Jean Anyon

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I have learned a great deal over the past two years as the president of this venerable association. And I say this with more than a little Socratic irony. From where I stand today, you see, I recognize that I had--and surely still have--a lot to learn about the vital necessity of trying to make a positive difference in the world as an engaged public intellectual. Being schooled for over a decade in the culture of academe, such public engagement was not, in my experience, something that received much serious or sustained attention, to the extent that it was acknowledged at all. In its prevailing forms at least, the rarified culture of academe seems many times to authorize (or even promote) the easy hypocrisy of word and deed, precept and practice. There is lots of talk about the need to overcome the many glaring injustices in the world today, but correspondingly little public action. (I must add here that I sometimes think people's zeal in decrying these injustices manifests their sense of guilt and complicity at their own relative inaction. To the extent that such displays serve as a catharsis and fulfill our *raison d'être* as academics, they doubtless supplant more direct public engagement and marginalize "on-the-ground" efforts to pursue possible avenues of change.)

As many of you also know, my bailiwick within the domain of educational foundations is philosophy, a discipline for which arcane theorizing and a carefully guarded detachment are often the norm. These habits of mind, while not entirely exclusive (thanks largely to my mentor Philip Jackson), were also a significant part of my inheritance as an academic, and they were likely reinforced by the fact that my area of specialization within philosophy is aesthetics. While practicing artists have often been known to participate in various social and political movements, aestheticians, like most academics, appear contented to converse among themselves while observing disinterestedly from the sidelines. (I'm reminded here of the popular saying that "aesthetics is to artists what ornithology must be like to birds." A parallel no doubt exists in other academic disciplines.)

Quite naturally, my preliminary efforts to come to terms with the forces that shaped my

identity as an academic surfaced periodically in my president's columns for the NYSFEA Newsletter. This open, collegial forum afforded me the opportunity to begin thinking through a number of social problems with a directness and sense of purpose that I have rarely experienced before. Inevitably, too, the disturbing realities issuing from these problems—many of which have been thoughtfully scrutinized over the last day and a half—have in recent years begun subtly reorienting and even politicizing my frame of mind as a teacher educator. While frank discussion of these realities eventually became an integral part of my work with my undergraduates, Tuesday night with my graduate students evolved gradually into a forum for voicing shared concerns, examining false consciousness, and forging a sense of solidarity and purpose in the face of needlessly destructive educational policies. (I should add that I often find that attending to these concerns is more important, and certainly more urgent, than the official course material.)

Finally, I was also goaded into self-searching by the eloquent "calls to action" of our recent past-presidents and keynote speakers. Their wise words forced me to take a critical look at who I want to be as a person of conscience and, even more pointedly, a person of substantial privilege in our society. Would I merely applaud those calls to action and remain safely on the sidelines, as habit and custom strongly urged, or would I venture into the fray? They were, after all, calls to answer for the claims of my own (and others) basic humanity and sense of human dignity. And as democratic theorist Benjamin Barber likes to point out (following John Dewey), when inequities constitute the status quo, liability is incurred through both action and inaction.<sup>2</sup>

I will confess then that my own calls to action in the Newsletter columns, though admittedly tentative and piecemeal, were conceived as much to motivate myself to abandon the relative safety of the sidelines as they were to provoke and galvanize others. I, rightly or wrongly, assumed that my experience was neither totally unique nor completely intractable. As Jean Anyon has forcefully reminded us, moreover, there is significant evidence suggesting that positive change is not as impossible as we often (perhaps conveniently) make it out to be. Nonetheless, I believe with Anyon that our calls to action must also fully recognize, and provide us with an effective means for confronting, the twin perils of apathy and cynicism. These all-too-common dispositions, which I venture we have all experienced at some point (either directly or indirectly), are deeply corrosive and routinely reinforce and sustain each other. History teaches us that when conditions allow them to persist

unchecked, they lead inevitably to despair or, more troublingly still, to forms of hope that are deeply toxic to democratic life.

### The Politics of Cynicism

There can be no denying that the current culture of apathy and cynicism in this country is especially hard on our children and youth. In his book *To Teach: the journey of a teacher*, Bill Ayers speaks candidly about what occurs when this diseased culture is teamed with policies that reduce classroom life to tooth-and-claw competition, and where the youth of an ever-more ideologically privatized public are left to conceive of hope merely in terms of the ambition to increased earnings power:

There is a narrow, selfish spirit loose in the land. Idealists are ‘suckers’ in the currency of the day, and the notion that schools should be decent, accessible, and responsive places for all children is just more pie-in-the-sky. With a combative social Darwinism setting the pace in our society, and a cynical sense that morality has no place in our public lives, teaching today can seem a fool’s errand.<sup>3</sup>

This “convenient cynicism,” as Ayers calls it, accepts that suffering, hardship, and inequalities are simply inherent in human nature and an irreversible part of life in a free-market society. At its most toxic, it amounts to a broad attack on the basic welfare of children and youth while simultaneously blaming them for the many social ills fostered by the harsh political, economic, and cultural realities that the adult world has bequeathed to them. In this deeply distorted reality, social problems appear mainly as private troubles, and are punished as such (as evidenced by the rapidly expanding prison-industrial complex), and thereby conveniently removed from deeper public consideration and sense of liability.<sup>4</sup> In other words, where private consumerist logic replaces public civic logic and questions of legality replace questions of public ethics, the inevitable effect is to privatize profit while socializing risk. A culture of resignation and angst is thereby substituted de facto for a viable politics of resistance and social transformation.

As Henry Giroux observes in his recent book *The Abandoned Generation*, “the profound cynicism parading as hope that is spurred on by neoliberalism and its myths of the citizen as consumer and markets as sovereign entities. . . both depoliticizes the realm of the social and commodifies the possibility of civic agency.” In this context of pervasive consumption,

so-called “voluntary choice” is constrained by the media-driven social psychology of wants and needs, while private consumerist decisions become feckless surrogates for public choices. This “economistic” or consumer vision of democracy (or false democracy) adheres to a top-down, expert guided institutional approach to decision-making and policy formation that, with its commodity and markets mentality, inevitably works *on* rather than *with* people. (One might say that the “experts” here, as people “in the know,” ultimately act as “stand-ins” for, rather than representatives of, the public as, in essence, “private government.”) In the words of writer and activist Judith Green, “economistic liberal and libertarian models of democracy simply aim to coordinate the unexamined preferences of differing, separate, fundamentally unchanging individuals in ways that avoid violent conflict while maximizing aggregate holdings of primary social goods, especially income and wealth.” From such a perspective, she continues, “individuals in their actual differences serve as the final measure and goal of the coordinating institutions of social life [among them public schools]. *There is and could be no shared public value in terms of which various actual individuals’ values could be assessed. . . other than freedom from interference with and by other individuals in one’s pursuit of whatever conception of the good one finds motivating.*”<sup>45</sup> Green thus joins Giroux in arguing that this cynical formulation fundamentally cripples the deliberative role of the public within a democratic social context, and, with its strong (and static) atomistic undercurrents, denies both the means and ends of substantive personal and social growth.

Giroux additionally notes that, when and where this neoliberal cynicism predominates, the “ideal of realizing the potential of the full human being [gives] way to a debilitating pessimism in which it becomes difficult to imagine a life beyond global capitalism, or for that matter a life beyond the [moral] failures of the present.”<sup>46</sup> When our imagination is allowed to wither in these conditions, as Maxine Greene reminds us, so too do our horizons of possibility and our ability to imagine and call into existence a different reality. Democracy becomes synonymous with the language of the marketplace, free trade, commodities, consumption, competition, profits, and increasingly on a global scale. The situation can only be that much bleaker for young people growing up today who know of no other possibilities, and who are denied the space and resources—the critical-creative agency—to imagine alternatives. *Given these conditions, I have come to think that, as teachers, academics, parents, and people of privilege committed to equity and genuine*

*human flourishing, it is our responsibility to work together to restore these cynically inflected and unjustly constricted horizons of possibility.*

In her powerful book *Ghetto Schools*, Jean Anyon confirms the importance of this task by pointing up the fundamental interrelatedness of schools and their surrounding communities. As she argues throughout, “long-lasting substantial educational improvement will not occur in the schools in our impoverished cities [and other areas] without the restoration of *hope* in the hearts of all involved—students, families, teachers, and administrators.”<sup>7</sup> This obvious truism, which is routinely ignored for its immanent critique of established social, economic, and political arrangements, undergirds Anyon and Giroux’s pursuit of a “politics of educated hope” at the vital intersection of democracy, political agency, and pedagogy.

### The Politics of Educated Hope

Drawing on his substantial body of previous work on the subject, Giroux begins his account of this regenerative politics with the observation that,

Americans need new theoretical tools—a new language—for linking hope, democracy, education, and the demands for a more fully realized democracy. While I believe that educators need a new vocabulary for connecting how we read critically to how we engage in movements for social change, I also believe that simply invoking the relationship between theory and practice, critique and social action will not do. *Any attempt to give new life to a substantive democratic politics by educators must also address how people learn to be political agents.*<sup>8</sup>

We will soon see that the notion that people must learn how to be political agents—which turns on a sophisticated form of *praxis* or “learning by doing”—is a prominent theme in the work of Jane Addams, Myles Horton, and Anyon. In their dual capacities as educators and reformers, they all bear witness to the fact that political agency does not necessarily follow from having the right kinds of analysis and critique. Rather, analysis and critique must be embedded within pedagogies that offer people an immediate sense of meaning and purpose—an intellectual *and* emotional investment that links belief to action, theory to practice. In short—and here I am invoking Barber—we need a new, dynamic and holistic kind of civics education.<sup>9</sup>

Giroux speaks next about the basic capacities of the “new language(s)” of resistance and possibility that he sees as key to movements for social change. As public intellectuals situated within particular neighborhoods, the nation, and the wider global world, educators, he says,

are required to understand more fully why the tools we used in the past often feel awkward in the present, why they fail to respond to problems now facing the United States and other parts of the globe. [Think of how the paradigm of independent, sovereign nations cannot effectively address emerging global forms of domination and oppression.] More specifically, we need to understand the failure of existing critical discourses to bridge the gap between how society represents itself, particularly through the media, and how and why individuals fail to understand and critically engage such representations and to intervene in the oppressive social relationships and distorted truths they often legitimate.<sup>10</sup>

This quintessentially pragmatic notion that there is no ultimate, universal discourse for effective critique and reconstruction, that any viable discourse must be responsive to the specifics of time and place if it is to avoid paternalism and maximize its liberatory potential, is again, as we will soon see, essential to the work of Addams, Horton, and Anyon.

Having examined these and related meta-issues and prerequisites for meaningful social change, Giroux begins outlining more directly the educator’s role in fostering an educated hope:

Against [the] ongoing assault on the public and the growing preponderance of a free market economy and corporate culture that turns everything it touches into an object of consumption, educators and others must offer a critique of American society and the misfortunes it generates nationally and globally out of its obsessive concerns with profits and consumption, and the commercial values of its market ethos. As part of this challenge, educators should help students bridge the gap between private and public discourse, while simultaneously putting into play ideologies and values that resonate with broader public conversations regarding how a society views itself and the world of power, events, and politics.<sup>11</sup>

Put simply, educators, as public intellectuals, must work to dismantle the myths and popular assumptions—buoyed by the American myth of exceptionalism—that now give neoliberal globalism, as a kind of utopic Americanization, an air of historic inevitability and teleological necessity. As part of this process, learning that disrupts these myths and assumptions must become inseparable from examination of avenues for political, economic, and social change, such that every sphere of social life is ultimately open to political action. Again, it cannot be stressed enough that changing consciousness is not the same as altering the institutional basis of oppression. Moreover, educators must recognize that culture (including youth culture) is no mere “side show” in this mythical world of free-market sovereignty, but rather a crucial terrain of politics and ongoing struggle where identities are shaped through the increasingly global—and pedagogical—powers of representation and commodification.

Finally, Giroux stresses that a politics of educated hope needs to identify agencies and processes for change and, what is often overlooked, for the development of civic courage as a form of social practice. This means identifying and pursuing possible avenues of change that engage “the interconnected modalities of desire, intervention, and struggle.”<sup>12</sup> It also means being “attentive to how any politics of hope must tap into individual experiences, while at the same time linking individual responsibility with a progressive sense of social destiny and those connections to the world that extend beyond local and national boundaries.”<sup>13</sup> And as we will again see with Addams, Horton, and Anyon, educators working to foment a politics of educated hope

must combine with others engaged in public struggles in order to invent languages and provide spaces *both in and out of schools* that offer new opportunities for social movements to come together. . . . [For at] issue here is the need to create a politics that contributes to the *multiplication of sites of democratic struggles*, sites that affirm specific struggles while recognizing the necessity to embrace broader issues that both enhance the life of the planet and extend the spirit of democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Using this general framework, we will now investigate, through a process of triangulation, some of the lessons we might learn about fostering a politics of educated hope from the work of our three very differently-situated reformer-educators, Addams, Horton, and Anyon.

## Jane Addams

Political theorist Iris Marion Young opens her book *Inclusion and Democracy* with the wonderful line, “Democracy is hard to love.” As she then goes on to explain,

Perhaps some people enjoy making speeches, of confronting those with whom they disagree, or standing up to privileged and powerful people with claims and demands. Activities like these, however, make many people anxious. Perhaps some people like to go to meetings after a hard day’s work and try to focus discussion on the issue [at hand], to haggle over the language of a resolution, or gather signatures for a petition, or call long lists of strangers on the telephone. But most people would rather watch television, read poetry, or make love. To be sure, democratic politics has some joys: the thrill of being part of a crowd of thousands marching down the street chanting and singing for a cause we believe in; the sense of solidarity with others as we work in a campaign; the excitement of victory. Defeat, co-option, or ambiguous results are more common experiences than political victory, however. Citizens must often put in a great deal of time to gain even a small reform. Because in a democracy nearly everything is revisable, and because unpredictable public opinion often counts for something, uncertainty shadows democracy.<sup>15</sup>

No one has better understood the need to accept and embrace the exigencies of this “unlovely” side of democracy than reformer and educator Jane Addams.

If 18<sup>th</sup> Century agrarianist Thomas Jefferson ever suffered a personal vision of hell-on-earth, a place, for him, thoroughly inimical to democratic life, it must have looked something like the urban environment that surrounded Addams’ Hull-House in turn-of-the-century Chicago. This is the place Addams, of quiet Cederville, Illinois (where her Quaker father never bothered to lock the front door), went to live and work of her own volition, if also under the duress of her Herculean sense of responsibility to all human souls.<sup>16</sup>

Chicago’s 19<sup>th</sup> ward, the neighborhood surrounding America’s first fully inclusive Settlement House, was populated by a hearty mixture of Italians, Bohemians, Greeks, Russian Jews, and representatives of fifteen other nationalities. These residents were overwhelmingly poor. Many worked for a pittance in factories and sweatshops where what labor laws

that did exist went largely unenforced. Sanitation was completely inadequate, fostering myriad health problems, with the streets indescribably filthy and no sewer system to speak of. And there were far too few schools for the growing masses of immigrant children.<sup>17</sup> Such conditions underscored for Addams the inadequacies of the popular liberal ideal of the “natural man” who enters the world a freely-choosing, self-sufficient and self-realizing being.<sup>18</sup> Enunciating the means of a more positive freedom, the official charter of Hull-House (1889) stated as its purpose to “provide a center for [the development of] a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago.”<sup>19</sup> In serving its environs in this way, Hull-House would always maintain the cherished open door policy that Addams had internalized as a youth. Such an environment, it turns out, was not completely inimical to democratic forms of life.

Like her friend and apprentice of democracy John Dewey (who would name his younger daughter after her), Addams maintained that Aristotle’s famous dictum that “man is a political animal” goes all the way down. Within her robust vision of democracy, in other words, intellectual life must ultimately contribute to and help to further political agency by taking an active interest in social problems and ends.<sup>20</sup> In short, it must serve as a critical resource for an educated hope. Addams’ progressive understanding of the social nature of the good, and her studiously planned pursuit of it, made her a genuine social scientist (one of the very first), and no mere do-gooder. As she would write in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1913), “We have learned to say that the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class; but we have not yet learned to add to that statement, that unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having.”<sup>21</sup> This attention to the social good is the core of Addams’ conception of “deep democracy.”

Deep democracy, in near dialectical opposition to our present “economistic” or consumer democracy, is actively participatory and innately pluralistic. As a form of developmental democracy, it emphasizes inclusiveness and mutual transformation through collaboration and collective problem solving among persons of diverse viewpoints, abilities, and potentials. In doing so it links people’s individual experiences with the larger social reality, in particular, with sites of democratic struggle and intervention. This richly contextual way of contributing to a concrete but dynamic social good, as evidenced at Hull-House, makes possible an

experience-based trust, hope, and mutual commitment that provides the basis for (or, if you will, education for) more extensive collaboration. Such active and vital connections with others—and here I am quoting Dewey—make it “impossible to draw sharp lines, such as would enable us to say, ‘Here my experience ends; there yours begins.’”<sup>22</sup> In this way, promotion of the general welfare is inseparable from the development of individual human persons. Put differently, personal growth and individuation are coterminous with ongoing social and institutional melioration, including, in turn-of-the-century Chicago, the fighting of various forms of corruption. Though such deep democracy has never been fully realized, it has, notes Green, “been partially achieved at certain times and places, giving rise to certain institutional forms [e.g., public education and universal suffrage] that have the potential to promote its fuller realization.”<sup>23</sup>

It is for this reason that Hull-House was at bottom a public educational community; and Addams lived the life of the quintessential public intellectual, with a flexibly amorphous yet purposively grounded sense of place. In the increasingly diverse and chaotic world of the American metropolis, education, she recognized, was crucial for making this world meaningful and intelligible, and for fostering inclusive participation in social life as a prerequisite for deep democracy. Addams believed that public schools in Chicago should attempt the same thing she strove to do with the residents and staff at Hull-House—to wit, to teach recent immigrants how to negotiate American civic and cultural norms intelligently while at the same time providing a place where their particular national heritages were both recognized and respected. Such reciprocity meant working *with* people rather than *on* them, as *trustees of their interests and students of their experiences*, and, ultimately, for the benefit of all, teachers and students, privileged and poor. At Hull-House, this work took the form of classes and lectures of all variety, college extension courses, a library and Labor Museum, a manual training shop, clubs for children and adults of both sexes, nurseries and a well-baby clinic, a public kitchen, playground, gymnasium, swimming pool, and little theater—all firsts in Chicago—in addition to reform initiatives for the public good too numerous to mention, but ranging from health and sanitation concerns to factory laws and tenement codes.<sup>24</sup> This was deep democracy at work—democracy as a form of life that calls for direct engagement with the “other,” be it an adversary or cultural “other”—and not simply an available set of rights and institutions. Indeed, Dewey admitted to drawing liberally on Hull-House as a “working model” for his evolving concept of the school as a democratic social

center.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to stress here that Addams' was not a sentimentalized, Panglossian vision of democracy. She clearly knew that she would always be swimming upstream, while, with her sober distrust of "isms" of all varieties, drawing frequent criticism from both the left and the right. Moreover, she acknowledged the growing intransigence of the social, political, and economic forces associated with what Dewey famously called "the eclipse of the public," whereby the atomistic individualism of the private market economy fosters "conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public."<sup>26</sup> Visionary reformer and educator Myles Horton would work tirelessly to interrupt this "eclipse of the public" from multiple points of intervention for most of his eighty-five years.

### Myles Horton

A son of the rural South, Myles Horton once remarked that, "If you ever get to the place where injustice doesn't bother you, you're dead."<sup>27</sup> Given his long life and perpetual activism, it seems that Horton found injustice to be a perpetual problem and, apropos of his Southern heritage, in a number of areas. Thus did Horton's innovative brainchild, the Highlander Folk School, a residential center for adult education committed to radical social reform, begin its storied history in Grundy County, Tennessee in 1932.

Interestingly, the basic idea for Horton's Highlander was inspired in part by the Danish folk school movement. This important movement, which Horton studied in depth, began in the mid-nineteenth century and had as its express purpose assisting the Danish people in reviving their native cultural traditions after successive military defeats at the hands of Prussia. As described by Frank Adams in his history of Highlander, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, the folk schools

[were] closely connected with the daily lives of the students. No books were used, only the spoken word, and much singing. [The schools] championed the cause of the peasants in their struggles against landlords, the church, and the nobility. . . . [They] were free of government control. There were no grades, ranks, tests, or diplomas. . . . Teachers were often young idealists, sensitive to injustices existing in their native land and hopeful for the future. Each folk school had an

'emotionally charged,' clearly-stated purpose. . . . Anyone eighteen or older could attend. Those who came supported the schools in any way possible: by work at the school, food from their farms, or money, if they had it. They stayed as long as they were able. Music and poetry were used by teachers to stir the students. Lectures for residential students were often repeated in the evening for older people who came from the countryside.<sup>28</sup>

A young but tough-minded idealist himself, Horton was first introduced to the Danish folks schools while doing graduate work in sociology at the University of Chicago in 1930. Given his deep-seated commitment to equality and emerging interest in social activism, Horton was sufficiently inspired to visit the folk schools for a time and learn about them first-hand.<sup>29</sup> Just one year later, having been much impressed with what he had seen and heard abroad, he sketched out his general plan for Highlander, appropriating various elements of the folk schools.

Just prior to his move to Chicago, Horton had participated in an ethics seminar at Union Theological Seminary under the eminent Christian Marxist Reinhold Niebuhr. Though Horton's undergraduate work had not prepared him sufficiently for the academic rigors of formal study at Union, the two had quickly developed a mutual respect and long lasting friendship. After hearing about Horton's idea for Highlander, Niebuhr strongly encouraged him to pursue his plans and even wrote the first fund-raising letter, to which a number of well-known and influential progressives, among them George S. Counts and YMCA president Sherwood Eddy, appended their names, effectively ensuring Highlander's successful launch.

Highlander's formal mission upon its opening was to bring together workers, grassroots leaders, community organizers, educators, and researchers to develop rural and industrial leaders for a new social order. One of the first public descriptions of Highlander, appropriately enough, was actually a "thinly-veiled crib from Dewey's *Democracy and Education*: 'It is the aim of . . . education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them. . . it must take account of the needs of the existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common.'<sup>30</sup> Consistent with this idea too, Niebuhr had impressed on Horton that it was the responsibility of the socially-concerned intellectual to work to "leaven out" the inequalities in society.

In addition to Dewey, Neibuhr, Counts, and Eddy, other notable participants and figures directly connected with Horton and Highlander include Jane Addams, Thurgood Marshall, Andrew Young, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Paulo Freire, Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, Septima Clark, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. As this impressive list reveals, and as Horton himself liked to point out, Highlander proudly flaunted segregationist Jim Crow laws every day for decades while helping to stage acts of civil disobedience throughout the South. It was a kind of open, free space in a decidedly dark and oppressive environment. Over its now seventy-four year history, Highlander (known today as the Highlander Research and Education Center) has helped to make important inroads in the Southern labor movement (1930-1953), the civil rights and citizenship schools movements (1953-1961), and, more recently, in efforts to support the social, political, and economic struggles of the Appalachian people (1970s-1980s).

Educated hope was one of the cornerstones of Horton's philosophy and something he aspired to nurture at every turn and with an infectious intensity. As he once explained,

Only people with hope will struggle. The people who are hopeless are grist for the fascist mill. Because they have no hope, they have nothing to build on. If people are in trouble, if people are suffering and exploited and want to get out from under the heel of oppression, if they have hope that it can be done, if they can see a path that leads to a solution, *a path that makes sense to them and is consistent with their beliefs and their experience*, then they'll move. But. . . they've got to know the direction in which they are going and have a general idea of the kind of society they'd like to have. If they don't have hope, they don't even look for a path.<sup>31</sup>

To nurture the educated hope that would clear the way for such a path, Horton, like his friend and confidant from Chicago Jane Addams, was thoroughly committed to working directly with oppressed people, going where the people are and being in touch with their daily lives, learning from them and linking their lives to the larger social reality. This, even in that face of constant threats and intimidation from the spiteful stewards of the status quo.<sup>32</sup>

One of Horton's great strengths as an educator and reformer was what might be called prophetic wisdom or vision: the ability to imagine in a compelling, realizable way alterna-

tives to present conditions. He always tried, he said, to keep one eye on the people as they are while the other looked at what they might become, holding as an end-in-view what Nel Noddings might call their “best possibilities.”<sup>33</sup> Horton was additionally convinced that people—in this case poor Southerners, black and white—ultimately had a great deal of tacit power both to conceive and solve the problems that touched on their own lives, and he saw it as his task to tap into and help mobilize that power.<sup>34</sup> In other words, he saw himself and Highlander in the role of a facilitator, assisting, through an active hands-on civics education, in the creation of sustainable and effective publics (in the Deweyan sense) for confronting racism and poverty. Disfranchized people, Horton believed, must be “encouraged to find beauty and pride in their own ways, to speak their own language without humiliation, and to recognize their own power to accomplish self-defined goals through social movements built from their own kin and kind.”<sup>35</sup> Not that he thought this was easy. As Ayers points out, Horton “knew that this was a hard doctrine, [not the least because] people often don’t know that they have the solutions and often act in ways that are contrary to solving their own problems. [Yet] the alternative, he thought, was patronization or worse.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Horton held that

small victories are less important than the learning that can emerge from taking large risks. As an example, he said that it was wonderful to win a victory for a stop light, a new housing regulation, or an end to a toxic dump. But if in the course of that struggle you had learned nothing about the fundamental values you were struggling for or did not understand your own role in the process, you might end up becoming just another oppressor of people weaker than you are. If a victory in the building of working-class housing leads to the exclusion of people of color by a white community-based organization, or if a struggle to open a bank branch in a poor community ends in the gentrification of the community, the victories would turn into defeats in the long haul.<sup>37</sup>

Horton shared something else with Jane Addams as well: He consciously avoided ideology thinking, or thinking that remained confined within the parameters of specific “isms” and their corresponding discourses and practices. Addams, always the experience-rooted pragmatist, recognized that genuine justice necessitated flexibility and the capacity to see and respond to things from multiple perspectives, to think (and act) on one’s feet,

resisting the potentially blinding and paralyzing certainties of doctrinaire attitudes. As a young activist who was at points chided for refusing to give himself over fully to any particular radical ideology, Horton's experience had led him to the same conclusion. Though Highlander maintained a specific mission, establishing "whom it is for and with, where it is, and why," it remained intentionally fluid in "its governing concepts, letting the people it serves and the times in which they live define precisely what. . . democracy, mutuality, and united social action mean."<sup>38</sup> Democracy, as a social conduit, is not only about rights and agency, it is also about the responsibility of active listening and mutual acknowledgement. Hence as Frank Adams explains, "Highlander had to learn. . . that ideology, no matter how firmly grounded in objective reality, is of no value if it is separated from a social movement of struggling people. Thus Highlander itself had to become a process through which people could find purposeful and democratic unity with others to solve their collectively-defined problems."<sup>39</sup>

Clearly embedded within this pragmatic mindset is a belief in the primacy of collective action for meaningful change. What is more, this belief implies that, in the end, people only develop the capacity to work effectively as a collective and for a common cause by actually trying to do so and reflecting on the consequences. Horton eventually took it as a truism that people learn about unity, its processes and possibilities, by acting in unison. Similarly, they only learn about democracy, and not simply a set of rights and institutions, by acting democratically and developing democratic habits. With every experience of acting as a democratic unity, Horton argued, people at once increase their capacity for such action, build a sense of community, and demonstrate the process of education. Thus once it became clear to Horton and other Highlander participants that significant social change could not be effected by individuals acting alone or by radical political analysis alone, Highlander attempted to educate people away from an individualistic mindset—another part of the myth of American exceptionality—and towards the freedom that only becomes possible with cooperation and collective action. As Jean Anyon would be quick to point out from her more contemporary vantage point, this is also how people develop their all-important identities as activists and members of social movements.

### Jean Anyon

Through her work for urban educational reform (beginning in Newark, New Jersey in the

early 1990s), Jean Anyon corroborates the social construction of new activist identities via the power of participation in contentious politics. In her most recent book, *Radical Possibilities*, she explains it this way:

As people march, sit-in, prepare petitions and speeches, meet with politicians and school boards, and otherwise engage in contentious politics, they typically develop identities as activists and, ultimately, if a movement develops, identities as part of that movement. . . . [We] do not typically get people involved in activism or social movements through exposure to critical pedagogy, social justice curricula, or books like this one, although these are crucial to providing information and analysis. Rather, as labor movement, peace movement, and civil rights activists will tell you—people are radicalized by actually *participating* in contentious politics.

Anyon then takes this argument the next logical step, asserting that, “The power of participation to encourage activism implies that an initial component of building a social movement is to personally involve students, other youth, and adults in public protest and other strategic activities with which they can advocate for better opportunities.”<sup>40</sup> Utilizing concepts from civil rights history and building on classical social movement theory, Anyon effectively demonstrates that the crucial continuity of protest over “the long haul” (the title of Horton’s autobiography!) requires a transgressive politics that actuates and shapes people’s political identities, just as it gives rise to educated hope in the form of new categories of social actors (e.g., abolitionists, civil rights activists, “suffragettes”). Significantly, too, such politicized individual and collective identities characterize virtually all of the major, successful social movements in U.S. history.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, Anyon’s extensive research on the political economy of urban educational reform has led her to conclude—and evidence suggests that, were they alive today, Addams and Horton would concur—that we need a new, more robust vision of reform, one that emphasizes deep structural changes to foster hope and ease the political and economic isolation experienced by many schools and communities today. We need, in other words, to work to create the conditions necessary for real, long term improvement in the quality of schooling and community life of poor and minority students. *School-based reform, though certainly helpful and even necessary in many cases, is simply not enough.* As Anyon argues,

Visionaries have long maintained that in order to make fundamental change we have to believe that such changes are possible; in addition, we need long-term plans for eliminating underlying causes. Unfortunately, educational ‘small victories’ such as the restructuring of a school or the introduction of a new classroom pedagogical technique, no matter how satisfying to the individuals involved, without a long-range strategy to eradicate underlying causes of poverty and racial isolation, cannot add up to large victories in our inner cities with effects that are sustainable over time. Although vital and sometimes heroic, such achievements are often idiosyncratic and unconnected, and their existence in education is typically subject to administrative or political whim.<sup>42</sup>

What Anyon is calling for here is, in effect, an expansion of our understanding of what constitutes educational policy in order to bring about significant and sustainable educational reform. What should constitute educational policy, from Anyon’s perspective, goes beyond the usual, school-based measures to include things like initiatives to establish a living wage (the typical job training solution to poverty is an outright charade, and only benefits employers, since there are simply not enough jobs that offer a decent wage<sup>43</sup>), substantial increases in funds available to cover the costs of a college education for those in need, the creation and enforcement of laws ending redlining and other deliberately segregationist practices, and so on. As Anyon observes,

neighborhood constituencies are forming in cities across the nation, as educational organizers embolden and conjoin parents and other residents to demand equity in funding, district accountability, and pre-college opportunities. *It remains to connect this educational struggle to other community campaigns for jobs, housing, and public transportation (for example), so that school reform demands have the power of a social movement behind them.*<sup>44</sup>

Finally, given the entrenched networks of power shaping political and economic conditions today, Anyon extends the work of Addams and Horton in finding absolutely essential regional coalitions of sympathetic individuals and organizations for collective action. (In *Radical Possibilities*, Anyon discusses a number of examples of effective regional coalitions and analyzes their ongoing activities.) She also maintains, echoing Nancy Fraser and others, that to leverage meaningful, enduring change, such coalitions must simultaneously

engage in both a public politics of recognition for marginalized groups—an activity for which public schools are particularly well suited, and to which academics might contribute as engaged public intellectuals—and a politics of redistribution. These coalitions must also work to garner the assistance of larger, coordinating umbrella groups to reach national audiences and make clear that “economic exclusion and educational underachievement flow fundamentally from systemic causes, even in the face of what appear to be democratic processes and individual [or cultural] failure.”<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

In closing, drawing from the lessons of educator-reformers like Jane Addams, Myles Horton, and Jean Anyon, I would like to take this opportunity to urge the membership of NYSFEA—individually or, better yet, as a collective—to commit to helping to foster educated hope as engaged public intellectuals. As Giroux effectively puts it, given the “current assault by politicians, conservative foundations, and the right-wing media on educators who spoke critically about U.S. foreign policy in light of the tragic events of September 11, it is politically crucial that educators at all levels of involvement in the academy be defended as public intellectuals who provide an indispensable service to the nation. Such an appeal cannot be made in the name of professionalism, but in terms of the civic good such intellectuals [can] provide.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, I suggest that NYSFEA seriously consider formally allying itself with other like-minded coalitions, organizations, and people to address the growing inequities both within and beyond the school walls and to work for reform in public policy. Such outlets might include, among many other possibilities (including student groups), Rethinking Schools ([www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)), Fairtest ([www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)), The Coalition for Common Sense in Education ([www.commonenseineducation.org](http://www.commonenseineducation.org)), the Campaign for Fiscal Equity ([www.cfequity.org](http://www.cfequity.org)), Teaching for Change ([www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)), the Children’s Defense Fund ([www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)), Oxfam America ([www.oxfamamerica.org](http://www.oxfamamerica.org)), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform (ACORN) ([www.acorn.org](http://www.acorn.org)), the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) ([www.industrialareasfoundation.org](http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org)), The Democracy Collaborative ([www.democracycollaborative.org](http://www.democracycollaborative.org)), MoveOn.org Civic Action ([www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org)), and CivWorld Citizen’s Campaign for Democracy ([www.civworld.org](http://www.civworld.org)). I would also suggest that our Newsletter and Website might be excellent forums to begin sharing ideas, discussing the possibilities for activism, and, eventually, strategizing our efforts. Of course,

as Anyon recognizes, we might well respond that “we live in a conservative time, with government suspicion of protest heightened, motivated by terrorism and war; the current landscape is not hospitable. History reminds us, however, that rarely does the status quo seem to invite rebellion. It takes the active appropriation of whatever conditions exist to begin transforming the present.”<sup>47</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 There is also a postmodern variant of this failure of responsiveness stemming from the critique of the metaphysics of presence. It suggests that, because we are all inevitably hidden from one another, we are not answerable for hiding. Democracy is thus readily dismissed as a kind of naive modernist hangover. See Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.77.
- 2 See, among other works, Barber’s now-classic *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 3 William Ayers, *To Teach: the Journey of a Teacher*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), p.8.
- 4 As Henry Giroux points out, adults “pass legislation that deny children the most fundamental and basic services. . . .commit 75 percent of the murders of youth in America. . .and also sexually abuse somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000 young people every year.” See *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.118. Many thanks as well to Leigh O’Brien for her insights on this issue.
- 5 See Judith M. Green, “Deepening Democratic Transformation: Deweyan Individuation and Pragmatist Feminism,” in Charlene Haddock Seigfried, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of John Dewey*, (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002), pp.263-264, emphasis added.
- 6 *The Abandoned Generation*, pp.60-61.
- 7 Jean Anyon, *Ghetto Schools: The Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), p.xvi.
- 8 Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, p.42, emphasis added.
- 9 In a somewhat different context, Barber points out that, “President [George W.] Bush believed freeing Iraqis from the brutal tyranny of Saddam [Hussein] was tantamount to making them free citizens. But to be freed from autocracy is not the same thing as being free

to rule one's self. Changing masters does not end servitude. Had President Bush consulted America's greatest democratic philosopher, John Dewey, he would have been reminded that the prudent practice of democracy rests on a sound philosophy of education, and he might have ordered his troops in Baghdad to bar looters not only from the oil ministry but from the schools, museums, and libraries as well. The lesson for national security policy is clear: an America wishing to secure itself from terror by forging a world of free nations needs to be at least as interested in smart citizens as it is in smart bombs. America's first instinct in spending dollars abroad has been to train soldiers rather than to train citizens." See *Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), pp.212-213.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

<sup>14</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *Pedagogy and Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p.227, emphases added.

<sup>15</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.16.

<sup>16</sup> See on this issue Jean Bethke Elshtain's excellent biography, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy: A Life*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002). People often forget that Hull-House was co-founded by Addams' childhood friend, Ellen Gates Starr.

<sup>17</sup> See Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), pp.92-93.

<sup>18</sup> See Addams' "Survivals of Militarism in City Government" in Jean Elshtain, ed., *The Jane Addams Reader*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p.147. This ideal is typically associated with the notion of "negative freedom," as freedom *from* constraint, rather than "positive freedom," as freedom *for* meaningful, growth-enhancing activity, which requires certain resources, such as education.

<sup>19</sup> Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*, p.37.

<sup>20</sup> See Seigfried, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of John Dewey*, pp.5-6.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, (New York: Macmillan, 1913), pp.219-220. Dewey occasionally taught this book in his courses at the University of Chicago.

<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education, The Middle Works, Volume 9*, ed., Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p.194.

- <sup>23</sup> Green, "Deepening Democratic Transformation," p.262. Addams' "deep democracy" overlaps considerably with Barber's notion of "strong democracy."
- <sup>24</sup> See Elstain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*, p.xix.
- <sup>25</sup> Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.77.
- <sup>26</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems, The Later Works, Volume 2*, ed., Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p.303.
- <sup>27</sup> Myles Horton, with Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), p.x.
- <sup>28</sup> Frank Adams, with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*, (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1975) pp.20-21. Note the strong resonance with elements of the civil rights movement in the U.S.
- <sup>29</sup> Horton's experience in Denmark is recounted in *The Long Haul*, pp.50-55.
- <sup>30</sup> Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, p.13.
- <sup>31</sup> Horton, *The Long Haul*, p.44, emphasis added.
- <sup>32</sup> Predictably enough, both Addams and Horton were branded Communists and part of the "Red Menace," though neither embraced Marxism or any other "ism."
- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, Noddings' *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992).
- <sup>34</sup> See William Ayers, "A Dream that Keeps on Growing: Myles Horton and Highlander," in *Teaching for Social Justice*, eds., William Ayers, Jean Ann Hunt, and Therese Quinn, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), pp.152-153.
- <sup>35</sup> Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, p.207.
- <sup>36</sup> Ayers, "A Dream that Keeps on Growing," p.153.
- <sup>37</sup> Horton, *The Long Haul*, p.ix.
- <sup>38</sup> Adams, *Unearthing the Seeds of Fire*, pp.206-207.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid. In *The Long Haul*, Horton tells the story of writing a letter to Dewey saying, "I want you to know I don't claim to be one of your disciples. I'm grateful for the things I've learned from you, and I'm delighted to say that I've learned these things from you, but I don't claim to be a disciple. I take sole responsibility for my ideas, And they're my ideas, and I don't want you to be embarrassed by criticisms of me that imply you approve of my thoughts or actions." In his return letter, Dewey wrote, "I'm so delighted to find that you don't claim to

be a disciple. My enemies are bad enough, but my disciples are worse” (pp.44-45).

<sup>40</sup> Jean Anyon, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p.170.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.141-142.

<sup>42</sup> Anyon, *Ghetto Schools*, p.165.

<sup>43</sup> See, on this issue, Gordon Lafer’s *The Job Training Charade*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> Anyon, *Radical Possibilities*, p.123, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.200.

<sup>46</sup> Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, p.189.

<sup>47</sup> Anyon, *Radical Possibilities*, p.149.