The Progressive Experience in Middletown
1900-1920

Mr. Hall
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Howard Friedman
The divergence between the ideal and the reality of American life has provided impetus to many political movements. Their success has been far from legion. Early twentieth century progressivism is one exception. It was the motive force for an upheaval in American society which had no precedent -- because the society itself did not in fact have precedent. This new America -- the multitude of immigrants, the unplanned, bursting cities -- was an opportunist's paradise. And, of course, they were the one thing of which the teeming urban centers had no shortage. Thus arose the boss -- a totally American phenomenon. The machines supplied the missing services, remedied the many individual problems, and made the deals. It can be argued that their effectiveness balanced their corruption. -- that they were the right men at the right time.

The reformers thought otherwise. These scions of the "new middle class" were becoming suffocated with the security and cultural opportunities of their social position. They wished "to pursue their ambitions outward, rather than simply to be left alone at home," remedying the multitude of American wrongs. Some went directly to the slums. Others attacked the veritably barbaric city governments. The spirit of the movement swept the country.

The present aim is to detail some effects of that influence on Middletown, Connecticut. The size and location of Middletown have endowed it with most urban problems, scaled down but definitely present. It makes a good laboratory, and many non-political reform exercises were conducted here.

I. Problems for Reform.

In 1900, Middletown contained 17,486 people. By 1910, the population had grown to 20,749.\(^1\) The city had three basic ethnic components -- the native Yankees, the Irish, and the Sicilians. The proportion of Russians is also significant numerically; culturally it appears less so. The bulk of Irish immigration took place in the mid to late nineteenth century. The first Sicilian arrived around 1895. This flow, which involved about 2,500 people, continued until the Johnson Act of 1922. The newcomers moved into the old Irish section -- the North End, bounded by the river and the railroad tracks.\(^1\) Mel Hyblaenum describes the living conditions encountered in Middletown: "A new arrival ... usually first found lodging in one of the packed tenement houses in the north end of town near the railroad tracks. Very likely he shared a room with four or five others, perhaps sleeping across the foot of a bed occupied by three relatives, just one of five or six similarly jammed rooms sharing the same little cook stove and the same broken toilet."\(^2\)

A publication of the Middletown Social Service League elaborates, "The foreign population is increasing at a rapid rate and the consequent overcrowding is likely to become a menace to our city, both morally and physically. Certain sections in this district are teeming with children and already the cry is raised of the lawlessness among the boys."\(^3\)

The Sicilians were remarkable in that almost all of them came from the town of Melilli, Sicily. They brought with them their own social structures, and their native suspicion of outsiders -- the

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2. Ibid., p. 56.
perfect ingredients for a ghetto.

In 1916, a health survey of Middletown found a number of problems directly or indirectly attributable to the crowded conditions. Toilet facilities were a major concern -- "...The objectionable conditions of the interior of some of the outdoor closets indicate the necessity of frequent inspection." 4 Garbage was found to create "unsightly scenes." 5 "...city dumps had been a source of great trouble for years back. ..." 6 Sumner Creek, through the heart of the "foreign quarter", was a major mosquito breeding ground, encouraging a malaria problem in the district. There was also trouble from flies, causing "a high death rate from diarrheal diseases among children." 7 In 1901, it was noted that "the need for a public bath-house...is very urgent." 8

Other health problems in Middletown affected the populace beyond the immigrant class. Adequate facilities for the detection and treatment of tuberculosis and venereal diseases did not exist. Food was found stored in unsanitary conditions. And impure milk, a frighteningly efficient disease carrier and special anathema of the progressives, was in common supply. The inspectors were informed that milk could be sold, "providing it is not 'very dirty'," and "regardless of bacterial score" 9 Said Charles-Edward Amory Winslow of the Yale School of Medicine, "The condition of the Middletown milk supply in particular calls for serious attention." 10 The reasons behind this condition were not hard to find. "Unclean milk can (sic) and is dealt out to the consumer because our laws are inadequate and not efficient enough." 11

4. David Greenberg and Ira Joel, Health Survey of Middletown, Conn., (New Haven, Yale Dept. of Public Health) 1918, p. 18. Joel was a West. Professor.
5. Ibid., p. 21
6. Message of the Mayor of Middletown, (Middletown, Pelton & King) 1907, p. 80
7. Greenberg, p. 28.
8. Message of the Mayor, 1901, p. 87.
10. Ibid., p. 8.
These are not by any means remarkable problems for the period; in fact, the children of Middletown were found to have far fewer "defects" than those from other cities.\textsuperscript{12} Efforts to deal with health problems were, however, crippled by the system of municipal government. For example, the Common Council itself comprised the board of health. Further, this was only a small part of the ineffective and inequitable whole.

The anomaly of Middletown government was of a form unique to Connecticut.\textsuperscript{13} In brief, it involved the simultaneous and independent existence of separate governmental structures for "town" and "city". The city comprised the most populous inner district, while the town included all land within the territorial limits. The city elected a mayor, a Board of Alderman, and a Common Council. The town as a whole was governed by Selectmen. City residents payed taxes to both town and city, supposedly receiving additional services.\textsuperscript{14} Such a system was incapable of maintaining even a centralized fire department; Middletown still lacks such an organization.\textsuperscript{15}

There were calls for reform from the public and from the government itself. In 1910, Mayor Fisher wrote, "The two chief objects to be sought by us...are the replacement of our present confusing and expensive dual government...by one organization and the introduction of a larger measure of individual power and responsibility in the chief offices."\textsuperscript{16} In other words, a progressive government -- one in which "...the fewer the laws, the better if those few properly empowered the experts, for the administration was expected to replace the tedious, haphazard process of legislative compromise."\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} Greenberg, p.49
\textsuperscript{13} Conn. Development Comm., Gov't. Organization, 1964, p.44
\textsuperscript{14} Myron Poliner, Gov't. of Middletown in Transition, unp. 1954.
\textsuperscript{15} Mayor's Report, 1906; Personal observation.
\textsuperscript{16} Mayor's Report, 1910, p. 20
\textsuperscript{17} Wiebe, p.169
Until the charter reform of 1924, however, the authorities were almost totally emasculated. Into this void stepped the new progressive organizations of Middletown.

II. Reform in Middletown -- the Social Service League.

Middletown in the early 1900s might be termed an ideal place for progressivism to take hold. The social problems which it had were genuine, but of very manageable dimensions. A growing managerial class existed. Thirdly, it possessed an institution of higher learning as a magnet for new trends and ideas. Jane Addams founded Hull House in 1889. It did not take long for the matrons of Middletown to catch the scent of reform, much as they discovered the latest in clothing fashions. The Middletown Social Service League, a local vehicle for the progressive spirit, was founded in 1907.

"Its constant aim has been to promote the civic, educational, and charitable interests of our city in friendly co-operation with other organizations. Special attention is called to the record of its services in improving conditions and promoting the public welfare . . ." said an appeal for funds in 1910. More succinctly, "the League stands for the moral and social betterment of our community, and it certainly has succeeded in accomplishing good results."¹ The membership list reads like a Middletown and Wesleyan social register for the period. Mrs. Samuel Russell, Jr. was an officer, as was Wesleyan physics professor Walter Cady, later to becom the "father of piezo-electricity."

The League undertook a wide variety of activities in the tradition

¹. Third Annual Report of the Social Service League, 1910 - 11, p.3
of humanistic reform. A full-time social worker was employed to manage the office and arrange programs. For a time, this was Miss Ethel Springer, the veritable Jane Addams of Middletown. Headquarters -- shared with the District Nurse Association -- were located at 232 Main Street.

The work of the League was divided into four departments. The department of education was responsible for such activities as a lecture series, attempts to improve public school teaching methods, a "Penny Provident Savings System" for school children, sewing and handwork classes, and a Summer School. Of these, the Chairlady seemed proudest of the Savings System: "We feel that/every child who has been persuaded to put money into this fund, there must have come some idea of the desirability of saving rather than unnecessary spending, and at least the dawning of the idea of the value of saving banks.\(^2\) These children would grow up to become good re-investors in the nation's economy. Grandmother might keep her money in the mattress; Junior must certainly learn otherwise."

The department of Public Health had the strongest influence on the populace -- although not, unfortunately, in the way the good ladies had envisioned. In March, 1911, strenuous lobbying by the League caused the Common Council to pass an ordinance requiring that paper waste be separated from garbage by each household. The people could not see the wisdom of this inconvenient measure, designed to reduce the number of "sporty and infectious rats" frequenting the city dumps. Such lack of enlightenment was disturbing to Mrs. Russell, then Chairlady of the department: "We cannot but wish that more of our city fathers and mothers really knew what

\(^{2}\) Social Service League, 1912, p.7
a city dump was."³ Did Mrs. Russell⁴, it can be wondered, pick through her own refuse? Be that as it may, the general outcry forced the Council to repeal the ordinance. Seven years later, the defeat still rankled the would-be sanitation engineer. In a 1917 statement, as the League prepared to close "for the duration", Mrs. Russell said, "We shall never forget the interpretation that the department made of our recommendations nor the criticism we had to bear."⁵ That a garbage collection fiasco should become a watershed in the life of such a woman is testimony to the nature of the reform era.

The second major concern of the health department was milk. The League supported several "milk stations" in town. The purpose of these facilities was to lower the infant mortality rate by providing unspoiled milk during warm summer weather. The facilities soon evolved into general infant care clinics, made possible by the cooperation of the District Nurse Association. It was not a cheerful business. "The principle recognized by milk stations in other places is that the station has not had a chance with the baby until the station has fed it forty-eight hours. On that basis there were five deaths ..."⁶ As one preventative, a "Campaign for Better Babies" was organized. In 1912, "first prize was awarded to an Italian baby, the second to a colored baby, and the third to an American baby."⁷

The third division of the League was the ambitiously named Department of Prevention of Poverty. Basically, it performed the functions of a modern welfare office, employing volunteer as case workers. They were called -- with graceful euphemism -- "friendly visitors".

³ Social Service League, 1910-11, p.7.
⁴ The Russells in general were philanthropically minded. Mel Hyblaeum makes note of the esteem in which they were held by the recent immigrants.
⁵ Social Service League, 1910-11, p.7.
⁶ Ibid., 1911-12, p.8
⁷ Ibid., 1912-13, p. 11.
osity of friends, and lately through the delightful gift of the Hubbard Fund." But gifts of money were thought to be only a stop-gap measure; moreover it was un-American, and thus anathematic to the aims of the League. Any sort of bootstrap-pulling was heartily encouraged. Destitute Italian women were found to be competent lace-makers; widows could take in washing. There was a very definite chastisement of "foreigners all too quick to ask for aid." Yet the work was found to be a "thrilling task", and there is little doubt that the coordination of the various charitable groups expidited the relief process.

An excellent clue to the nature of a society is the way in which it trains its young people. The Hitler Youth and Mao's Red Guards are two examples. In the Middletown of 1910, this was the province of the Social Service League's Department of Recreation. It operated a number of clubs and sports activities during the school year, some supervised by Wesleyan volunteers. The major program, however, was a summer playground at Mill Hollow. In the 1911 Annual Report, Mrs. Oscar Kuhns, Chairlady, enunciated her philosophy of playgrounds. It is worthy of quotation:

"Play is the child's preparation for life, and influences which are present in early years bear fruit in the man or woman. We believe that a playground where quarrels and bad language are never allowed, where the children are taught to play fair and where they are kept happy all day, every day of the week, will be of unspeakable value in the development of the child. It is one way by which we can help to Americanize the children of our foreign population. We bespeak the interest and sympathy of all right-minded citizens." (Emphasis my own.)

9. Ibid., 1910-11
III. Conclusion.

Progressivism began as a movement for the betterment of urban living conditions. It proceeded to reform local governments. The states were next — Governor Charles Evans Hughes of New York is an example. With the election of Teddy Roosevelt to the White House, progressivism made the national scene. When Woodrow Wilson arrived at Versailles, it attempted to take over the world. The adaptability of the basic ideals is amazing, for the jump from milk station to League of Nations is a long one. Yet the movement survived, for Wilson's essential vision of the ideal world was not far from "...a playground where quarrels and bad language are never allowed, where the children are taught to play fair and where they are kept happy all day, every day of the week. . ."

But, truly, the relationship between Mrs. Russell's League and Woodrow Wilson's League is a moot point. The important realization is that both were the attempts of people powerful within their own spheres to muster resources and create a new and better world.
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