

Jane Addams' *Hull House*:
from educational commitment to feminist and pacifist activism

La *Hull House* di Jane Addams:
dall'impegno nel campo dell'istruzione all'attivismo femminista e pacifista

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Jane Addams – a pioneer of social education, an intellectual, and a social researcher within the marginalized contexts of Chicago – was a militant activist, feminist, and pacifist, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Her figure embodies the intersection of educational commitment, care, and social reform (Striano, 2022). A leading figure at the first major International Congress of Women in The Hague in 1915, Addams founded Hull House in Chicago, transforming social assistance into a laboratory of civic pedagogy where education became a tool for collective empowerment (Hamington, 2001). Her work bridges the themes of care and education, paving the way for a pedagogical vision grounded in justice, participation, and intercultural dialogue. In Addams' thought, care takes on political and pedagogical value, an experiential knowledge that unites theory and practice, science and action, positioning women as conscious protagonists of democratic processes.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, peace, hull house, social education, intercultural dialogue.
Femminismo, pace, hull house, educazione sociale, dialogo interculturale.

Jane Addams – pioniera dell'educazione sociale, intellettuale e ricercatrice sociale nei contesti emarginati di Chicago – è stata un'attivista militante, femminista e pacifista, insignita del Premio Nobel per la Pace nel 1931. La sua figura incarna l'intersezione tra impegno educativo, assistenza e riforma sociale (Striano, 2022). Figura di spicco del primo grande Congresso Internazionale delle Donne tenutosi all'Aia nel 1915, Addams fondò la Hull House a Chicago, trasformando l'assistenza sociale in un laboratorio di pedagogia civica dove l'educazione divenne uno strumento di emancipazione collettiva (Hamington, 2001). Il suo lavoro fa da ponte tra i temi della cura e dell'educazione, aprendo la strada a una visione pedagogica fondata sulla giustizia, la partecipazione e il dialogo interculturale. Nel pensiero di Addams, la cura assume un valore politico e pedagogico, una conoscenza esperienziale che unisce teoria e pratica, scienza e azione, ponendo le donne come protagoniste consapevoli dei processi democratici.

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1. The figure of Jane Addams: education, feminism, and pacifism

A progressive, feminist and pacifist woman, as well as an intellectual of great inspiration whose influence endures to this day, Jane Addams represents a pivotal chapter in the history of the feminist and pacifist movements of the early twentieth century. Through her commitment to nonviolence, emancipation, and the vision of a more equitable and fair society, she contributed to redefining the role of women's social and political engagement (Hammington, 2001; Rauty, 2025). With Hull House, Addams and her collaborators – including Ellen Gates Starr – established one of the most significant laboratories of social observation and action of their time, a space in which forms of social justice and empowerment were concretely tested (Hammington, 2001; Seigfried, 1999). Challenging dominant power structures, Hull House remains, to this day, a key reference point for practices of education, hospitality, and the production of situated knowledge (Hammington, 2001; Striano, 2022).

This discussion aims to demonstrate how Jane Addams's educational commitment, through Hull House, intertwines with her feminist and pacifist activism, highlighting the role of care as political knowledge and as a tool for democratic participation (Bellatalla, 2018).

The historical background is that of early twentieth-century United States, and particularly the city of Chicago, one of the largest urban centers in the country, which was profoundly affected by the economic and social transformations of that period (Rauty, 2017). Industrialization disrupted the city's social structure, also as a result of large-scale immigration that particularly affected peripheral districts (Addams, 1907; Rauty, 2017/2025). In this context, the first significant social tensions emerged, linked to phenomena such as crime, exploitation, and poverty affecting the most marginalized segments of the population, deeply altering social arrangements and interpersonal relationships (Rauty, 2017/2025; Addams, 1907; Addams, 1896).

Jane Addams's pragmatic and situated approach remains, to this day, an essential point of reference within feminist peace research, particularly in relation to movements such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) (Confortini, 2014/2020). This pragmatism provides a necessary lens through which to historically retrace feminist pacifism throughout the twentieth century, of which Addams was a key protagonist. As Confortini writes, "This approach builds on work by feminists pragmatists such as Jane Addams which argues that knowledge is developed through sympathetic experience" (Confortini, 2014). The WILPF officially adopted its name only in 1919, although its origins date back several years earlier (Confortini, 2020). The movement took shape during the International Congress of Women, held in 1915 in The Hague, where activists from different countries gathered to oppose the outbreak of the World War I and to promote a political perspective grounded in peace and cooperation among peoples (Ruddick, 1980; Bianchi, 2012; Confortini, 2014).

Elected as the first president of the new organization, Jane Addams emerged as a central figure in international pacifism (Bianchi, 2013/2015). A few months before the congress, in January 1915, she had contributed to founding in the United States the Woman's Peace Party, an organization established with the aim of mobilizing women against war and in favor of diplomatic solutions to conflicts (Bianchi, 2015; Suriano, 2015). This experience constituted the core from which the U.S. section of the WILPF later developed, strengthening the link between American feminist pacifism and the international peace movement network.

Addams developed a broad and articulated conception of peace that went beyond the mere absence of armed conflict, encompassing dimensions such as social justice, equity, and the quality of civic relationships (Addams, 1907; Rauty, 2025). In this sense, peace was interpreted as an active social and political process, closely connected to the modes of governing communities (Shielde, 2017).

This perspective emerges particularly from the concept of peaceweaving, developed from Jane Addams's direct experience in social work and her critical observation of the functioning of municipal administrations, especially in the city of Chicago (Shielde, 2017; Striano, 2022). According to this framework, urban governance and peacebuilding are deeply interconnected processes: militarism and the hierarchical logics typical of military organization tend to negatively influence city governance (Shielde, 2017), reducing the space for cooperation and inclusion.

The paradigm of peaceweaving places strong emphasis on the relational dimension of social life, recognizing that lasting peace is built through networks of cooperative relationships (Addams, 1907; Addams, 1916). From this perspective, ethical and political development is not measured through abstractions, but through everyday experience. The construction of institutions and forms of governance should therefore be oriented toward cooperation, solidarity, and peace, rather than coercion or military defense, demonstrating how idealistic or militaristic approaches are incompatible with genuine social transformation grounded in inclusion and respect for rights and responsibilities toward humanity (Shielde, 2017; Striano, 2022).

A final element is represented by the development of so-called "sympathetic knowledge", understood as the capacity to comprehend the perspectives and experiences of other social actors. In this sense, Addams' ideas offer a valuable framework for the development of positive peace through the construction of relationships and mutual understanding.

2. Jane Addams and the politics of care

Jane Addams's pragmatist thought, which conceives knowledge as a relational process constructed through shared experience (Schielde, 2017; Striano, 2022), emerges from social interaction and from practices of care developed within community life. In this perspective, knowledge is situated and morally embedded; values and priorities arise from relationships and mutual responsibility (Confortini, 2014; Hamington, 2001). The ethical function of care (Hamington, 2001) can be situated within the framework of what Sara Ruddick (1980) defines as maternal thinking, a form of care-oriented thinking that develops through maternal practice, grounded in the social recognition of the other. This form of thinking is not biologically innate but culturally constructed, thereby framing care as a universal practice rather than an exclusively female one (Ruddick, 1980; Bianchi, 2012; Confortini, 2014). Oriented toward the preservation of life, this mode of thought is potentially antimilitarist; those who engage in caregiving tend to develop resistance to violence and war (Confortini, 2014; Bianchi, 2012; Ruddick, 1980). Motherhood thus becomes a foundation for a politics of peace, grounded in the recognition of the cognitive and moral value of care (Ruddick, 1980; Bianchi, 2012; Confortini, 2014), which Addams identifies as an essential dimension within relational processes. The educational action of Addams and the Hull House is therefore characterized by attention to the multiple dimensions shaping social interaction, particularly in the marginalized areas of the city, marked by strong internal tensions related to child and industrial labor exploitation, the condition of women, and the difficulties faced by migrants in finding recognition and space within social settlements (Addams, 1907; Rauty, 2017/2025; Bellatalla, 2018). At the same time, Addams developed a broad and global vision of her educational and social work. The reflections she matured did not remain confined to the space of the Chicago settlement but led her, together with her collaborators, to progressively expand the scope of her engagement. Her action thus turned toward international issues, particularly the question of war, translating into active pacifist commitment and firm opposition to World War I. The European journey she undertook on that occasion was not limited to participation in the congress; Addams traveled across several European countries with the aim of directly understanding the complex political and military situation affecting the continent (Shielde, 2017). Her letters¹ clearly show how personal presence was, for her, essential in playing a mediating role. Indeed, Addams attempted to initiate dialogue with the heads of state of the countries involved in the conflict, seeking to promote a negotiated solution (Stocker, 2018). However, her efforts proved unsuccessful, highlighting how war was deeply rooted in a male-dominated political culture and in a patriarchal model of power management:

The American women, led by the distinguished Quaker Jane Addams, honorary citizen of Chicago, undertook a bold initiative. Despite the dangers posed by large U-boats and naval mines, they dared to cross the ocean and, being at that time still "neutral," were present in significant numbers. Jane Addams conducted the negotiations in an exemplary manner. The resolution drafted by the congress over eight days of intense deliberation – articulating the demands for an impending peace – contained a series of proposals that would later reappear in Woodrow Wilson's well-known Fourteen Points.

The congress also appointed a delegation tasked with engaging each of the governments involved in the conflict, with the aim of bringing an end to the bloodshed as swiftly as possible. This responsibility was entrusted to Helene Stöcker, the American Jane Addams, the Dutch physician Aletta Jacobs, and the Hungarian Rosika Schwimmer. If memory serves correctly, they were received with goodwill everywhere. Each government affirmed its own readiness for peace – if only the hostile neighbor would do the same. Jane Addams also held valuable discussions with Wilson. Yet, despite all these efforts, the war – as is well known – continued for another three and a half years (Stoker, 2018)².

Jane Addams's actions and her commitment to a dialogical and nonviolent approach, rooted in a practice of care grounded in proximity, yet expanding toward humanity in its broadest and most universal sense, resonate today in the reflections of Martha Nussbaum. In her inquiry into "human" democracy (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 42), Nussbaum identifies as essential: "the ability to reason about political issues affecting the nation, to examine, reflect, discuss, and reach conclusions without deferring to tradition or authority [...] the ability to see one's own nation as part of a complex global order, in which problems of various kinds require transnational deliberation for their resolution" (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 42-43).

1 The epistolary exchanges of Jane Addams reflect her sustained commitment to peacebuilding and her efforts to engage in dialogue with heads of state regarding the conflict of World War I. To explore these materials in greater depth, visit: <https://digital.janeaddams-ramapo.edu/items/show/9212>

2 Translation of the writer

3. The pedagogical action of hull house

At the center of Addams' educational reflection lies the idea that peace cannot be separated from material living conditions (Addams, 1905), a pedagogical vision that recognizes poverty as one of the main causes of conflict (Bajaj, 2008). From this perspective, education is called to develop critical awareness (hooks, 2020) with respect to social and structural inequalities (Degortes, Deiana, 2025).

In *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), in the chapter "Educational Method", Jane Addams criticizes an educational system overly oriented toward vocational training and instead proposes a model centered on the integral development of the person. Education, she argues, should foster interests, relationships, and civic responsibility, with the aim of strengthening participation in democratic life. Within this perspective, each individual is called to actively contribute to the community, having their own value recognized (Addams, 1902), thereby promoting forms of social awareness of one's work: "We are not willing that thousands of industrial workers shall put all of their activity and toil into services from which the community as a whole reaps the benefit, while their mental conceptions and code of morals are narrow and untouched by any uplift which the consciousness of social value might give them" (Addams, 1902, p. 180). Addams's aim is to promote an inclusive model designed to integrate immigrant groups and to value the experiences of urban communities in order to foster the construction of an authentically democratic community: "If these young people could actually see that the complicated machinery of the factory had been evolved from simple tools, they might at least make a beginning toward that education which Dr. Dewey defines as a 'continuing reconstruction of experience'" (Addams, 1910, p. 236). She denounces the limits of an educational system that restricts women's opportunities and argues for the need for an education oriented toward social change (Addams, 1916), through the active participation of women in reform processes – including the fight against child labor – attributing to education a transformative role (hooks, 2020), thus taking shape within an international and cooperative perspective: "The democratic ideal demands of the school that it give social value to the child's experience" (Addams, 1905, p. 180).

An educational approach that overcomes the dichotomy between thought and labor, promoting a holistic understanding and the active participation of all members of the community. Within this framework, the author identifies the need for educational intervention, as also emerges from the social analyses conducted on Italian families in the urban periphery (Addams, 1902; Rauty, 2025). Addams observes how boredom, resulting from the transition from community-based, outdoor forms of life to a fragmented urban context, constitutes a central factor in demotivation and deviance (Addams, 1902). She recognizes a condition of liminality experienced by immigrants within the social structures of the city (Striano, 2022).

This leads to a reflection on the crucial role of educational agencies, particularly schools and educators, who are called upon to address the needs of immigrant minors by promoting an education oriented toward awareness of their social and productive role (Addams, 1905): "Just as the political expression of democracy has claimed for the worker the free right of citizenship, so a code of social ethics now demands that he be a conscious member of society, possessing some notion of his own social and industrial value" (Addams, 1902, p. 192).

The analysis of the yearbook *Hull House Forty-Second Year Book* (1931)³ will allow us to better understand how practices of care, arising from Addams's attentive and systematic observation, are manifested within Hull House.

To make this argument more effective and immediate, MAXQDA analysis software was used; through a lexical analysis of the forty-second yearbook produced by Hull House, it clearly and distinctly presents, by means of the following word cloud, the framework within which the action and pragmatist thought that characterize Addams's figure are situated.

3 The yearbook refers to the first twenty years of activity of the Chicago social settlement. The choice of this reference stems from the historical and explanatory completeness of the socio-educational experience of Hull House.

Her action, rooted in an ethics of care, fostered the activation of empowerment processes and the promotion of forms of individual and collective agency, while at the same time supporting the development of grassroots organizational practices. Such practices take shape as analytical and transformative tools capable of making visible and countering the systemic injustices embedded in mechanisms of exploitation, marginalization, and social labeling (Addams, 1902; Shielde, 2017; Striano, 2022; Rauty, 2025).

From this perspective, bottom-up intervention assumes an eminently political and epistemic value, insofar as it is oriented toward redefining the conditions of access to knowledge and participation, through the integration of educational (Nanni, 2012), cultural, and artistic practices, understood as generative infrastructures of social transformation. Within this framework, Addams emerges as an epistemic figure whose contribution to the production of situated knowledge anticipates contemporary epistemological perspectives, legitimizing the role of women in processes of self-determination (Bellatalla, 2018) and, in a context of strong patriarchal oppression, bringing the female voice into spaces traditionally reserved for male and militaristic power.

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