Abstract:

In this presentation, I argue that Jane Addams regarded sociology as a social enterprise organized with the aim of applying knowledge in order to “cure” the “ills of democracy” and improve social life. In accordance with her project, Hull-House – the place where her idea of sociology became “settled” and was institutionalized – was transformed into a public stage at the intersection of home and work, or the point at which the private and the public came to coincide. An analysis of Addams’ writings is employed to support the view that her notion of “settlement” reflects the first explicit effort to attain a theoretical grasp of what eventually came to be designated in social theory as a “public sphere.” In order to help clarify this issue, the distinction between what I term Addams’ conception of a liberal public sphere and Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere is examined in respect to the feminist critique of the shortcomings of his position. In addition, an important point of the present discussion is that Addams’ notion of “social intercourse” as the essence of the settlement – in fact constitutes an ideal type of “symbolic interaction.” I also maintain that Addams’ conception of “democratic social intercourse” – the ethical rules, social function, and subjective meaning of which are described and developed throughout her works – provided the sociological, empirical, and theoretical foundation for Mead’s philosophical analysis of the emergence of the interactive social self.

The present discussion thus has two research goals. First, it seeks to cast light on the controversial issues concerning Addams’ contribution to sociology and symbolic interactionism, including the manner in which Hull-House indeed became sociology’s home and an “integral part of the history of the discipline” (Calhoun). Second, it presents an analysis of the relationship between Addams’ sociology and Mead’s philosophy, which it takes as an empirical case supporting some of Durkheim’s most enigmatic and prophetic claims about sociology’s identity. These include the notion that sociology is “the most useful of all preparatory studies” for the philosopher, as well as the view that sociology is “destined” to “provide philosophy with the indispensable foundations which it at present lacks.”