“Let Our Little People Go Free:”
Felix Adler’s Campaign for Social Justice in the Progressive Era

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Introduction

It was another victory for the New Deal. In 1938, after decades of struggle, Congress finally passed a viable federal prohibition of child labor with the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Yet, this was not the first attempt to abolish child labor by federal statute, nor did the law vary significantly from its predecessors. One underwhelmed Washington Post journalist reported, “Now, we are back to where we were 22 years ago.”\(^1\) Indeed, after two years, the Supreme Court had ruled unconstitutional the FLSA’s virtual twin, the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916, reversing this crowning achievement of the Progressive era. Twenty years later, and threatened by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s plan for judicial overhaul, the Supreme Courtreinterpreteditheconstitutionalboundsoffederallower,openingthedoorescolegislationpursuedbyagenerationofsocialreformers.

On April 24, 1933, before he could validate his fifty-year fight against child labor, Dr. Felix Adler, once the leader of this crusade, died. Founder and long-time chairman of the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), the first and most influential organization to coordinate a national child labor movement, Adler dedicated his life to preventing “a holocaust of the children.”\(^2\) It was his lifetime of national service that compelled President Roosevelt to write to Adler’s widow how he had “lost a true and valued adviser.” President Roosevelt assured Helen Adler that future generations would immortalize this “cultural leader of spiritual force,”


\(^2\) Felix Adler, address delivered at the first meeting of the National Child Labor Committee, April 15, 1904, quoted in Walter I. Trattner, Crusade for the Children; a History of the National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Hindman, 49-51.
“philanthropist,” and “beloved citizen” by continuing to reap rewards from his contributions. The President proved only partially prophetic.

![Figure 1 Dr. Felix Adler, c. 1920. Courtesy of the New York Society for Ethical Culture.](image)

Despite his leadership in such reforms as child labor, kindergartens, tenement houses, civil liberties, racial justice, and a host of others, Felix Adler is the forgotten progressive, remembered, if at all, as the founder of the Ethical Culture movement, a secular substitute for organized religion that emphasized ethical conduct and social reform. Although he was founding chairman of the National Child Labor Committee, chair of Political and Social Ethics at Columbia University, and a member of the New York State Tenement Housing Commission, the Committee of Fifteen, and several New York labor arbitration boards, his legacy has faded.

Neither a comprehensive biography of Felix Adler nor a history of the Ethical Culture movement, this thesis instead uses Adler's pioneering work on child labor reform as a lens for understanding his role as a progressive and the origins, nature, impact, and fate of the progressive movement. Like other prominent progressives, Adler was deeply discontented with

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the changes modernization and industrialization had wrought on their society and culture, and launched a series of reforms to improve their political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, along with a reassessment of the principles underwriting these institutions. For all their differences in motivations, beliefs, class, religion, and political allegiance, progressives did share a common orientation. Influenced by the rise of social science, and armed with the power of photography and statistics, progressive reformers constituted a broad coalition in their attempts to reformulate American democratic principles, to alter American politics, to press for greater ethnic tolerance, and to demand protections for the victims of industrial capitalism.4

With Adler as its philosophical head, the child labor movement was one of the few able to attract together diverse segments of the reform community, largely because the cause advanced simultaneously ethical and scientific principles. The abolition of child labor, proponents reasoned, would promote public weal, state security, and economic efficiency, by ensuring the development of children into independent well-informed citizens. Thus, the child labor movement was both a labor and an education initiative; any legislation enacted needed binding and effective provisions that would account for both issues. For Adler, child labor illustrated the abuses of the industrial order, but more so, child labor represented his fear, and those of many progressives, of what the future could possibly hold for society. With the establishment of the NCLC, child labor also became one of the progressive initiatives that had national coordination and eventually manifested itself in federal legislation. Although child labor was never entirely eliminated, the progressive campaign unquestionably enjoyed significant successes in both protective and education statutes.5

4 I will use a lower case “p” for this kind of general progressive as well as for the word progressivism, but an upper case “P” when discussing a member of the Progressive Party or in reference to the Progressive era.
5Trattner, 10.
Adler's intellectual life was one of contradiction, harmonized by an ethic first learned in a household which took social justice as a given. He was a neo-Kantian and pragmatist, Jewish and secular ethicist, traditionalist and liberal. He grew up in a family that supported abolition, idolized Lincoln, revered scholarship, advocated social justice, and actively engaged in charitable causes. As a young man, he became convinced that the outside world was under the undue influence of greed, egotism, and self-destruction. His postgraduate studies in Germany exposed him to socialist and Kantian ideas and played a critical role in his development as philosopher and progressive reformer.6

A combination of socio-political history and intellectual biography, this thesis looks both at the development of Adler's philosophical ideas and his profound and lasting impact on social legislation, especially pertaining to child labor. His thought and work directly influenced other social reformers; Jacob Riis, for instance, names Adler's lectures in his autobiography as the major motivation in his commitment to tenement reform.7 This thesis, however, also does something else: It underscores the growing Jewish role in American reform. Adler's personal background as a Jew shaped the movement he created and the kind of reforms it launched. Convention regards progressivism as an essentially Protestant movement rooted in the social gospel.8 But such a view is incomplete. Adler's life illustrates how Jewish concepts of social

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benevolence began to supplant the *noblesse oblige* or laissez-faire liberalism of his Protestant contemporaries. A disproportionate share of the early activists who supported his key reforms—involving civil liberties, race, and housing reform, as well as child labor—were Jewish.

This work relies on Adler’s papers at Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML), a voluminous collection of transcribed speeches, scrapbooks, diaries, correspondences, and other materials. It also uses newspapers and periodicals that document Adler’s influence and the progress of his reforms. Adler’s many public roles earned him regular press coverage. Methodologically, these newspaper and periodical articles serve as a bridge between his platform statements and the fruits of action seen in child labor legislation. Replete with investigative reports and anti-child labor manifestos, the National Child Labor Committee publications are a well of information on the child labor movement.

A comprehensive history of child labor reform in America lies beyond the bounds of this thesis and has been documented in the useful scholarship of Walter I. Trattner, Hugh D. Hindman, Viviana A. Zelizer, and Stephen B. Wood.9 The movement was a culmination of diverse influences that spanned decades, but I will concentrate on Adler’s role in child labor reform: his relentless advocacy from the platform, his establishment and chairmanship until 1921

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of the National Child Labor Committee, and his reconstruction of education. Columbia holds the records for the NCLC for the years 1914-1943, while the Library of Congress houses a collection that span the years 1904-1953. Most of the government documents—both congressional records and official NCLC publications and reports—are accessible electronically.

Adler has attracted limited attention from specialists in American Jewish history, American philosophy and theology, and the history of education. Much of this scholarship focuses on Adler's role in the development of Ethical Culture, both as a philosophic creed and as an outgrowth of Reform Judaism.

As a Leader of Ethical Culture, Howard B. Radest analyzes Adler mainly through this lens. Radest’s *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* chronicles the evolution of the Ethical Culture Societies from 1876 through 1969. Radest shows how Adler’s reign in Ethical Culture set the movement, and how Society projects and specific Society members contributed to the cause of reform on a local and national level. In *Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture*, however, Radest explores the intricate intersection of politics, social reform, education, and economics that formed Adler’s philosophy, and how it translated into actions. Yet, this thesis will situate Adler within a larger network of progressives; some were members of Ethical Culture, while others were not. Ultimately, Ethical Culture was just one of Adler’s brainchildren. It may prove more useful to assess Adler within a framework larger than himself, rather than one he formed.

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10 Platform is the official term for the Ethical Culture pulpit, a word Adler wanted to avoid using for its overtly religious connotation.

Robert S. Guttchen’s *Felix Adler* is mostly an exploration of Adler’s philosophy, particularly in the fields of ethics and education, grounded in his core concept of worth.\(^{12}\) Whereas both Radest and Guttchen focus primarily on Adler’s philosophy, I am interested in both his actions and philosophy as a catalyst for reform. Unlike these formal analyses of Adler’s philosophy, Horace L. Friess’s *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture: Memories and Studies* is a personal and often anecdotal quasi-biography. As his student, disciple, son-in-law, and finally literary executor, Friess had an intimate relationship with the scholar and reformer since his impressionable young adulthood.

Benny Kraut examines Adler within the context of Jewish history, following his religious progression, or declension, from Judaism, and the Jewish community’s reaction.\(^{13}\) In *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*, Kraut illustrates how Ethical Culture ultimately pushed Reform Jewry to the left, forcing them to liberalize and align themselves with the most progressive strains of Protestant and Catholic groups in united social reform efforts. Thus, Kraut sheds light on the role of the Jews in the Progressive era, an overlooked history, which may help explain Adler’s erased legacy.\(^{14}\)

John Stephens Mikulaninec’s Ph.D. dissertation, “A Study of the Political and Economic Theories Propounded by Felix Adler 1876-1927,” supplies the Progressive era backdrop in order to contextualize his analysis of the relationship between Adler’s philosophy and his international

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\(^{13}\) Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*.

and national political activities. It fails, however, to develop the historical relationship between Adler’s crusade for education reform and child labor reform.\textsuperscript{15}

I owe a debt to this earlier scholarship, but I will also suggest that the scholarly treatment of Adler needs to be rethought. Adler was both a thinker and an activist, and this latter aspect of his life has been understudied. Adler claimed that creed and deed were inseparable, and I will bring these two facets of his life closer together. This thesis does not enter the debate on the nature and legacy of the progressives, but it does re-situate Adler in the context of progressive historiography, building on yet also challenging certain recent developments in this scholarship.\textsuperscript{16} Like recent works by James Kloppenberg and Daniel Rodgers, this thesis looks at progressivism's European roots and underscores that progressivism was part of a transatlantic discourse. But this thesis also disputes the claim by such scholars as Jackson Lears that progressivism is best understood as an outgrowth of late nineteenth century Protestantism. Jews and Catholics played an important role in progressive reform, setting the stage for their disproportionate role in social reform later in the twentieth century.


Chapter I details the first twenty-four years of Adler’s life, and the development of his thought from Reform Judaism to an ethical philosophy that emphasized social justice. Chapter II concentrates on Adler’s establishment of Ethical Culture in 1876 and the various progressive social reforms instituted, particularly in education. It also focuses on Adler as a public figure and his influence on Reform Judaism. Chapter III outlines Adler’s early child labor philosophy and its ties to education and Ethical Culture. Chapter IV concerns Adler role outside of Ethical Culture as founder of the National Child Labor Committee and chairman from 1904 to 1921. With Adler retired from the NCLC, Chapter V describes Adler’s desire to further embed a distinct philosophy in the Ethical Culture movement. Adler’s shift in philosophical tone after World War I parallels a shift in actions. He increasingly turned from social reform to education reform, though he continued to preach the interdependence of action and idea. Chapter VI thus attempts to explain why Adler’s role as ethicist has eclipsed his role as activist. It will also offer some answers as to why historians have omitted Adler from the American narrative, and why it is important that he be included. Although Adler was a radical reformer in social justice and education, he also embodies many of the contradictions inherent to progressives that make for such a debated movement with an ambiguous legacy.
I. From Reform to Reform

The welfare of society, the progress of society as a whole, is the supreme law.\(^{17}\)

- Felix Adler

This chapter delineates the first twenty-four years of Adler’s life, and the progression of his thought from Reform Judaism to an ethical philosophy that emphasized social justice and the individual’s duty to mankind over God. It introduces the people who influenced this progression and the forces of history that compelled him, including his father and mother, the Civil War and Lincoln, the industrialization of New York and the rise of commercialism, and Reform Judaism. His years spent in graduate study in Germany also receive attention, with an emphasis on his exposure to socialism and Kantianism.

Felix Adler had an annual tradition of lecturing on an issue of national importance in the days before the election. On November 3, 1901, two days before Seth Low defeated Tammany Hall to become New York City’s next mayor, Adler delivered an address titled “On the Eve of the Decision What New York Has at Stake.”\(^{18}\) Before delivering his fiery denunciation of municipal corruption and the city’s desperation for lasting reform, Adler first posed the question of whether it was appropriate for a moral teacher to discuss politics from the Ethical platform. Those in opposition, according to Adler, based their resistance on archaic and scorned conceptions of the platform’s function. Their theory held that economics and politics lay strictly in the amoral realm, and thus, were unsuitable subjects for the setting; for an ethical leader to try and “ethicize” politics was to risk alienating a portion of his constituency. Adler mentioned this


Note: As a founding member of the Committee of Fifteen, Adler was crucial in helping to elect Seth Low, his Columbia classmate, as mayor. Besides for the speech above, Adler campaigned relentlessly for the reform mayor in opposition to Tammany’s corruption.
argument in order to unequivocally dismiss it. The real reason for opposition was “crass materialism;” but he did not break free from the bondage of “subserviency to religious prejudice” in order to enter into new bondage of “subserviency to political and economic prejudice.”

Moral progress required the “beating out” of the practical questions that affect state and class relations. Theodore Parker and the abolitionists recognized this imperative, and those ministers that remained silent, using their pulpit as a personal fortress instead of a weapon for justice, were contemptible cowards. Adler asked his audience if they were willing to make the same kinds of concessions as slaveholders and fellow sympathizers who refused to recognize “the slave man, the colored man…as a neighbor whom we are bound to treat as a human being.” And could they now respect “any person in a position to influence others at all who should practice the same abstinence?”

With this, he proceeded to the crux of his speech. Both candidates for mayor claimed to support reform, but the time for promises had passed. In the city, a loud cry for change arose out of the depths of the tenement house population, together with those that stood united with them. “The time has come,” cried Adler, “when we want actual reform. Things have come to such a pass that we must have an immediate and thorough renovation.”

New York only had one thing at stake—its future.

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By 1901, Felix Adler had been serving the social justice cause for over a quarter of a century. Adler’s adulthood as a progressive, however, reflects his development as a creature of the second half of the nineteenth century. Born in Germany, Adler moved with his family to New

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York in 1857, when New York’s Temple Emanu-El offered Samuel, Felix’s father, the rabbi’s position. Just six years old at the time, Adler essentially lived the entirety of his life in a New York that exemplified industrial greed, political corruption, and social, racial, and ethnic injustice. Yet, when he first arrived, it was the issue of slavery that overshadowed the nation as it tore at the seams. The turbulent years leading up to and through the Civil War gave rise to a pervasive American nationalism that had combined with social and political ideals. Adler’s first impression of America, fortified over the next ten years, was an urban New York invigorated with the fight for liberty, democracy, and unity. Throughout his life, Adler would continue to hold American society to the republican and egalitarian ideals expressed in the heat of the struggle.

Adler’s family founded its Americanism in the personage of Lincoln and the anti-slavery ferment of the Civil War era in the North. Samuel’s immediate and enduring devotion to Lincoln put him at odds with many of his congregants that had business ties with the South. Through Samuel’s admiration, Lincoln earned a permanent presence in the household. Only eleven years old, Felix begged to join Lincoln’s cause as a drummer boy, but soon developed an aversion to militarism with the Draft Riots of 1863 and Lincoln’s assassination. He never forgot the glow from the burning Negro Orphan Asylum or the tears of his grieving father for their president.

Samuel was a brilliant thinker, with strong religious convictions and a profound sense of decency. From Samuel, Felix not only inherited a deep appreciation for scholarship, but a

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22 Friess, 20.
23 Friess, 20.
passion for justice.\textsuperscript{26} In Germany, Samuel won acclaim as a progressive Jewish reformer working for civil equality. Politically and religiously active in supporting democratic reforms, Samuel encountered some government resistance in Germany, and therefore accepted Temple Emanu-El’s offer to come to New York, where he could pursue his democratic reforms unencumbered. Indeed, he became a significant force in shaping American Reform Judaism. Within the first few years of his appointment, Temple Emanu-El undertook a host of charitable causes, from aiding Union soldiers to relieving impoverished Irish immigrants. In 1859, Samuel, together with Rev. Samuel Isaacs, founded the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York, and he personally assumed guardianship for the orphaned children of a congregant in 1864. These ethical examples help elucidate why Felix marked his father as one of the three most important influences in his life and one of two “Chief Influences” on him as a young man.\textsuperscript{27}

Henrietta, Felix’s mother, stood as his second “Chief Influence.”\textsuperscript{28} Whereas Samuel could appear at times austere and distant, Henrietta was gentle and warm but with a sharp wit. Family life revolved around Henrietta, who exerted tremendous influence over the whole family, and Felix in particular. She was also their public face, which left Samuel free to pursue his passion for study.\textsuperscript{29} As the religious leader’s ambassador, Henrietta actively engaged with the community, listening to their concerns and keeping informed on current events.\textsuperscript{30} Felix formed a close companionship with his mother through their joint social work. Henrietta trained Felix in personal contact with the poor, making charitable visits to tenement houses a regular feature of

\textsuperscript{26} Radest, \textit{Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture}, 8.
\textsuperscript{27} Kraut, 9. Heymann Steinthal and Abraham Geiger were the other two of the three most important influences.
\textsuperscript{28} Kraut, 9.
\textsuperscript{29} Friess, 20.
life long before it became a progressive trend. It was during these visits that Felix first became conscious of the injustice of poverty and “had his first indignation stirred by their misery.”

In the years following the Civil War, there was no shortage of misery. The Civil War brought economic distress to New York City, and the desperation of so many around him stirred Adler’s already sensitive social conscience. Large-scale urban industrialization helped to raise wages, but with it prices. Real wages remained abysmally low and workers began to organize into trade unions. With unemployment and inflation wreaking havoc on the working class, strikes broke out across the North. The economic problems during the war produced social problems that continued long after. His excursions with his mother became a first-hand education in substandard housing, neglected sewage systems, and the various health hazards of tenement life. According to Kraut, “this intense exposure to the wretched existence of the poor helped to shape his life-long resolve to improve their social, physical, and spiritual state of existence.”

His social work as an adolescent was limited to charitable activity, but this expanded into “the tidal wave of social reform and reconstruction” that dominated his adulthood.

Witnessing the seeming decline of democratic politics and rise in inequality, Adler spent his adolescence increasingly demoralized, even as American society began to swell with optimism. According to Radest, Adler, “clearly foresaw the troubles awaiting an industrialized democracy.” The simplicity of agrarian America submitted to a new age of urban industrial complexity. Ethnic diversification by way of mass immigration reconfigured American society, redefining ideas of citizenship and redrawing lines of social membership. The idea of American

32 Kraut, 16.
33 Kraut, 16.
34 Kraut, 18.
progress began to parody itself in the growth of commercialism and the takeover of corporations.\textsuperscript{36} The inequity and differentiation pervading every strata of society became glaring.\textsuperscript{37}

**An Education**

Of course, as a middle class Jewish immigrant surrounded mostly by upper class Protestants, Adler was not a stranger to difference.\textsuperscript{38} Felix’s intellectual development was as much a product of his educational environment and social life as it was of larger transformations taking place on the outside.

Even within the German-Jewish community, Adler’s family was set apart both by Samuel’s profession and by its stable religious identity. While most bourgeois German-Jewish families struggled to balance Jewish traditions and practical reforms for a tenable religio-cultural identity, Felix’s home brimmed with his mother’s piety and his father’s convictions.\textsuperscript{39} Indeed, growing up, Adler felt “out of key with the average middle-class student.”\textsuperscript{40} As a result, he experienced a solitary youth. Nor did it help that Samuel, who considered education paramount, enrolled Felix in Columbia Grammar School, normally exclusive to middle and upper class


\textsuperscript{37} Radest, “Work and Worth,” 79.


\textsuperscript{39} Kraut, 7.

\textsuperscript{40} Eleanor Adler, “The Life and Letters of Felix Adler: Childhood and Youth in New York,” 6.
Christians. While grammar school left Adler uninspired and alienated, his supplemental Jewish studies with his father imbued him with a reverence for knowledge.

Adler hardly discovered thriving intellectual life at Columbia College when he matriculated in 1866. Limited to Columbia’s 150 students, eight faculty members, and single rigid curriculum, Adler found college wanting, especially in philosophy and religion. The youngest by at least two years, Adler was most likely the only Jew as well, which inevitably impacted his future philosophy. He must have felt his Jewishness acutely during his education, and a vision of a single brotherhood of human beings based on inherent individual worth would appeal to a young man who suffered a lonely youth for a religious identity.

The social tension of his early education made an imprint on Adler. Too young for his college peers and too mature for his Jewish ones, Adler increasingly turned his attention to social reform and education. By age fourteen, Adler had become a teacher at Temple Emanu-El’s Sunday school. From a “book of jottings” he kept as a youth, the foundation of Adler’s distinct pedagogy is already discernable. By the time he was seventeen years old, Adler had concluded that “education is from *educo*—to bring out,” not to “stuff in,” but “to bring out, i.e. the talents.” Felix exuded an aura in the classroom, conveying sensitivity and understanding to his

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41 Friess, 20; Kraut, 8. Samuel had his own doctorate from the elite German University.
42 According to Kraut, Samuel was reputed to have amassed one of the largest personal libraries in New York at the time. Kraut, 228, endnote 18.
43 Friess, 22.
44 *Cap and Gown* recorded Adler’s graduating class by religious denomination, but excluded Jews. Thus, Adler was omitted. If other Jewish students existed, therefore, it remains undocumented; though, it is improbable. Kraut, 11.
45 Kraut, 11.
46 Kraut, 13; Friess, 23.
47 “book of jottings” is the phrase Kraut uses to describe an intellectual digest that Adler kept as an adolescent. The book is undated and untitled, but based on its content Kraut is fairly certain Adler compiled it in his junior year at Columbia. The notebook is not organized in any way, but is merely a potpouri of different subjects Adler thought about. The notebook is located in Adler’s papers. See: Kraut, 229, endnote 19 for further detail.
48 Kraut, 14.
students that did not go unnoticed. Esteemed by both his students and fellow teachers, Adler was the first the school honored in a ceremony before departing for studies in Germany.  

The German Years

Once in Germany, Adler finally had the intellectual liberation denied him in his undergraduate education. With graduate study in America still relatively underdeveloped, it became fashionable for “professional men” to complete their studies in Germany. The German university was the paradigm of intellectual progress and the modern university. At the University of Berlin, Adler studied with leading scholars at the cutting edge of their fields. There was a general spirit of breaking free from tradition and becoming untethered to the provincialism of past views.

According to historian James T. Kloppenberg, the young American men who continued their studies in Germany and other European intellectual centers in the late nineteenth century encountered radical reformist and socialist ideas that they then introduced into American society. This was the first step in the creation of a native social democracy, the origins of which Kloppenberg traces to the ethical societies in Europe and America. The movement’s leaders adapted socialist ideas to mainstream politics and, through reform efforts, generated a culture of social democracy. Yet, concentrating on the social gospel movement, Kloppenberg describes the ethical societies as Christian organizations with branches in both Europe and America that allowed for easy communication. In the 1880s, Christian leaders studied in Europe, and in the following decade, social gospel grew more receptive to radical Christian socialist ideas. Finally,

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50 Friess, 27.
52 Friess, 28.
53 Kloppenberg, 200.
at the start of the twentieth century, the movement “rode the wave of progressive reform to dominant positions in various religious denominations.”

Richard T. Ely and Walter Rauschenbusch, according to Kloppenberg, were the main contributors to the development of American social democratic theory centered on social responsibility, personal commitment, and humanitarianism. Both went to school in Germany after studying philosophy at Columbia College. In both England and the United States, ethical intellectuals were characterized by a “flight of emotion away from the service of god to the service of man.” Ultimately, they sought, without revolution, to “extend the democratic principles of participation and equality from the civil and political spheres to the entire society and the economy.”

Kloppenberg fails to mention Adler, though the parallels in their narratives are striking. Moreover, Adler preceded the social gospelers, and as Adler scholars note, had already applied the ideas that would only echo in the social gospel movement a decade later. In Germany, under the tutelage of preeminent intellectuals, Adler transformed. In addition to his father, Adler named Abraham Geiger, the prominent Reform Jewish scholar, and Heymann Steinthal, the noted philosopher and philologist, as the three most significant influences in his life. All three

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54 Kloppenberg, 200-207.
55 Beatrice Webb quoted in Kloppenberg, 205.
56 Kloppenberg, 199. See also: Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 198, for more on the influence of progressive intellectuals that adopted welfare-state policies learned in Berlin and other centers of social democratic thought.
57 To offer an example: Rauschenbusch began his transformative post as minister in Hell’s Kitchen, New York in 1886. Adler established Ethical Culture in 1876. After ten years, Adler was a seasoned reformer.
58 Geiger is a pivotal figure in Modern Jewish history, especially in the formation of Reform Judaism. As a close friend of Samuel Adler, Geiger agreed to personally mentor Felix. Although they would split paths religiously, Felix continued to correspond with his teacher for years and regularly incorporated Geiger’s ideas into his lectures. For more on Geiger’s philosophy and his historical significance see: Abraham Geiger and Max Wiener, Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism: The Challenge of the Nineteenth Century (Cincinnati, New York, N.Y.: Hebrew Union College Press; Distributed by KTAV Pub. House, 1981); Ken Kolton-Fromm, Abraham Geiger’s Liberal Judaism: Personal Meaning and Religious Authority, Jewish Literature and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
set strict standards that challenged Adler and made him determined to excel. Their impact on him, together with his other instructors, “was nothing short of revolutionary.”

Hermann Cohen, an important authority on neo-Kantianism, opened the door to Adler’s own philosophy, even if Adler deemed Cohen’s version too abstract and unresponsive to practical social life. Philosopher Friedrich Albert Lange, however, whose neo-Kantian interpretation of the history of materialism linked Kant’s autonomous ethics to current socialist thought, proved most critical. For Adler, Lange’s *Die Arbeiterfrage (The Labor Question)* “proved epoch-making,” and his work attacking John Stuart Mill’s economic individualism added to this metamorphosis. He forced Adler to admit the legitimacy of socialist grievances and to “square [him]self with the issues that Socialism raises.”

Although Kant helped guide Adler’s philosophy away from theism, and toward a “moral law,” Lange determined the course of his future social activity. He convinced Adler that the progress of civilization depended on the advancement of social justice and assistance to the working class. Lange’s humanitarianism and dynamism appealed to Adler. As he read *The Labor Question* with “burning cheeks,” Adler incorporated his new appreciation for practical social reform into his developing ethical thought. Thus, he became one of the earliest proponents of social justice and labor cooperation, proving his commitment to Lange’s mission a few years later with the founding of Ethical Culture.

59 Kraut. 48.
60 Cohen introduced Adler to the Kantian concept of autonomous ethics—ethics independent of deity or theism, and a universal moral law that exists in every individual consciousness. Adler also adopted Kant’s view of the human being as an end *per se*, not to be used as a means by any other being.
61 Friess, 33.
63 Adler, *Ethical Philosophy of Life*, 12.
64 Kraut, 70; Eleanor Adler, “Felix Adler as a Social Reformer,” Felix Adler Papers, box 13, folder 11; Kloppenberg, 206.
Adler was to complement his secular studies with lessons at the neighboring Academy for Jewish Learning; but as the recently established institution was still somewhat in disarray, Adler instead studied independently with distinguished Jewish scholars Abraham Geiger and Moritz Steincherider. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the concerned letters of his family members back in New York, Felix was noticeably more devoted to pursuing his philosophical studies than his rabbinic ordination. Ultimately, Germany introduced Adler to three life-long interests: pedagogical theory, which would feed into modern education and child development reform; social psychology that compared diverse ethical and religious systems and allowed Adler to place his own Judaic studies within a larger context; and philosophy, particularly neo-Kantianism, the dominant German philosophy of the period. By the time he turned twenty-one, Adler had crafted a raw version of the “idea” that formed the basis of his life’s work. From Kant, he extracted three principles that comprised his formula for true liberty: “freedom for experimental science, for progressive morality, and for nondogmatic religious faith.”

In this developmental stage, Adler only hinted at his plans in letters to his family. At first his parents dismissed this as the product of a maturing mind at a university, but as Felix’s letters became ever more sophisticated, his father grew anxious. Samuel tried to broach the subject sensitively, writing to Felix, “in your last letter you write of ‘your complete change of thought,’ without saying in what the change consists.” Felix’s cousin, the chemist Isidor Walz, was less subtle and less forgiving than Samuel. In one of his more polite letters, Walz requested “to be favored with something like a lucid intelligible statement” of Adler’s new beliefs. Felix should state in “plain English” what he meant, since it appeared the issues troubling him were those that

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65 Friess, 28-35.
66 Friess, 33.
had confused and disappointed every “son of Adam.”

According to Walz’s logic, millions of people, some of the greatest intellectuals, had tried to tackle “insoluble problems,” but “Felix Adler, student phil., in the blessed year of 1872, entertains a just hope of finding the philosopher’s stone.” Walz ended by insisting that he wished not “to discourage” Adler, but to enlighten him on the futility of his endeavors: “our age is a pushing, energetic, material one, especially so in our country; if you want people to occupy themselves with philosophical or religious questions, you will have to take them by the collar and force them to do so.”

Walz, however, was mistaken in believing Adler did not understand the nature of his society or the limits to philosophical inquiry. Before Adler returned to America, he devised a plan of action with tangible goals. He intended to venture out and “arouse the conscience of the wealthy, the advantaged, the educated, to a sense of their guilt in violating the human personality of the laborer.” Although Adler received his Ph.D. in Semitics *summa cum laude* from University of Heidelberg in 1873, no records indicate whether Adler received his rabbi’s degree. Certainly he never donned the title “Rabbi.” In Germany, Adler prepared himself to lead a reform movement, though not the one Samuel had intended him to train for.

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On October 11, 1873, one month after his return, Felix Adler delivered the Saturday sermon to the Temple Emanu-El congregation at the request of its president, no doubt a test drive before Adler’s expected appointment as Samuel’s successor. By the end of his speech, “The

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69 Isidor Walz to Felix Adler, November 22, 1872, Felix Adler Papers, box 13, MS 3, 22.
70 Isidor Walz to Felix Adler, April 27, 1872, Felix Adler Papers.
71 Adler, quoted in Friess, 35. Original quote from Adler, *Ethical Philosophy of Life*, 12.
72 Kraut, 75; Eleanor Adler, “The Life and Letters of Felix Adler: Student Years in Germany,” 38.

Note: It was common for students to transfer to different universities as each school had its specialty. Geiger actually advised Adler to make the switch in 1873.
Judaism of the Future” and thereafter known as the “Temple Sermon,” it was evident that Adler no longer fit the job description. He essentially outlined the philosophy he had developed in Germany and the conclusions he had returned home intending to put into motion.

Counter to societal anxieties about the death of religion, Adler argued that religion was not dead but that current religious forms that had become meaningless. Religion as an institution moves with the progress of history, with the obsolete surrendering to the new. If Judaism was to survive it needed to unite with real life, to reinvent itself, bringing its “great humanitarian doctrines” with it and abandoning the archaic. Adler called for a new religion “bearing on all conditions and relations of life.” Judaism had to implement the moral principles to become a “Temple of the Future, [with] Justice its foundation, Peace and Goodwill its columns.” To conclude, Adler asserted that Judaism was inherently a universal humanitarian religion, not “given to the Jews alone” but to “the whole family of man.” Judaism emphasized not believing but acting, ever claiming “to be a religion—not of the creed but of the deed.”73

The sermon was generally well received, especially by younger members; the Jewish Reform movement underway in America was not far removed from many of Adler’s main points.74 The Board of Trustees, however, noticed that for a temple sermon, Adler had failed to even mention God. Under some pressure, the Board awkwardly asked if Adler could clarify some of his ideas, specifically whether he did in fact believe in God. Adler, gauging the gap that lay between them, replied that he believed in God, it just was not their God.75

With that, he withdrew his candidacy, and left the reform temple.

II. Deed Before Creed

The Beginnings of Ethical Culture

The Temple Sermo demonstrated how Germany converted Adler, although converted to what remained undetermined. Problems of working class conditions and economic disparity dominated debate in 1870s Germany. Socialists, liberals, social reformers, and religious leaders discussed concrete political, social, and cultural programs that would ameliorate the dehumanization engendered by German industrialization. In Germany, whose social and intellectual climate was more advanced than that of the U.S., Adler had devised a plan to meet the urgent demands of modern American society. Once separated from his Jewish socio-religious fellowship, Adler launched a new secular association to execute this plan.

The United States was in the midst of profound, unsettling transitions: A rural society was becoming an urban society, a pre-industrial society, an industrial society, marked by a vast increase in immigrants and labor tensions. The century had been one of struggle and Americans looked to the future with tentative hope, tempered with an undercurrent of foreboding. Reflecting on the initial motivation for the movement, Adler insisted that Ethical Culture did not begin as a series of rationalistic societies comprised of an intelligentsia embittered by religion, but as a movement for progressive reform. It originated as a positive action for humankind, not a negative reaction against Judaism. From its inception, Ethical Culture was bound with labor

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77 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 26.
struggles—“the chief moral question of the day”—and the tangible and philosophical problems of the modern industrial world.\(^78\)

On May 15, 1876, in New York City’s Standard Hall, Felix Adler explained his plan to a largely Jewish middle class audience in what became the founding address of the Ethical Culture movement. The “distinct traits” of their age necessitated drastic change. Success in printing and railways yielded “great and unexpected evils,” so that progress in industry paralleled decline in national morality. This trend pushed the whole liberalist concept of progress into doubt. “An anxious unrest, a fierce craving desire for gain has taken possession of the commercial world,” Adler reproached; the acquisition of wealth was the basis of existence rather than a means towards an enhanced existence. Society granted luxury an importance it never merited—a dangerous transgression.\(^79\)

Consequently, modern society floated aimlessly, a ship without a rudder drifting with the “tide of business,” absorbed in the “giddy race of competition.” But it was a “want of purpose,” Adler contended, which was the “great and crying evil in modern society.” The dynamism of their age preoccupied men with illusions, blinding them to their own hollowness. Adler warned, though, that “there comes a time of rude awakening,” when “a great crisis sweeps over land,” and then society would anguish over the world that they had fashioned.\(^80\) By their one hundredth anniversary, Americans had desecrated the values on which they had declared independence.

The question of the children, however, was of even greater significance. The parents’ purpose is to improve their world for their children; yet, even the self-evident reverence for childhood had dissipated from society. Change, therefore, was imperative. Progress demanded,

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\(^{79}\) Felix Adler, “Address of May 15\(^{th}\), 1876,” in *Twenty Years of the Ethical Movement, 1876-1896* (Philadelphia: Innes & Son, 1896), 2.

\(^{80}\) Adler, “Address of May 15, 1876,” 3-5.
both a great, united effort and the division of labor. Every individual is limited in some capacity and excels in another; thus, only in combination with one’s fellow was efficiency certain. 81 This method of production held true for material and intellectual goods.

Adler, then, proposed a weekly respite from the ravages of business, where they would gather every Sunday to discuss “our practical duties in the practical present, to make clear the responsibilities which our nature as moral beings imposes upon us in view of the political and social evils of our age.” 82 In the same breath, he assured his listeners that he had no intention of introducing a new “priestly office;” prayer and ritual were excluded. Mainly, Adler wanted this movement to finally transcend the bitter vitriol that had defined religious conflicts for millennia. It mattered little what a person believed or disbelieved, as long as he “be one with us where there is nothing to divide—in action. Diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed! This is the practical religion from which none dissents…. This is that common ground where we all grasp hands as brothers united in mankind’s common cause.” In their age of crisis, men should come together in brotherhood and serve the “commonweal,” becoming “instruments of unending good.” 83 Adler concluded this powerhouse sermon with a directive: “The time calls for action. Up, then, and let us do our part faithfully and well.” 84

Although they share similar themes, this societal critique clearly moved beyond the Temple Sermon and its ambiguous implications. Adler proposed replacing religion with a movement to help humanity, unquestionably and explicitly nontheistic. This rather radical scheme could only have gained traction during a period of “uprooting,” Radest contends. 85

81 Adler, “Address of May 15th, 1876,” 7-9.
82 Adler, “Address of May 15th, 1876,” 12.
83 Adler, “Address of May 15th, 1876,” 13-16.
84 Adler, “Address of May 15th, 1876,” 16.
85 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 28.
Adler’s “New Ideal” called for social reconstruction; it encompassed both their contemporary institutions and their mode of thought, beginning with mass education for women and children who were still constrained. Adler continued to identify the labor problem, the role of women, and a new view of childhood as the era’s gravest moral issues.\(^{86}\)

The ethical ideal entailed a more inclusive and equitable community, without walls of ethnic and religious divide and without barriers to equal opportunity. Since only ethics remained changeless in their chaotic world, ethics, Adler argued, should guide them in solving social problems that “demand a higher justice.” If guided instead by greed and selfishness, anarchy would soon follow. The principles of ethics stipulated that they “admit ever larger classes of society into the old bond of inalienable right and fellowship.”\(^{87}\)

The Jews of “Christian New York”

After one year, Adler’s Sunday lectures were popular enough that one young man actually fainted from the overcrowded hall, according to a *New York Herald* report.\(^ {88}\) Society membership had also doubled in size, making the total at approximately four hundred.\(^ {89}\) The movement gradually solidified into an official organization, the Society for Ethical Culture, as a Board of Trustees formed with Joseph Seligman as its first president. In this respect, Ethical Culture was both part of a larger trend of associations in the nineteenth century and an evolutionary step ahead. Different voluntary charity organizations, usually comprised of an ethnically and nationally homogeneous membership, emerged in the late nineteenth century to deal with the consequences of the rising city. Many cities patterned New York, responding to

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\(^{86}\) Friess, 54.

\(^{87}\) Friess, 50.

\(^{88}\) “The Ethical Culturists: Progress of the Society and the Work to Be Accomplished-Address of Professor Adler,” *New York Herald*, May 14, 1877.

\(^{89}\) Friess, 57.
immigration, poverty, and health issues. Yet, reform was still in its infancy, and the nation was not prepared for problems that were still only “noticed by a few on the frontier of social criticism.”

According to Radest, Ethical Culture introduced a new breed of organization into this mix. Ethical Culture was, at root, an urban movement. Founded by Jews, with many of its first members as Jews, the movement was naturally at home in an urban environment. Forced by prejudice over the generations to adapt to city life, Jews “had developed habits of social welfare among themselves,” building a “brilliant” record of “self-help” combined with “mutual responsibility.” It is this historical development that Adler wanted to universalize in Ethical Culture. Roused by Adler’s Temple Sermon, the organizers of Ethical Culture “created a magnificent pioneering record of social service and set a pattern for the movement.”

The first members of Ethical Culture and the larger Sunday lecture audience represented a broad spectrum of Jews in their religiosity and self-identification. Especially in the first few years, many Jewish members had no intention of forfeiting that identity, while many Sunday attendants came merely out of curiosity. Yet, Adler fulfilled the intellectual, spiritual, and social needs of hundreds of New York Jews dissatisfied with the state of contemporary Judaism, which felt stale, disingenuous, and inconsistent. According to Kraut, Adler’s Sunday lectures were paramount; they revived the spiritual and social consciousness of men and women and directed them to social justice action. While some Jews, especially the young, found Adler appealing for his abandonment of dogmatism and ritual, others fell in line because they recognized, as noted

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90 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 37.
91 For more on the history of Jews and city living, see Ezra Mendelsohn, People Of The City: Jews And The Urban Challenge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
92 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 37.
93 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 37.
94 Kraut, 126.
by Jewish follower, Gregory Weinstein, that Adler “was a forerunner and pioneer in all movements for practical social betterment.”95 Every Sunday, Weinstein came, drawn by Adler’s dissent from dogma, faith in man’s inner ethical consciousness, and ardent denunciations of social and economic offenses together with their “constructive remedial” solutions.96

In *Rebirth of a Nation*, Jackson Lears argues that the Progressive era reforms had their roots in the widespread physical, spiritual, and moral renewal movements of the second half of the nineteenth century. For Lears however, “the impulse to conduct a world crusade began in the recesses of the Protestant soul.”97 Social Christianity was indeed integral to progressivism, but assigning an entire era of reform to one religious sect is excessive. For instance, Lears does not mention that many of the reforms New York underwent are directly traceable to Jewish or Ethical souls. Moreover, Lears credits the social gospelers for initiating ideas that Adler had advocated for over a decade. The social gospelers, according to Lears, opened up discourse with their alternatives to laissez-faire and insistence on individual morality.98 The notion of deserving poor became obsolete as reformers recognized the hand of the industrial system at work. A closer look at the misunderstood working classes revealed the depth of economic deprivation and led to new theories on traditional themes of charity. Other Social Christians helped dismantle the harmful assumptions that perpetuated the American do-it-yourself philosophy.99

Lears acknowledges that not all progressives stemmed from these spiritual beginnings. Many who advocated reform and pursued the public good substituted social justice with ideas of efficiency and management. Rather than focusing on social democracy for America, these

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95 Weinstein, 100.
96 Weinstein, 99-100.
97 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 5.
98 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 196.
99 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 197.
progressives tended to be more cosmopolitan. Nevertheless, progressives stood united in their dedication to the “commonweal,” which “linked public and private morality.” This vision of a cooperative commonwealth as a regenerative enterprise formed the foundation of Adler’s ethical philosophy.

Adler dismissed the idea of the “deserving poor.” Reform was not about charity, but community; the reformer was equally part of the imperfect society, and benefited in some way from the services he or she rendered. Each member of society depended on the other, and it was this reciprocal relationship that produced the “ethical manifold.” Reform in this light presupposed democracy, as there were no superiors and inferiors but a basic interdependence that equalized all. According to Adler, reform activity created the conditions for individuals to save themselves from destitution. Arguing then against the prevailing trend of noblesse oblige, Adler maintained that reform was not a condescending or a manipulative activity, but the demands of a democracy. His concept of social reconstruction presumed that every person, independent of socio-economic status, needed reform in some way, and by engaging with those of radically different experiences, poor and wealthy alike experienced moral growth.

In the late nineteenth century the fear of “overcivilization,” Lears writes, was really a sense that the Protestant ethic no longer fit comfortably within its modernizing capitalist society, and that Protestants, in essence, were becoming untethered. Progressive reformers believed that “reborn individuals could renew an entire society;” this tendency of renewalists to think in holistic terms about society made the transition to connecting private needs with public

100 Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 200, 4.
101 Radest, Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture, 168.
102 Felix Adler, "The Ethical Problem," The Philosophical Review 38, no. 2 (1929); Adler, Ethical Philosophy of Life, 125-126.
103 Radest, Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture, 168.
104 Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 9.
responsibility fairly easy. Yet, Adler’s vision for a more ethical world was not a response to some personal psychological demand for control in a time of uprooting. Furthermore, as a Jew, Adler never shared in the Protestant ethic liberalism that served to postpone similar reform movements among his Protestant peers; as a result, he became a pioneer reformer. Hence, Jacob Riis’s frustration that “among the strongest moral forces in Christian New York was and is Adler, the Jew or heretic,” who seemed to contain more Christian love than the apathetic churches.

Like Lears, Moses Rischin recognizes the spiritual basis of the social reform movements and its theme of regeneration in response to modernization. He describes Adler as New York’s “most pragmatic clergyman,” who set the pace of reform. In *The Promised City*, he lists Adler first as one of the few reformers, along with Jacob Riis and Lillian Wald, who in the early stages of late nineteenth century reform “founded the core social institutions of the modern city.” Adler was a “spokesman” for the many disenfranchised and a “prophet” to his Ethical Culture adherents. Although Rischin seems to agree with Lears when he criticizes the established German-Jewish community for its limited role in early social reform, leaving it to their children to join a largely Protestant-inspired movement, he also admits that “New York’s first advocate and practitioner of social Christianity was Dr. Felix Adler, a Jew.” As discussed previously, though, it was precisely Adler’s Jewish upbringing and the influence of his father, who had never separated religion from social activism, applied to the fusion of Kant and Lange that was most responsible for Adler’s outlook.

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105 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 10.
107 Rischin, 196.
108 Rischin, 201.
109 Kraut, 71.
Conceivably, a social justice movement could have arisen out of Reform Judaism, and indeed, Adler had expressed this desire in his Temple Sermon. Emil Hirsch, and later Stephen Wise, compelled in part by competition with Adler, proved that Reform Judaism was as capable of attending to social concerns as the social gospel. Adler, however, anticipated the social gospel movement, and Kraut credits him for being “the first, and for some time, the only leader of Jewish origin to engage actively in social reform and the social reconstruction of society.”

Ethical culture attracted large numbers of followers in the beginning, but after 1880 membership leveled off and no longer posed a threat to the established American Jewish community; thus, attacks on Adler largely discontinued. The American Jewish community also had decidedly more important matters to tend to with the influx of hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. In addition, the Reform Jewish community co-opted the Ethical movement by instituting its own social justice initiatives to satisfy those who might have left Judaism. Socially conscious Jews were able to both stay within their communities and fulfill their social reform aspirations. Thus, as Ethical Culture became increasingly marginal, as it had historically maintained a large Jewish demographic, it paradoxically became better favored. Although small, seen by most as a minor Jewish sect, Ethical Culture had a central role in social reform that many appreciated and admired for its nonsectarian programming and benefits.

Many of Adler’s reforms directly aided Catholic and Protestant poor, like his District Nursing and Workingman’s School, but soon immigrant Jews began to reap rewards with his tenement work. For this reason, many prominent Jews joined his ranks. Adler pioneered housing reform, painfully aware of the substandard living conditions of New York’s poor since boyhood when he and his mother had paid philanthropic house calls. His criticisms led to the formation of

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110 Kraut, 132.
111 Kraut, 179.
the Sanitation Commission of the 10th Ward in the Lower East Side, and as a member of the Tenement House Commission, he proposed the first state subsidized model tenement housing to replace the slums.\(^\text{112}\) The first of these homes on Cherry Street housed poor Jewish immigrants. His Commission also led to better construction standards, crucial for children and babies, who were particularly vulnerable in cramped apartments without shafts or windows. Despite Adler’s rejection of Judaism, the strength of his humanity and his perseverance for social reform made him a revered figure in many Jewish circles by the late eighties.\(^\text{113}\)

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.jpg}
\caption{Jacob Riis, “Home of an Italian Ragpicker.” 1888. http://www.masters-of-photography.com/R/riis/riis_italian_ragpicker_full.html. Photograph can also be found in How the Other Half Lives: Study Among the Tenements of New York.}
\end{figure}

In the late 1870s, however, Adler was still drawing plenty of controversy. According to the \textit{Christian Register}, Adler, the “new exponent of radical ideas,” was “attracting a good deal of attention, especially among the more liberal Jews.”\(^\text{114}\) He quickly mobilized with Ethical Culture, initiating a host of reforms that included his Free Kindergarten and District Nursing within the first two years. The media closely observed the new Society and its charismatic leader, but with

\(^{112}\) Kraut, 180.
\(^{113}\) Kraut, 180.
\(^{114}\) \textit{Christian Register}, March, 29, 1877; Radest, \textit{Toward Common Ground}, 57.
mixed reviews. Although many Jewish newspapers denounced Adler, his overpowering presence on the platform and his evident sincerity in social justice won him the respect of public opinion. The *Index*, the journal for the Free Religion Association, lauded the mission and the man throughout the seventies and eighties. *Index* writers were taken aback by Adler’s singularly captivating oratory skills and his presence that hovered over the assembly:

> From the first sentences it is apparent that his Intellect is of a keen, relentless, and incisive order, and his scholarship ripe and rare. Absolute fearlessness seems to be one of his leading characteristics, and some of the things he said on Sunday must have been peculiarly startling to his Jewish auditors, but he said them as if he deserved thanks for his almost pitiless sincerity…. His sentences seem to drop out of a great profound and his whole manner so singularly unstudied instead of suggesting glibness shows hardly a sign of preparation.\(^\text{115}\)

Publications, like the *Index*, helped to clarify for the public this new movement and its highly visible leader. At the end of their third year, partly in response to anxious Jewish critics and confused Society members, Adler explained the purpose and nature of Ethical Culture, a perpetual task throughout his career. They were not trying to form a new religion or even a religious sect, nor were they responding to changes that happened eighteen hundred years before with the birth of Christianity; rather, they were responding to a different kind of revolution of their own time. They witnessed the turning point of history, as science transformed the “basis of life.” Their task was to now reconcile the “head and heart of society,” for science and industry to coexist with the emotional life. The illusory independence that pervaded society prevented people from uniting around a common purpose and encouraged a hierarchy based on socio-economic status rather than on merit. Life is made cheap when wealth is made central.

\(^{115}\) Friess, 58; Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 23. Taken originally from the *Christian Register* and reprinted in the *Index*. 
Industrialists took the humanity of their laborers to give life to their machines, so that “an army of starvation” was what remained from “our industrial system.”

For Adler, child labor best demonstrated where egotism led, how religion had failed, and how a new movement was in order. A nine-year old forced to labor thirty-six consecutive hours, a 3½ year-old toiling in a brickyard, and a boy of fifty pounds buckling under clay blocks of the same weight spoke louder than his rhetoric. Nevertheless, he believed the age was ripe with opportunity for change as men and women grew discontented with the status quo. Overcoming these obstacles for change meant recognizing the necessity of education reform and that they “labor together for the welfare of the children.” That is why they founded Ethical Culture—to free the children.

**Liberating Labor with Learning**

For the first twenty years of his career, Adler’s main preoccupation was “the social” or “the labor question.” More than just working conditions and wages, his “liberation of labor” referred to a comprehensive educating of workers, in order to improve their material, intellectual, emotional, and ethical standard of living. Democracy called for an increased role for the working class and for their “voice in the making of economic decisions.” In reply to the charges of heresy he received for his more radical social reform ideas, Adler declared it “arch-heresy” to “deny the possibility of progress in removing license, slavery, and poverty.” As the “one

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116 *Index*, Vol. 10 (1879), 304.
117 *Index*, 304.
118 Index, 303; *Index*, May 11, 1879, vol. 10, Felix Adler Papers, box 19.
119 Friess, 61.
120 Friess, 71.

Note: Adler was particularly denounced for his concept of a progressive income tax. In general, Adler did not believe in having more money than necessary and therefore advocated a steeply graded income tax that would serve social needs. Adler thought it “an enforced sacrifice for the common good,” the press called his discourse of this idea, “The Communist Sermon.” See: “Felix Adler as a Social Reformer,” Felix Adler Papers, box 13, folder
stinging motive” of the Ethical movement, the labor problem represented their “desire to contribute to the evolution of an unjust society in to a just society.”121 The perfection of human society was their chosen religion, Adler comments in his autobiographical notes. Not the creed, but the deed was their “watchword,” and with this mantra, the Society, threw itself determinedly on the “path of practical reform.”122

Radest clarifies what Adler intended by “Deed, not creed.” It needs to be understood within a Kantian framework, for devoid of this context, the phrase reads as “a kind of crude activism.”123 Adler meant that the creed could only come to exist out of the experience of the deed; thus, the deed is necessarily primary. Creed and deed, however, function in an interdependent dynamic: “deed without creed is meaningless; creed without deed is empty.”124

Adler’s persistent push for education reforms to complement labor reforms underscores this fundamental principle of interdependent creed and deed. Labor reforms were necessary as humanitarian measures, but they would yield only short-term improvements if unaccompanied by education initiatives to allow for a long-term reconstruction of society. Throughout his life, Adler continued to mourn his early failed cooperative projects, his first ventures into social reform.125 Left uneducated, individuals acted against their interests. He, consequently, made education the marrow of his vision. While adult education was important, Adler concentrated

121 Adler, Our Part in this World, ed. Horace L. Friess, 32.
122 Adler, “Notes for the Sunday Address: An Address with an Autobiographical Background,” [ca. 1928], box 30, folder 3, 10.
123 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 37.
124 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 37.
Note: Adler said multiple variations of this idea: deed before creed, deed, not creed, diversity in creed, unanimity in deed. For the most part they are interchangeable because the idea remains the same; namely, that the deed is primary.
125 For instance, Adler organized a printing cooperative that fell apart once the economy improved. See Eleanor Adler, “Felix Adler as a Social Reformer,” Felix Adler Papers, box 13, folder “Social Pioneering,” MS 11.
mainly on children, with the view that teaching ethical respect for humanity had to begin with
the child. Uncorrupted by the individualistic competition of the marketplace and more malleable,
children proved better candidates for the reconstruction of society’s values that Adler intended
through education. Moreover, Adler’s preoccupation with stable structural change made the next
generation—the future citizenry—his natural target group.

His Free Kindergarten, the first free kindergarten east of the Mississippi, was a direct
response to the “social question.”126 Its objective was to provide working class children with
some of the care crucial to their early years. Adler and Alfred Wolff, his friend and early
supporter, personally went to poor communities, distributing handbills and asking families to
send their children to his Free Kindergarten. Most families were confused, some suspicious, but
in January of 1878 Adler opened his school with six boys and two girls. He established the
United Relief Works for those who wanted to partake in his social reform activities without
joining his movement (this is how many New York Jews became involved in social reform).127
The Kindergarten acted as proto-day care center—it cleaned, clothed, and fed poor children who
otherwise would have been on the street or at work with their parents. Similar kindergartens,
modeled after Adler’s, soon appeared in major cities around the U.S.128

Adler immediately drew wide public notice, first for his reforms and second for how he
introduced his reforms in connection with his ethics. The labor problem, economic exploitation,
was just one more expression of stripped away humanity and undervalued human worth.
According to Radest, Adler believed that “the indignities suffered by the workingman were as
great as his economic want, that lasting destruction of personality was a consequence of

126 Felix Adler, Felix Adler Papers, box 30, folder 4.
127 Friess, 65.
128 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 42.
regarding the worker not as a human being but as a ‘hand.’” The workingman’s stripped away humanity congealed into a “social legacy” inherited by his children; education was to counteract this inheritance.\(^{129}\)

The week after his Kindergarten opened, Adler delivered his Sunday address on “the Ethics of the Social Question,” declaring that “social justice” was the school’s “alpha and omega.”\(^{130}\) He debunked the myth of the American merit-based economy, a fallacy that “overlooks the great inequalities of opportunity caused by glutting the labor market, insecure unemployment, and poverty of education.” The theory of the worker of today becoming the owner of tomorrow remained a tall tale unless supplemented with the economic, moral, and intellectual liberation of labor required to create conditions of mobility.\(^{131}\)

Sobered by his cooperative mishaps and encouraged by his Kindergarten’s success, Adler proceeded into more formal education in 1880 with the Workingman’s School.\(^{132}\) This school introduced industrial education as a necessary supplement to a “liberal education.” “Our hope” said one Society official, “is to educate through the hands, the brain.” Their aim was for graduates to “not only be working men and working women, but working men and working women.”\(^{133}\) In addition to manual shops, Adler was the first to incorporate art, music, and drama into the curriculum, disciplines necessary not only for the cultivation of artistic talents, but also for the holistic development of the individual. Certainly, he was building off of experiments by progressive educators before him, most notably Switzerland’s Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Nevertheless, “this was one of the outstanding efforts to introduce the [teaching of academic

\(^{129}\) Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 42.

\(^{130}\) Friess, 65.

\(^{131}\) Friess, 65. A set of three original addresses titled “The Ethics of the Social Question” can be found in Felix Adler Papers, box 81, folder 62.

\(^{132}\) Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 43.

\(^{133}\) Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 43.
subjects] through the varied types of activities.”  

It provided a paradigm for the possibilities of public education and changed the nature of education as a discipline.

Ethical Culture School “is today recognized as the model for all private and public education institutions,” but Gregory Weinstein remembers how the Workingman’s School was also a public forum dedicated to the day’s most important questions.  

A decade of “hard times” gave birth to “deep thinkers and valiant champions” regarded as dreamers for now conventional ideals. The “Ardent Eighties” was a period of growth and dynamism in American urban centers. Out of the churches, synagogues, labor organizations, and the privileged class emerged leaders of “thrilling battles” that left an enduring legacy now integrated into the social order.  

People began in earnest to deal with the problems of substandard housing and the swelling tenements. According to Friess, by 1890, New York’s 35,000 tenements contained approximately 1.7 million people, or more than two-thirds of city’s total population.  

Attacks on housing and public education came from all sides, but Adler’s criticisms encompassed a broader platform, namely, obstacles to the “common advance of humanity in the growing industrial society.”  

By his thirties, Adler was fully immersed in housing, city government, and education reform.

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134 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 44.
135 Weinstein, 99-101. Ethical Society’s Young Men’s Union gathered Sunday evenings at the school, and often Samuel Untermyer and Samuel Gompers debated labor conditions “to the keen enjoyment of the audience.”
136 Friess, 1-3.
137 Friess, 94.
138 Friess, 94.
From 1880 to 1895 when it changed its name to Ethical Culture School, the Workingman’s School—Adler’s new eight-grade free elementary school—thrived, succeeding in its aim of providing a premium education suited to everyone in a growing industrial culture, regardless of socio-economic background. This was how Adler defined social justice, where equal opportunity existed for every child and education was universalized. At the foundation of the school was Adler’s assumption that “only education could extirpate poverty at the root and alleviate the misery of the poor.” The school centered on educating the child’s inner nature in accordance with actual experience. Adler took a special role in all plans for the school, from creating the curricula to selecting the teachers, who had to be of the highest caliber in their field, as well as an adherent of the school’s values.

Adler adamantly distinguished mere trades training from industrial education, perhaps the school’s most salient departure. For schools “to recognize distinctions between rich and poor,”

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139 Friess, 95. The Workingman School added more schools including secondary schools as the years progressed and the Workingman School became Ethical Culture School.
would be a disgrace to democracy. He did not want to train poor children to become better cooks and tailors, but to allow the hands to connect with the mind. Industrial education was a form of training that belonged to the age, applicable to both wealthy and poor students. His other unconventional education initiatives included physical education, arts and crafts, and music. The curriculum combined the “gate of labor” and the “gate of study”—a learning by doing philosophy and a learning by observation methodology—both emphasizing experience.

The New York Board of Education was so impressed with Adler’s school that its president said, “If I could have my way, every public school in this city would be conducted in accordance with the system of instruction adopted” in the Workingman’s School. The school earned ample press coverage as well. The Herald Tribune, for example, in a glowing commendation on December 27, 1891, wrote: “Eureka! I have found it at last! A school where children actually like to go.... A school which deals with living things.” Instead of training children in the same rigid education Adler himself had received, the Workingman’s School “gave its pupils a rather full experience of youthful life in a growing modern city.” In subsequent years this practice became nearly universal. Adler’s innovative pedagogy is arguably, according to Friess, “the single greatest institutional success of Adler’s life.”

The objective of school was to “train reformers,” those who devote themselves to the “beneficient transformation of faulty environment.” This was a means of character building for the student and would precipitate a harmonious future society dedicated to the common

141 Friess, 96.
142 Quoted in Friess, 98. At the World’s Fair at Chicago, Adler delivered an address on American education where the board also praised the school in its “Educational Exhibit of the State of New York, Hand-book 17, 1894.”
143 Quoted in Friess, 98.
144 Friess, 98.
145 Adler, quoted in Radest, Toward Common Ground, 103. Quote from Ethical Record (1901), 107.
Reform was to serve as the bridge between socio-economic classes and the common ground where all could meet. “Adler has taught well the lesson of social ethics,” writes Radest in his description of the student and teacher councils that formed in the community-like school. If the school were to truly produce democratic, ethical citizens, then it would have to allow students to practice self-governance. Adler envisioned every school as a “little commonwealth” educating a future citizenry for the larger commonwealth. The school was the link between the family and the state; its role was to transform children of families into servants of the nation, and without the school, political virtue would disintegrate.147

146 Adler, quoted in Radest, Toward Common Ground, 103.
147 Felix Adler, “Child Labor and Education,” speech, January 23, 1887, Felix Adler Papers, box 64, folder 23, 6.
III. Less Labor, More Learning

The perennial debate over individual rights and the bounds of state power obstructed child labor reform in the nineteenth century. It was unclear whether government could intercede on a child’s behalf in opposition to parental authority. Where the state resides had been the American question, but to Adler, the answer was simple. The state exists nowhere; it is an idea that inhabits the minds of the people, and therefore, “must be reborn from age to age if the state is to be perpetuated.”148 The public school is the “womb” that conceives and nurtures this “state” idea. It is the cornerstone of the republic. Like Ethical Culture, the public school was a “common ground” where children learned to rise above differences as one undivided people.149 Rather than reinforce cyclical socio-economic hierarchies through education inequity, Adler promoted using education to create equal opportunity and to unite a single people within a single institution; he proposed a legislative agenda to achieve this goal.

Myths and Facts

In 1887, after New York passed a weak and ineffective child labor law, Adler delivered a series of addresses on child labor and education reform, in which he insisted that a compulsory education law partner any child labor law. Adler seethed with sarcasm in his estimation of the legislature’s new requirement for fourteen weeks of schooling per year: "What a generous legislature! How much can a child not be expected to learn in fourteen weeks during the entire

year." Children should devote, if not full-time, then at least half their time to education. This dead letter regulation made a mockery of law in its window dressing reform.

A recent investigation of factories attested to the urgency of education reform. The Commissioner of New York’s Bureau of Labor Statistics asked children, eleven and twelve years old, basic questions: What was the capital of their state, how many states in the union, what state they lived in, and whether they could read. To each one, the children responded that they never went far enough in school to learn the answer. A child of ten was asked whether he had attended school. He replied that he had, and when asked for how long, he answered, "about a week." Some working children did not even know their town’s name, only that of the mill where they worked.

With this disturbing report, Adler inspired his audience in “vigorous language” that “provoked hearty and prolonged applause,” wrote a New York Times observer. “The question of child labor,” declared Adler, “is one that should invite the most serious attention of all right thinking men, of all who feel a brotherly sympathy for the uprising laboring classes, of all those who are concerned for the future of our free institutions.” Educate these children and they will be the future problem solvers of social difficulties; leave them to drown in their own ignorance and those that survive will be tomorrow’s ignorant mobs to follow "wily demagogues." To avoid catastrophe, "let the shield of the state be held over the little children."

This meant strict, enforceable, and effective government legislation for both child labor and public education.

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These lectures received considerable coverage; many supported his education initiatives and confirmed his exposé on child labor in the factories. Some of the statistics, though, were so disconcerting that many remained incredulous.\textsuperscript{155} Surely, a four-year old laborer was impractical, even if enlightened New Yorkers could believe such inhumanity existed. Nevertheless, in a recent study, a physician found that out of a sample of 535 girls between ages ten and twelve, working in factories, shops, or at home, only sixty were healthy. One of the many unhealthy was a three-year old who had contracted infantile paralysis, a disease partially treatable under normal circumstances. The mother, however, neglected the child, so that by age five the child was sewing buttons, and by age thirteen, the girl, now “a hopeless cripple,” was still forced to finish a dozen trousers a day.\textsuperscript{156}

Child labor, though, was more than just a handful of statistics, horrifying as they were. Child labor was a national epidemic, extending beyond New York’s tenements, beyond any single shocking anecdote. Many Americans remained skeptical to its severity and ubiquity, because the implications for their own culture and society were uncomfortable. Adler understood their incredulity as it arose from a misconception of what an oppressor was. Fairy tales familiarized a “kind of man-eating ogre,” a Saturnalia who devours his children; but this is a disservice to the complexity of human nature.\textsuperscript{157} The oppressor, according to Adler, was merely a man “blind in one eye” by greed. He chose to remain ignorant of his crimes, having his


\textsuperscript{156} Adler, “Child Labor in New York,” 5.

subordinates do his dirty work and leaving himself free to engage in facade philanthropy. The employer lived by the postulate, “Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth.”

Men had consciences, industries did not; it was the nature of the system that allowed evil to persist. Everywhere, the increased employment of women and children followed in the wake of the “progress of industry.” As machines replaced men in the more arduous operations, the cheap labor of women and children grew in demand to feed these machines. Thus, their employment continued to increase, so that from 1870 to 1880, child operatives in New York State rose by 43 percent and women operatives rose by a staggering 115 percent.

The numbers worsen out west and down south, with a full quarter of Pennsylvania’s total working force comprised of children younger than fifteen. The national disease was perhaps most tragic in the coalfields, where seven year olds were forced to breath in the “poisonous gases of the coal and powder smoke.” They toiled as if condemned to a chain gang, with no charged crime but sentenced to “loss of health and deformity of body” as an inevitable punishment.

Hundreds of thousands of children continued in this way throughout the U.S., but the most worrisome aspect of it for Adler was that this number was incessantly rising. He asked whether a majority of the nation’s children had to be enslaved before the rest of society deigned to take interest.

Americans seemed to have learned nothing from the Civil War. When Northerners turned a blind eye to slavery, they further entrenched an institution of suffering; slavery was a national blemish, despite its Southern location. With child labor, Americans appeared intent on repeating past mistakes. Yet, just as the abolitionists grew wise, rallied support and crusaded for justice,

with the Bible in hand shouting, “thus, said the Lord, ‘let my people go free,’” so too Adler was steadfast in his mission, urging his contemporaries to never tire of shouting, “let our little people go free.”

They needed to emancipate the child, both from the slavery of labor and the slavery of ignorance.

The First Legislative Steps to Liberation

New York had already proven the leader of the nascent child labor movement, setting the pattern of legislation for other states to follow. Abolishing child labor in New York, even if just in New York City, was of greater consequence than they had realized. Adler sought to rectify the 1886 law with the knowledge that any action undertaken in New York would ultimately extend nationwide.

The law was blatantly insufficient, Adler insisted, as it only required fourteen weeks of schooling per year and only banned children under thirteen from factories. Unless extensively amended, the regulation was likely to do more harm than good; taking children out factories without putting them into schools—and schools with a proper pedagogy—was futile, if not dangerous. On his recent inspection of the City’s lower wards, Adler came across a family in dire poverty. The father apologized for allowing his children to work and confessed that he preferred them in school, but felt they could not eat without the children’s pitiful income. Starvation, Adler argued, was not a trade-off of education reform. Parents that allowed their children to learn instead of labor made real sacrifices that the government had a responsibility to compensate. Schooling their children hurt poor families, but it paled in comparison to the looming threat of an

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163 Already in 1887, Adler called for a national united effort to abolish child labor, almost twenty years before the founding of the National Child Labor Committee.
entire generation steeped in ignorance. Moreover, only education could break the cycle of poverty that prevented families from ever rising beyond subsistence. In the meantime, Adler suggested the government provide “public relief,” “a stipulated allowance,” for the opportunity cost of sending children to school. If there was one matter New York could afford to be “liberal” with, it was children.

The law’s failed education provisions matched its failed labor protections. The Commissioner’s testimony described the outrageous perjury parents committed to keep their children in the factories. Tiny ten year-olds brazenly insisted that they were over thirteen, the legal age for employment. The law went into effect on July 4, 1886, and the Commissioner mocks astonishment at the number of children who became thirteen on July 5th. Those actually thirteen had been in the factories for years, and were consequently illiterate. This led Adler to propose that all workers between ages thirteen and eighteen test for literacy, and those who fail attend night school. The law did not guard adequately against the physical hazards of the factory either. “It is not uncommon,” the Commissioner reports, “that one sees in the factories children without a hand or without fingers.” Additionally, overcrowding, where workers were “packed together like sardines” and deprived of oxygen, made the factory a perilous place. Based on the Commissioner’s discoveries, Adler prescribed that the law forbid from factories all children who did not carry medical certificates testifying that they were sufficiently developed for industrial employment.

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166 Adler, “Child Labor and Education,” 16.
The law also set a sixty-hour week maximum for children and women younger than twenty-one; but without a day maximum, the law was impotent. Young girls worked unhealthy twenty-four hour shifts without meals or rest and without exceeding the week limit. A ten-hour-day law would correct this injustice, but only if coupled with greater oversight. More factory inspectors would ensure that factory owners no longer evaded discovery for law violations.167

These changes would only come, Adler cautioned, if they aroused public opinion to action. They had to campaign relentlessly until they “wiped out from the escutcheon of our state the blot of child labor.” Both workers of the head and of the hand had to join together to “raise a common cry, a unanimous voice, demanding that the children of the people be made free.”168 The fate of the future citizenry concerned the entire nation equally, breaking boundaries between middle and working class and private and public realm.

As with many of his reforms, Adler was ahead of his time in child labor legislation but with fellow progressives close behind. Between 1885 and 1889, ten states passed minimum wage

167 Adler, “Child Labor and Education,” January 23, 1887, 18.
laws and six set maximum hours for children. Various small labor laws sustained the movement for the next two decades, but to no avail. If anything, the epidemic spread, so that by 1900, census statistics registered two million employed children between ten and fifteen (or one out of every five children).\footnote{Frederick Boyd Stevenson, "Preliminary Survey of Conditions by the National Child Labor Committee Reveals a Startling State of Affairs -- Between Two and Three Million Children from 10 to 15 Years of Age Are Working for Their Daily Bread in the United States." \textit{New York Times}, November 27, 1904, http://www.proquest.com/ (accessed February 23, 2010). Note that the census counted 1.7 million children between ten and fifteen, but the number was almost certainly higher (around two to three million).} The movement was too fragmented and its adherents too marginal to create mass mobilization: socialists were radical, trade unions were self-interested, and women’s clubs were still sentimentalized and stereotyped.\footnote{Trattner, 35.} Besides for a handful of reformers, with Adler figuring prominently in their ranks, society at large was still apathetic.

Adler, on the other hand, had been invested in child labor problems since 1872, when in Germany he read “with horror” Karl Marx’s description of England’s orphanages, mills, and child maltreatment in \textit{Das Kapital}.\footnote{Felix Adler, “Annual Address of Chairman,” \textit{Child Labor Bulletin} 4, No. 2 (August 1915), 92 nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.FIG.GITEM:32044100860543 (accessed February 23, 2010).} Adler’s 1887 child labor series was not his first foray into this issue. It came, however, at a pivotal point in the history of child labor reform, when the seeds of progressive legislation took root. Moreover, the philosophy and legislation he espoused grew mainstream in the following decades as the movement coalesced. As Adler had intended, child labor became less acceptable as society became more socially conscious. Thus, when public consensus was finally ready for a large-scale movement at the turn of the century, reformers naturally looked to Adler as the de facto leader for a child labor reform organization.
IV. The Holy War

‘How long,’ they say, 'how long, Oh, cruel Nation, will you stand to move the world on a child's heart; Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation, and tread onward to your throne amid the mart?'

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The Camps Organize

Historians often recognize the 1890s—with its mass Eastern and Southern European immigration, beginnings of modernization and culture of consumption, and move of business and industry to dominance—as a major turning point in American history. According to historian Richard L. McCormick, most Americans, however, experienced the decade as a period of intense crises and severe disorientation, with “cataclysmic” consequences for public life. Men and women organized to advocate for legislation, entering the public sphere en masse in response to contemporary conditions. Some of these efforts succeeded; most failed.

The federal government’s negligible response to the nation’s economic turmoil made many Americans wonder whether modern industrial society was reconcilable with American values of democracy and equality. In response, socially conscious men and women experimented with new treatments for society’s ailments. Most progressive projects began in the 1890s, but only took stride during the next two decades when public outcry won more receptive ears. Through a “literature of moral protest,” progressives awoke the nation to “the city’s squalor and

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175 McCormick, 118.
congestion, the poverty and degradation of the industrial order, the waste of the nation’s physical and human resources, and the graft and corruption in its political life.”

Progressive reforms, especially those successful, followed a general pattern: a progressive ethos, partially rooted in older religious aspirations to save the cities from sin, compelled upper and middle class men and women to join voluntary associations dedicated to achieving particular reforms using social science and moral suasion as its tools. Modest in their reach, these organizations worked within the capitalist framework to protect against the iniquities of big business. Progressives reconstituted, and thereby preserved, American individualism within a collectivist interventionist mode. And although they sought to purify government, they also transformed their causes into public responsibilities, ultimately, entrusting government to carry out their programs.

This is the story of the National Child Labor Committee. Confined to trade unions, labor organizations, and handful of urban reformers for most of the nineteenth century, the child labor movement flourished in the early twentieth century in an alliance of labor, religious groups, women’s clubs, and philanthropic and social service organizations. A who’s who of the progressive reform elite, the National Child Labor Committee laid dead center of this intricate web. Child welfare was integral to the era’s theme of social justice. In addition to the

176 Trattner, 11.
177 McCormick, 121-122.
178 Hindman, 50.
179 Hindman, 10, 51.
180 Located in the United Charities Building at Park Avenue and East Twenty-Second Street, The NCLC, and child welfare in general, was literally “at the center of New York’s social reform movement.” The same building housed the Charities Organizations Society, the NCLC, the National Consumer’s League, and The Children’s Aid Society, all of which aimed to aid poor children. Bonnie Yochelson, "Lewis Hine's New York City 'Newsies'," New York Journal of American History 66, no. 2 (2003), 104, (A publication of the New York Historical Society, courtesy of The New York Society for Ethical Culture).

note: “Social Justice” was also presidential campaign slogan for Theodore Roosevelt when he ran on the 1912 Progressive Party ticket.
abolition of child labor and enactment of compulsory education, the call for child welfare inspired the creation of children’s aid societies, the establishment of juvenile courts, reformatories, and probation systems, the improved healthcare of mothers, and the construction of playgrounds and parks.¹⁸¹ The nineteenth century liberalist ethos had conditioned Americans to distinguish between deserving and non-deserving poor, and children seemed least culpable for their own destitution. Even those who felt unmoved by projects targeted at adults sanctioned those for the feeble and defenseless children; thus, every program for social change found links to child welfare.¹⁸²

Sentiment alone, however, did not propel the reform movement. More Americans began to comprehend what Adler had long preached: children required proper development to become productive members of society. Child labor reform was not only a plea for the children but for the health of the nation.¹⁸³ To defeat this “menace to civilization,” Adler explained, the NCLC engaged in a “holy war,” “a war having for its object the stability of civilization as well as the welfare of the child.”¹⁸⁴ The NCLC, Trattner claims, was a “practical,” even “militant” organization, which rarely indulged in abstract idealism. Committee members understood that ideals alone could not enlighten large pools of indifferent or hostile citizens on the evils of child labor and convert them to reform missionaries.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Trattner, 12.
¹⁸² Trattner, 12; Hindman, 51.
¹⁸³ Trattner, 12.
¹⁸⁵ Trattner, 13.

Note: I will use the “NCLC” and the “Committee” interchangeably.
Child labor was, after all, an old institution; progressives had to illustrate how the industrial revolution had transformed familiar child labor into alien “child slavery.” Child labor had been a positive good: an apprenticeship for the young, which also kept them from trouble. An emphasis on education, better class relations, and the rise of an exploitative industrial system turned the positive good into a social evil. With children crammed in airless factories, damp coalmines, and hazardous mills, the stakes had changed. As one British official reported: “chained, belted, harnessed like dogs in a go-cart, black, saturated with wet, and more than half naked—crawling on their hands and feet, and dragging their heavy loads behind them—[the children]…present an appearance indescribably disgusting and unnatural.” Those who did survive—and many did not—lived short, deformed, disease-ridden and miserable lives.

Most remained blind to this injustice, but Adler was not alone in his early campaigns. The rise of organized labor and census statistics helped expose conditions. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Socialist Party radically attacked child labor as part of their war on capitalism. The National Consumer’s League, however, led by the brilliant and formidable Florence Kelley, proved the most vital agency prior to the NCLC. League chapters publicized industrial conditions, advocated better standards, and drafted child labor abolition laws. Public indifference grew difficult, even if government remained in the firm grasp of industry.

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186 Trattner, 22.
187 Trattner, 23.
188 Trattner, 33.
The South was worse still, where the rush to industrialize wreaked havoc on the lives of child workers, and where states legislatures lacked the reform tradition that the North had built over decades. By 1900, child labor had become a norm in southern employment, with the ratio of child to adult workers four times as great as in the North. Reverend Edgar Gardner Murphy of Alabama, one of four southern states without a single child labor or compulsory education law, grew more agitated as he observed first-hand the abomination of child labor in his textile town. Up before dawn, returning after dusk, dirty, pallid, battered, and often terribly and irreparably injured, child workers became “human waste” before his eyes. Like Adler, Murphy understood that the enemy was the system, an outcome of industrial progress, not a specific employer. Legislation and education, combined, presented an antidote. In 1901, Murphy created the Alabama Child Labor Committee, the first of its kind, and set out to stir the southern conscience.

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189 Trattner, 37.
190 Trattner, 41.
191 Trattner, 51.
Immediately, Adler heard “the cry that goes up from Alabama,” and, before the Ethical Culture Society, called for New York’s own “Child Labor Commission, to be authorized by the Legislature, and appointed by the Governor of the State; charted to investigate this whole subject and to bring out the facts in an authoritative Report.”\textsuperscript{192} Headed by Felix Adler, Florence Kelley, William H, Baldwin, and other prominent progressives, the New York Child Labor Committee “waged a campaign of education and propaganda” and fought successfully for legislation.\textsuperscript{193} Adler traveled to Albany to testify at public hearings and present materials from investigations; more than once he left Albany with a legislative victory.\textsuperscript{194} Furthermore, Adler’s authoritative reports before the New York State legislature produced “a legislative prototype” soon adopted by other states.\textsuperscript{195} Within a few years, New York had the highest child labor standards of any state.

Unite and Conquer…Gradually

The New York Child Labor Committee had set the precedent for the NCLC. Murphy relocated to New York, where he and Adler discussed the prospect of forging a national committee, one composed of members from across the country but managed in New York City by an executive committee to determine legislative goals and policy.\textsuperscript{196} Adler, along with Florence Kelley and William Baldwin, invited reformers throughout the U.S., urging them to join this new organization. On April 15, 1904, Adler presided over the first general meeting of the National Child Labor Committee and announced their purpose: investigate child labor practices, publish reports, lobby legislatures with findings, establish satellite local committees to

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\textsuperscript{193} Trattner, 57.
\textsuperscript{194} Mikulaninec, 137.
\textsuperscript{195} Mikulaninec, 137.
\textsuperscript{196} Trattner, 58.
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execute uniform agendas and serve as points of communication. A New York Times journalist covering the event relays how Felix Adler, “a gentleman known for the sound judgment and practical good sense he brings to the advancement of movements of education and reform,” proposed a national committee to make accurate information accessible, and thus, create that “well-informed public” necessary for progress.

According to Trattner, Adler proved an easy choice for chairman. He was an “outstanding and renowned national figure…an amazingly energetic and resourceful man…dedicated to establishing social justice for all.” In fact, all of the executive committee’s members were distinguished, capable, and dedicated to the cause. The prestige of its members enabled the otherwise controversial Committee to first command a hearing. They wanted extreme change, but were unwilling to use extreme measures; rather, they employed research and public education in pursuit of gradual legislative gains, recognizing that a small steps strategy was the surest path to progress.

As Adler announced at its first meeting, the NCLC self-consciously organized as “a moral force” to protect children from the detriments of premature labor. Their intent was not to redefine American capitalism or the social order, but to eliminate an injustice in service of the existing American system. Most joined the cause out of a patriotic concern for their nation’s future, a central theme of the Progressive era itself. Adler’s assertion that “social and economic injustice would disappear” along with child labor only once Americans realized that life’s chief end was not “money-making” or “personal aggrandizement” but “service,” best embodies the

197 Mikulaninec, 141.
199 Trattner, 64.
201 Trattner, 65.
sentiment at the core of the movement and era.\textsuperscript{203} The opportunity to develop one’s mental and physical faculties was an inalienable right that society had to ensure.\textsuperscript{204}

Whether state or federal government was to represent this “society” became a point of contention within the Committee. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt invited to the White House Adler, Samuel McCune Lindsay, secretary of the NCLC, and Dr. Charles Patrick Neill, Commissioner of Labor, to guarantee them his support for the Beveridge-Parsons Child Labor Bill, a proposed federal law that barred the interstate exchange of goods manufactured with child labor.\textsuperscript{205} A faction of the NCLC feared federal intervention would alienate the southern population, impede state legislation, and injure their chances at obtaining a federal Children’s Bureau.\textsuperscript{206} The NCLC ultimately endorsed the bill, but many southern members, including fellow founder Rev. Murphy, left the association.\textsuperscript{207} The bill never passed.

At this point, Adler, a self-titled “conservative radical,” still believed local self-government preferable to federal action.\textsuperscript{208} The central government was too remote, oblivious to the complexities of local issues and the severity of conditions. Under Adler, the Committee served as the catalyst for states child labor legislation, achieving compulsory state education, eight-hour days for children above the minimum employment age, and the abolition of night work.\textsuperscript{209} These regulations were limited, however, and Adler soon recognized federal action as not only unavoidable but fitting. Like slavery, child labor was a national problem that demanded

\textsuperscript{203} Felix Adler, “Annual Address of the Chairman,” \textit{Child Labor Bulletin} 4, no. 2 (August 1915), 95 nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.FRig.ITEM:32044100860543 (accessed February 23, 2010).
\textsuperscript{204} Trattner, 67.
\textsuperscript{205} Mikulaninec, 142.
\textsuperscript{206} Mikulaninec, 142.
\textsuperscript{207} Hindman, 52-53, 64-65. Note also, Murphy left for reasons of ill health as well and was a fairly passive member after the NCLC’s founding, see: Eleanor Adler, Felix Adler Papers, box 13, folder “Child Labor,” MS 19.
\textsuperscript{209} Mikulaninec, 143.
universal emancipation. When state governments consistently proved themselves unable or unwilling to tackle evil, enfeebling the entire commonwealth, then Adler argued, patriotism bound them to summon “the great mother of us all,” the State.\(^{210}\)

**Turning to Uncle Sam**

After he returned from his year in Berlin as the esteemed Theodore Roosevelt Exchange Professor, Adler threw himself into federal child labor reform, hoping to publish and lecture the opposition into submission.\(^{211}\) Many of the arguments he systematically advanced trace back to his 1880s campaign, though, by 1910 had become mainstream progressive fare. He focused each argument on patriotism, ethics, and efficiency, aware that “efficiency in all lines of activity” was then “more than ever, the supreme desideratum.”\(^{212}\)

Efficiency depended on both the worker’s physical and mental strength; skilled workers needed to be able to hone their talents, with the cultivated intelligence to improve upon their skills. Work did not turn children into adults, but inhibited development. The abolition of child labor, from this perspective, was merely a movement for greater worker efficiency, allowing for a more competitive American economy on the world stage, and eventually, a higher standard of living for the working class.\(^{213}\) Child labor was also economically inefficient based on a simple

\(^{210}\) Adler, “The Attitude of Society Towards the Child as an Index of Civilization,” 135-14.

\(^{211}\) Mikulainece, 145.


cost-benefit analysis. The idea of cheap labor was an “economic fallacy,” Adler claimed, for cheap labor ultimately became “expensive labor,” as it wasted time and material. Similarly, high wages were necessary for the progress of all classes and, in the long run, the wealth of the nation.

The most pernicious pretense for child labor came from “false sympathizers” who alleged that employers were the benefactors of working children, without whose income, entire families would starve. A serious misunderstanding of how the new economy functioned allowed for this rationalization to persist.²¹⁴ Child labor actually perpetuated poverty by suppressing adult wages. This inversion of natural child-parent caretaking, where the child now sacrificed for the parent, contributed to the modern breakdown of the family, the fundamental unit of civilization. Its prolonged childhood civilized the human specie; through their complete dependency, children made adults compassionate. By forcing children to forfeit their youth, industrial enterprise threatened to reverse this progress and return humans to barbarity.²¹⁵

In short, child labor was the disease of Democracy.²¹⁶ When a nation’s sovereigns are the people themselves, widespread ignorance spells disaster. National survival and certainly national wealth depend on an educated population. The nation, therefore, was responsible for protecting its two million “Crown Princes” from spoiling.²¹⁷ The “American ideal,” Adler writes, rests on a “belief in the uncommon fineness that is latent in the common man,” and the capacity for

concealed talents to surface. Child labor denied opportunity, quashed potential, and erased the future.\textsuperscript{218} More than un-American, child labor was anti-American.

America’s proper defender was the national government. Child labor anywhere was a threat to democracy everywhere. With the creation of the Children’s Bureau in 1912, citizens became better informed of conditions and more supportive of federal action.\textsuperscript{219} Only the central government could address this centralization of public opinion, or as Adler’s Committee colleague Dr. A. J. McKelaway phrased it: “The only answer lay with Uncle Sam.”\textsuperscript{220} The NCLC, therefore, designed a new bill that banned the shipment across state lines of goods made even in part by children under fourteen or from factories, canneries, or workshops that employed children under sixteen. A new provision made the employer accountable, in addition to the carrier of the goods. But the real novelty lied in that the bill’s provisions were now federal. The Committee made the enactment of the Palmer-Owen bill, named after its respective House and Senate sponsors, its topmost priority.\textsuperscript{221}

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\textsuperscript{218} Adler, “The Seven Sins of Child Labor,” 129.
\textsuperscript{219} Trattner, 120.
\textsuperscript{220} Trattner, 123.
\textsuperscript{221} Trattner, 124-5.
Once more, on February 2, 1914, Adler traveled to the White House as the NCLC’s spokesperson. President Wilson believed the bill unconstitutional, but Adler secured “presidential neutrality,” convincing Wilson to withhold public criticism until the NCLC could launch its educational campaign.\footnote{Trattner, 125.} Wilson and Adler had been acquaintances from the early 1890s when Wilson lectured at Adler’s Plymouth Summer School of Applied Ethics, and had since maintained at least a limited correspondence.\footnote{Woodrow Wilson to Felix Adler, April 2, 1896, Felix Adler Papers, box 5.} Adler took advantage of this relationship and appealed to Wilson’s ethical, patriotic, and logical sensibilities. By this time, most Americans agreed that child labor was morally reprehensible, and Adler urged Wilson to heed the “the national conscience.”\footnote{Felix Adler, “Notes for the Interview with President Wilson on Federal Legislation Forbidding the Interstate Shipment of Articles in the Productions of Which Child Labor Has Been Employed,” conversation notes, Felix Adler Papers, box 42, folder 2.}

With Wilson’s acquiescence, the “legislative battle began.”\footnote{Trattner, 125.} The Committee mobilized, pushing pamphlets, public addresses, and posters, and sending letters to local congressmen and media outlets. Adler publicized the abolition of child labor as “a national duty,” and Lewis Hine exposed America to the urgency of this duty through his photography exhibits for the NCLC.\footnote{Felix Adler, “Abolition of Child Labor: A National Duty,” 20-24.  
Note: Lewis Hines’ influence as the official photojournalist for the NCLC cannot be overemphasized. His works were pivotal in convincing a reluctant public of child labor realities. Hine first learned photography as a teacher at the Ethical Culture School, when he was instructed to take his students to Ellis Island and have them familiarize themselves with the diversity of the American people by photographing arriving immigrants. Walter Rosenblum and others, eds., America & Lewis Hine: Photographs 1904-1940: [Exhibition] (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1977); Bonnie Yochelson, "Lewis Hine's New York City 'Newsies'," New York Journal of American History 66, no. 2 (2003), 94-106.} The American Federation of Labor, National Consumer’s League, U.S. Children’s Bureau, medical associations, farmer and union organizations, churches and synagogues, and women’s clubs all joined in the Committee’s efforts. The bill breezed through the House, but languished in
the Senate until it resurfaced as the Keating-Owen bill with the backing of President Wilson; he then signed the bill into law in 1916.227

Adler did not have time to bask in the glory of this “crowning achievement of progressivism.”228 On June 3, 1918 in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, the Supreme Court ruled the Keating-Owen Law unconstitutional in a five to four decision, an ideological faceoff between laissez-faire and progressive doctrines that typified the age.229 The Court charged that the law had allowed the federal government to regulate intrastate manufacturing rather than interstate commerce. If the justices permitted the Commerce Clause to justify this federal imposition, then they feared nothing would be safe from government’s clutches. Inversing progressive creed, the Court decided that the regulation of child labor risked destroying the polity.230

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227 Hindman, 66; Trattner, 129.
228 Hindman, 66.
229 Hindman, 68-69.
230 Trattner, 136.
V. The War to End War

If its victory was short-lived, Adler’s “holy war” still did not end in a resounding defeat. The handful of stubborn states previously unwilling to pass protections adopted the standards in the now invalid Keating-Owen Law to discourage any future federal intrusions. Furthermore, progressives soldiered on, even if most were in retreat. The string of disappointments progressives faced during the conservatism of the postwar period is evidence that reform attempts did not cease with World War I. Progressives reached their climax with the Keating-Owen Law and then fell into a sliding decline throughout the twenties. Still, as seen from Adler, the campaign for social justice continued even if it lost some of its former zest along with its wide support base.

Reform and its Discontents

World War I had revealed the barbarism of the “civilized” western world, and the peace, its greed and vindictiveness. Adler was unnerved, but he did not undergo the transformation of some of his contemporaries. Mainly, the war confirmed his anxieties over the moral implications of an industrial order. “It is a trifle trying to one’s patience to hear these weak meowings that civilization has broken down,” Adler complained. Civilization had not collapsed; rather, the war showed that they had mistaken their materialistic culture for civilization. The task then was to construct a “real civilization.”

Nevertheless, the postwar period saw a gradual shift away from mass civic engagement, and Adler too appears to have shifted his orientation in his later years. In 1921, at the age of

231 Hindman, 70.
232 Radest, Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture, 14.
233 Adler quoted in Radest, Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture, 20.
seventy, Adler retired as chairman of the NCLC, though he continued to lobby for legislation and defend the NCLC against charges of radicalism. According to his wife Helen, Felix “felt the approach of his last years” and decided to concentrate on his ethical philosophy and to devote more time to training successors in order to secure a permanent foundation for the Ethical movement. “I have for more than fifty years been living a kind of double life—innocent but difficult,” Adler wrote in 1931 to his daughter Eleanor. “Those who are engaged in the inner development of some engrossing thought…a growing philosophy” are never freed from it. Thus, his change stemmed as much from exogenous forces as his long-held desire to ground his lifetime of deeds in an ethics creed, without which the walls of Ethical Culture would crumble and social reforms would dissipate.

Forever the realist, he held no illusions of utopianisms. He saw that “in a massive and dominant industrial culture, the sacred and inviolable are too quickly dismissed as stumbling blocks to success. Mere empiricism reduces to opportunism, and opportunism to exploitation.” It is for this reason he never abandoned the ethical ideal as “an instrument.” This instrument would guide the reconstruction of society—social reform with a vision, experimentation with direction, meaning, and motive. Ideals did not deny reality; they allowed one to imagine and thus strive for alternative realities.

236 Felix Adler to Eleanor Adler, 1931, correspondence, Felix Adler Papers box 6, folder “1931.”
238 Radest, Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture, 168.
Radest considers Adler an uncomfortable reformer, for he sought reconstruction but settled for the less holistic, coherent, and effective reform.\textsuperscript{240} Despite his partnership with pragmatists in education, housing, child labor, welfare, and legal rights, Adler criticized ad hoc reform—mere “provisionalism.”\textsuperscript{241} He remained discontented with his social work, which like “provisionalism,” responded inadequately to industrialism. Trying to convince his fellow progressives grew tiresome, especially as the era moved counter to his practical idealism. When sociologists gathered at the Museum of Natural History to celebrate their excellent work on behalf of the city's congested poor, Adler unleashed his dismay. For twenty years, he had participated in the tenement and settlement house movements, and he assured them that the added playgrounds they congratulated themselves on would solve little. Congestion came from unconscionably high rents that consumed most of the poor’s meager income; this is why he had just observed six unmarried men and women huddled together in a single room. When the crowd giggled nervously at this scandal, Adler fumed: “You laugh! You laugh! I wonder you do not cry out in horror.” After a moment of awkward silence, the audience exploded in applause. Adler did not stay for the rest of the festivities.\textsuperscript{242}

In his quest to make life meaningful and democracy viable in industrial society, Adler consistently returned to education. He had established his schools on grounds of social welfare, but aware that any reconstruction of society required first the reconstruction of education. As he aged, he became “more and more explicit about the connection between social and pedagogical radicalism.”\textsuperscript{243} Education and labor reform were two halves of the same coin for Adler, but after World War I, he turned away from “mere” social reform and towards remedial education. The

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{240} Radest, \textit{Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture}, 167-168.
  \item \textsuperscript{241} Radest, “Work and Worth,” 80.
  \item \textsuperscript{242} “No Hope For The Poor Says Felix Adler,” \textit{New York Times}, March 11, 1908.
  \item \textsuperscript{243} Radest, ed Guttchen, \textit{Felix Adler}, 37.
\end{itemize}
Fieldston Plan, Adler’s final contribution, exemplifies the interdependence of creed and deed, idea and act. “In another echo of progressivism,” the Fieldston Plan’s objective was to produce civically engaged citizens by having schools model democracy. “Schooling,” Radest explains, “is thus preparatory for the larger work of social reconstruction.”

“Write large the pre-professional schools,” Adler replied when asked for materials for a new encyclopedia of biography. When he discovered on April 13, 1933 (eleven days before he died) that an education foundation had awarded the Fieldston School a grant for pre-professional coursework, he confessed, “It is difficult to understand the desire to communicate—even with the dead.” But in that moment, he thought he must tell the good news to Alfred Wolff, the man with whom fifty-five years prior he had distributed handbills on street corners to attract their first students. Adler’s investment in child labor was always intrinsically linked to education interests and his foremost conviction that that the “teaching of ethical respect for humanity” had to “begin with the child.” The aim of the pre-professional school, Adler stated, was to “educate a generation of specialists who will estimate their success in their own line by the degree to which they advance the progressive movement of humanity in all related lines.”

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244 Radest, Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture, 141.
Note: As seen by his addresses on child labor, Adler fully understood the potential for the school as a “common ground” to form generations of reformers well before the creation of his Fieldston Plan. Fieldston Schools were the first schools he established however with this stated purpose. He established the Workingman School, which transitioned into Ethical Culture School, out of concerns of education inequity and was to be a solution to the labor problem. Fieldston was his solution to modernity.
246 Boyle, 4.
248 Felix Adler, quoted in V.T. Thayer to Dr. Robert Kohn, correspondence, January 29, 1936, Felix Adler Papers, box 10, folder “biographical notes.”
Adler and his Discontents

Yet, this was not the specialization that businesses, and even most schools were quickly adopting in the twenties. Throughout the period, Adler’s influence seems to wane. Despite his continued public presence, including as Ethical Culture leader, Columbia University professor, and the Eastern Division of American Philosophical Association president, in the postwar culture, Adler became obsolete. Indeed, he was woefully aware that the era considered him a dated thinker. “I have suffered much,” Adler confides, “from a sense of…humiliation, due to the acceptance of scientific and philological standards” that he did not create. This continued to depress him as he became increasingly alienated not only from postwar society, but from his own Ethical Culture Society. Once, the “van of reform,” he was now “backwards,” the world told him and “want[ed] none of his wisdom.”

If only his Society was as ruthless. Acutely aware of the incongruity between the original guiding principles of his Ethical movement and modern culture, Adler insisted to the Board of Trustees that they build new leadership to carry Ethical Culture into a new era. He stood against “the skeptics, the behaviorists and the pragmatists,” but he also never presumed to embody “truth.” He refused to engage in intellectual fads he considered incorrect or that did not coincide with his ethical philosophy. But that was his philosophy and did not preclude alternative ethical philosophies of life that the Society might adopt. Trends changed and Adler wanted to protect the movement from his self-acknowledged limitations. Unfortunately, try as he might,

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249 Kraut, 167.
250 Adler, “Autobiographical Notes Various Occasions by Dr. Felix Adler,” 27.
251 Felix Adler quoted in Kraut, 167.
252 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 134.
253 Edward L. Ericson, Afterword in Felix Adler and Ethical Culture: Memories and Studies, by Horace L. Friess (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 257. This is an idea that Adler reiterated throughout his career, in his speeches and publications. He wanted people to adopt his ideas only if they found them useful.
Adler could not escape his own personage. As a man of prestige and personality, founder and gravitational center of the movement, Adler needed only hint his slight disapproval to kill an idea in its tracks. This ensured that during his lifetime “his views would predominate” over the popular “liberal experimentalist philosophy.” With its new leaders as Deweyan pragmatists, the Ethical movement came to consider its father a relic and his philosophy, anachronistic.

At his death, Adler had no one to bequeath his philosophy, what he viewed as his life’s legacy. “Honored as a founder, venerated as an educator, admired and emulated as a social critic and reformer, he was virtually abandoned by his successors as a philosopher.” Without a single vision to propel them, writes Radest, Society leaders ventured in their own directions, each initiating programs that made the institution increasingly disorganized and unfocused.

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254 Ericson, 258.
255 Ericson, 258.
256 Ericson, 258.
257 Radest, Toward Common Ground, 134.
Conclusion: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

The full significance of Felix Adler’s work cannot be gauged today. It is gratifying to observe how widely his services to many a good cause are now acclaimed, how generally his initiative in important measures of social reform and education are recognized. The influence of his life, so nobly lived, his philosophy, so independent and fruitful, his emphasis upon the sovereignty of ethics, so prophetic in its character, has been profound.258

- Nathaniel Schmidt

Felix Adler may have been a product of his historical situation, but in his advocacy for equitable education, social justice, and the recognition of human worth, he remains relevant and deserves renewed attention. Today, the outsourcing of labor across the world enables substandard conditions, exploitation, and rampant child labor. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), there are at least 218 million child laborers worldwide; this is about one out of every seven of the world’s children. 259 Sixty percent toil in hazardous conditions, and many are the victims of human trafficking and other forms of slavery.260

For the 2009 World Day Against Child Labor, President Barack Obama issued a statement eerily familiar:

Even in this modern era, children around the world are forced to work in deplorable and often dangerous conditions at a time in their lives when they should be in classrooms and playgrounds. Global child labor perpetuates a cycle of poverty that prevents families and nations from reaching their full potential…. We must stand united in opposition to child labor and recommit ourselves to ending this practice in all its forms – today and every day.261

A century before President Obama’s speech, Adler spearheaded this ethic on which global anti-child labor activism still rests:

258 Nathaniel Schmidt, undated, Felix Adler Papers, box 14, folder “Life and Letters: Rejected Manuscripts.” Based on my research, I estimate that Schmidt wrote this around 1933 after Adler’s death.
260 UNICEF, “Fact Sheet: Child Labour.”
It is from this point of view, as a hindrance to [progress], that I look with unspeakable sorrow upon child labor as a condition which blunts the mind, and which crushes those precious germs of intelligence that are deposited there for universal benefit.\textsuperscript{262}

Adler universalized the right of children to be free from this condition:

Child labor, wherever it exists, from the point of view of civilization, or national progress and humanity, is intolerable…no matter what the race of the child may be, no matter what its antecedents may be, whether it be foreign born or native born.\textsuperscript{263}

\textbf{History’s Categorical Imperative}

Adler’s anonymity is due mainly to his ambiguity: both the pragmatist (though he disliked the term) and the idealist, Adler combined reform and philosophy to respond to the complexities of modernity. He was intensely cognizant of the modern dilemma, even if he described it in somewhat Victorian terms and employed symbols that his contemporaries found outmoded and unappealing.\textsuperscript{264} Foreseeing the moral problems of the industrial order, he devised solutions that bridged idea and practice.\textsuperscript{265} Nevertheless, his active involvement in a plethora of causes for over half a century has “masked his originality,” writes Radest.\textsuperscript{266} For the activist, he is too philosophical, for the educator, too Victorian and out of touch with psychologized pedagogy. To the philosopher, he is a reformer and religionist; and to the religionist, he is neither conservative enough for orthodoxy nor liberal enough for current ethics.\textsuperscript{267} Yet, his motivating question—how to live an ethical life under the conditions of a commercial industrial world—transcends category.\textsuperscript{268}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{262} Felix Adler, “Child Labor Meeting, Montclair,” Felix Adler Papers, box 52, folder “Child Labor”
\item \textsuperscript{263} Adler, “The Abolition of Child Labor: A National Duty,” 23.
\item \textsuperscript{264} Radest, “Work and Worth,” 81.
\item \textsuperscript{265} Radest, \textit{Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture}, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{266} Radest, \textit{Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture}, 147.
\item \textsuperscript{267} Radest, ed. Guttenen, \textit{Felix Adler}, 44.
\item \textsuperscript{268} Radest. \textit{Felix Adler: An Ethical Culture}, 149.
\end{itemize}
History, however, likes its categories. Adler co-founded the National Child Labor Committee, but Progressive era histories rarely associate Adler with the Committee and typically do not place him alongside child welfare advocates such as Lewis Hine, Florence Kelley, Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, Reverend Murphy, and even the young Frances Perkins. Perhaps, it is simpler to provide a name of renown that does not require extended commentary. Ethical Culture also formed such a fundamental part of Adler’s life and legacy that historians are averse to viewing him outside this framework. While he initiated many of his reforms using the Society as his striking arm of social justice, he also undertook independent activities, like the NCLC, that are eclipsed by his Ethical Culture classification.

If as a practical idealist and activist-philosopher Adler defied convention, even more so did he as a self-acknowledged ethnic-racial Jew who nonetheless abandoned its socio-religious fellowship. He never denied his ethnic origins, but he did deny that his roots defined his social, cultural and religious identity. Friends, colleagues, and newspapers, however, continued to identify Adler as a Jew during and after his life. In 1906, celebrating 250 years of Jewish settlement, the New York Evening Post listed in particular the contributions to morality of two Jews under the heading “Jewish Idealism”—Felix Adler and Oscar Straus. Similarly, Oswald Garrison Villard commemorates the passing of a “great American Jew” in The Nation. Villard invokes Adler’s “achievements” to demonstrate the “ingratitude” and “selfishness” of

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269 Kraut, 177.
270 Kraut, 177.
271 Kraut, 177.
barring immigration to Jews, when few Americans, native or otherwise, have contributed more and devoted themselves more completely to the U.S.\textsuperscript{273}

This label has practical significance. Traditional Jewish teachings fused with progressive pedagogy in Adler’s education system.\textsuperscript{274} Jared R. Stallones claims that Adler internalized in his youth, whether or not consciously, the child-centered Jewish pedagogy that stressed individual moral development and wedded study and practice in the fulfillment of Law. These concepts appear in the Bible and Talmud, texts that long predate progressivism and were well known to the would-be-rabbi.\textsuperscript{275} As previously discussed, Adler’s Jewish background shaped his creation of Ethical Culture and the demographic of his support base. Both progressive education and social reforms (through the Society) had roots in Judaism. Adler strengthened this connection between Judaism and progressivism by shifting the Jewish socio-religious spectrum to the left. Jewish leaders felt pressure to mirror Adler and adopt the social justice platform (their previous unwillingness was Adler’s original reason for breaking with the faith).\textsuperscript{276} Reform leaders, like Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, both of whom maintained enduring friendships with Adler, gained national stature as social justice activists.\textsuperscript{277} Reform Judaism has since etched out a distinct place in the American liberal scene.

Adler, however, definitively withdrew himself from Reform Judaism, and is therefore, rarely linked with its progressive tradition. But neither does the greater progressive narrative, which traces its beginnings to Protestantism, claim him. Instead, Adler drifts in limbo. As the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{273} Villard, "Issues and Men."
\textsuperscript{275} Stallones, 180-182.
\textsuperscript{276} Kraut, 180-182.
\textsuperscript{277} Stephen S. Wise called Adler “the one prophetic Jewish voice in the life of the city,” and credited Adler for his own decision to become “the ethical leader of a church.” His church would serve the Jewish people. He self-consciously imitated Adler, and adapted the social justice of Ethical Culture to his own socio-religious fellowship. Kraut, 210-213, 224-225.
\end{flushleft}
honored founder, Adler has a home in Ethical Culture; but the marginal movement itself receives little attention. Not quite Jewish, Protestant, or secular, Adler stands as history’s orphan.

Adler’s perceived regression after World War I also served to obscure his progressive identity. Adler turned more philosophical as the age turned less. As Frank Manny, former superintendent of Ethical Culture School, wrote to Lewis Hine, Adler grew “only interested in moral interpretation;” yet, “nothing since the [Russian] Revolution could be used that way.”

He seemed a vestige from another epoch, unable or unwilling to adapt. Nor did it help that Adler’s private and public self were even more incongruous. To those in his inner circle, like Julius Henry Cohen, Adler “was fuller of real fun, prankish, impish fun than any man [he] ever met.” Others, who knew him simply by persona or through work, at times cowered in fear. Even Cohen, who was privy to the humorous and human inner Adler, recalls how the “the rafters trembled, the walls shook” when Adler took the stage. “Under his spell,” Cohen concedes, “you felt that God Himself would at any instant come down from His heaven and slay the men who had so forgotten their duties to their fellowmen.” Thus, one has to dig deep for the man. Often he stays buried, and what is left is a moral orator reminiscent of another era.

**Prophet or Relic**

The trajectory of Adler’s life elucidates the apparent demise of the progressive movement. By the 1930s, the progressive generation was old; when they died, their brand of reform seemed to die with them. The progressive movement, though, had always been

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fragmented, and the strain of progressives dedicated to management and specialization evolved into the new age as liberal reformers. The New Dealers were a different breed of reformer. They operated from complex government bureaucracies rather than private voluntary organizations. The moral discourse that many progressives had coupled with the language of efficiency largely vanished. Adler no longer embodied the harbinger of progress; the new age demanded science, not ethical science, and practicality, not practical idealism. With the country deep in its worst depression, reformers did not crusade on moral missions to save the children, but delved into “bold persistent experimentation” to meet the urgent needs of “one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.”

These, of course, were not mutually exclusive; for the most part, progressivism and New Deal liberalism exist on a continuum. With unemployment at twenty-five percent, President Roosevelt quickly endorsed legislation lobbied by the NCLC for over twenty years. Likewise, progressive organizations persisted. Adler may have stepped down from the National Child Labor Committee, but the NCLC continued its projects throughout the twenties and thirties, and finally succeeded with the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.

The variety of initiatives the progressive movement encompassed delegitimizes the argument that progressive concerns became irrelevant with the Depression and New Deal. Adler might appear immaterial to the New Deal era, but in many respects, he was curiously prophetic. He advocated for government responsibility, public relief for the poor (rather than send children

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to work), and a radical graduated income tax. He augured the New Deal’s public jobs programs in 1894, when, in response to high unemployment, he gathered with Samuel Gompers and 20,000 workers in Madison Square Garden to discuss public work projects as palliatives for their distress. Ultimately, the New Deal finally executed the social, political, and economic reconstruction that Adler deemed necessary for permanent reform.

The tragedy of Adler’s life is in a sense the tragedy of American liberal reform: a lack of historical memory. Each generation of reformers ignores the commonalities with its predecessors. Rather than building on past initiatives, reformers start anew, repeating many of the same mistakes. Adler had proposed remedies that New Dealers first went through “a chaos of experimentation” to discover.

As someone who dedicated his life to social justice, Adler offers a potent and timeless lesson. Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, pronounced at Adler’s memorial that although “Dr. Adler held no public office...he was a public servant of the first order of excellence.” He embraced an ideal of active citizenship, in which all people had a responsibility to actualize social justice. He was not one to confine his attention to a single reform, but embraced a broader vision of how to reshape society. We live in cynical times when idealism is eschewed and active citizenship seems to have little relevance. Adler's vision provides a vantage point from which we can criticize our society; his life offers a model of how we can serve humanity.

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284 Rischin, 178.
286 Hofstadter, 305.
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