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RACIAL JUSTICE AND THE IMAGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Marilyn Fischer is Professor Emerita of Philosophy at the University of Dayton. She has published extensively on the philosophy of Jane Addams and is currently writing a three-volume set that traces the intellectual resources Addams drew upon throughout her writing career. The first volume, *Jane Addams's Evolutionary Theorizing: Constructing Democracy and Social Ethics*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2019. She is currently working on the second volume which will cover Addams's theorizing between 1900 and 1914. A projected third volume will be devoted to Addams's writings during and after World War One.



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The City Commission in my hometown of Dayton, Ohio recently adopted a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis. In doing so, Dayton joins municipalities around the country, as the global pandemic of coronavirus COVID-19 swirls around us. The Commission gave compelling reasons for their action, citing the disparate rates of poor health outcomes in African American communities, as well as disproportionately high rates of poverty, unemployment, economic distress, homelessness, incarceration, and inadequate education.¹

The Commission's commitment to remedy these inequities is welcome. Others have laid out this evidence in much detail; I want to focus here on public health as an image for our imaginations. We think in images. Before we can find pathways toward justice, we must imagine them and imagine where they lead. Even though the virus is brand-new in humans and racism is old enough to merit the name of America's original sin, racism and COVID-19 are twinned crises. Here I examine the tension people feel between images of liberty and of public health and point out how placing public health more centrally in our imaginations can guide us toward racial justice.

Tensions between Images of Liberty and Public Health

Even conscientious, well-meaning people may be troubled by the Commission's resolution because their deep political commitment to individual liberty does not map easily onto their image of public health. Because of COVID-19 many have been willing to comply with directives to wear masks, wash hands, and maintain social distance. They may have given up jobs, health insurance, and childcare for the pandemic. They understand these measures as necessary, short-term restrictions on their freedom. They nod in agreement with the first

¹ The Dayton City Commission resolution is posted at:
<https://www.daytonohio.gov/DocumentCenter/>

half of the World Health Organization's definition of public health as "all organized measures . . . to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole." They worry, though, about how much freedom Americans would have to give up to address racism as a public health issue. In their minds, before March 2020, public health departments hummed quietly at the fringes of consciousness. They gave them attention only when anti-vaxxers got noisy or when Flint's lead-laced water became national news. How can something at the fringes of consciousness handle a problem as deeply entrenched as racism?

This image of freedom, so dominant in Americans' minds, comes from the Enlightenment, from the era of the U.S. founding. It is an image of free, detached, individuals endowed with natural rights, for whom the state functions primarily to protect these rights. This image is a metaphoric expression of seventeenth century science. In Isaac Newton's universe, individual atoms move freely through space in accordance with universal natural laws. In the late nineteenth century, the era of classical American pragmatism's founding, intellectuals replaced this image with a new one from biology, most famously articulated by Charles Darwin. In this image individual organisms are not detached from each other. They evolve out of a history and live interdependently with others in constantly evolving habitats. Life for these organisms, including human ones, is characterized by interdependence rather than independence, community rather than detachment, and contingency rather than the certainty of fixed, lawful regularities.

John Dewey writes, "Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not 'in' that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil."² Dewey's images closely mirror the contrast between the Enlightenment image of detached

² Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 204.

individuals and the evolutionary one of living creatures that require conditions of clean water, nutrition, and a healthy environment to sustain their lives. This evolutionary image accords well with the second half of the WHO's definition of public health, which states, "Its activities aim to provide conditions in which people can be healthy and focus on entire populations, not on individual patients or diseases."³ Note how far this statement is from our typical image of health care, populated as it is by nurses and doctors, hospitals and prescription drugs, all in the service of individuals who are ill. Public health is a far broader category; health care can function well only when it works in tandem with a strong public health program.

These conditions for public health must be met if human life is to be sustained over time. When they are met, freedom as the ability to flourish and thrive is an outgrowth; otherwise, freedom is distorted. Racism is an indicator of how these conditions, the sunlight and soil of human lives, have been withheld from African Americans and other disadvantaged groups. When this withholding is defended in the name of freedom (such as freedom from "excessive" taxation, or outcomes of "voluntary," though asymmetric, labor contracts), then freedom for some functions as theft from others' required conditions for life. Racism today is indeed a public health crisis, an unjust deprivation of those conditions required for sustaining life in the United States in the twenty-first century.

Movement toward Racial Justice

Reframing racism as a public health issue provides an image conducive to addressing the many facets of racial deprivation. Doing so is not new, as the experiences of early American pragmatists demonstrate. They lived in an era of pandemics. Waves of cholera, typhoid, tuberculosis, and more swept through the cities as industrialization

³ quoted at <http://www.capitalareaphn.org/about/what-is-public-health>

crowded people together and public sanitation systems were grossly deficient. These infectious diseases were little understood; treatments and cures were largely unknown. W.E.B. Du Bois and Jane Addams had typhoid; Dewey's son, Gordon, died of it.⁴

Addams and the residents of Hull House in *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895) and Du Bois with former Hull House resident Isabel Eaton, in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), produced two of the earliest social epidemiological studies in the U.S. These studies documented the conditions that constitute public health and demonstrated the linkage between racism and deprivation.⁵ When Addams opened Hull House in 1889, the population of Chicago was 78% immigrants and their children.⁶ The vast majority of these were from Southern and Eastern Europe, of nationalities that the country's majority Anglo-Saxons (a term they used rather than "white") treated as racially distinct and inferior to themselves.⁷ The results of Du Bois's study showed the same linkages, intensified by the deeper racism against African Americans.⁸

Addams did not look to the nation's previous struggles for freedom for an image of how to attain justice and peace. That history was soaked in blood. After a seven-year war to free the colonies from British rule and a four-year war to free enslaved persons, the crisis of

⁴ Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race*, Vol. I, 64; Linn, *Jane Addams: A Biography*, 289; Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 150.

⁵ Residents of Hull House, *Hull-House Maps and Papers*; Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*; Schultz, "Introduction," 2-4; Jones-Eversley and Dean, "After 121 Years, It's Time to Recognize W.E.B. Du Bois as a Founding Father of Social Epidemiology." See Du Bois's later and more extensive study in *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*.

⁶ Knight, *Citizen*, 179.

⁷ For an excellent discussion of how Anglo-Americans regarded Southern and Eastern Europeans as racially distinct and inferior, see Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*. He summarizes the fluidity of racial categories, writing, "Between the 1840s and the 1920s it was not altogether clear just where [the color] line ultimately would be drawn" (7).

⁸ Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 5, 385-89.

racial oppression persisted. In *Newer Ideals of Peace*, her search for pathways away from war and toward justice and peace, Addams found an image in the ongoing efforts against tuberculosis. Addams herself had suffered from “the white plague,” then the leading cause of death in the U.S.⁹ Addams writes, “In illustration of this new determination one immediately thinks of the international effort to rid the face of the earth of tuberculosis. . . . This movement has its international congresses, its discoverers and veterans, also its decorations and rewards for bravery. Its discipline is severe; it requires self-control, endurance, self-sacrifice and constant watchfulness.”¹⁰ In Addams’s mind, if we address unjust disparities as matters of public health, pathways of coordinated cooperation can be found.

Public Health as a Guiding Ideal

Finally, public health is an image for our time. Calls for justice and equality have served well, but images, like persons, lose energy over time. It is time to engage another image, one potent for the current moment. Dewey thinks of these images as ideals. “Ideals are like the stars,” he writes, “we steer by them.”¹¹ They guide us, although we may never reach them.

In her analysis of commercialized prostitution as a public health issue, Addams gives us a phrase that can serve as an image of a guiding ideal. At a time when venereal diseases were incurable and

⁹ As a child, Addams had Pott’s disease, or spinal tuberculosis (Knight, *Citizen*, 36, 122). During World War One she was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the kidney (Linn, 317). Addams was well acquainted with research on tuberculosis, as two of the city’s leading public health researchers on the disease, Dr. Alice Hamilton and Dr. James Britton, were Hull House residents. For tuberculosis as the leading cause of death, see Abrams, “Spitting is Dangerous, Indecent, and Against the Law!” 417.

¹⁰ Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace*, 16-17. Du Bois lays out in detail the intense, multifaceted efforts required to counteract racism and provide the conditions for public health for African Americans. See *The Philadelphia Negro*, chapter 18.

¹¹ Dewey, *The Study of Ethics*, 262.

epidemic, Addams writes, “Certainly we are safe in predicting that when the solidarity of human interest is actually realized, it will become unthinkable that one class of human beings should be sacrificed to the supposed needs of another.”¹²

“When it becomes unthinkable. . .” can serve as a guiding image, an ideal to steer by in addressing racism as a public health issue, one that can foster imaginations fertile enough for addressing everything from implicit bias to systemic inequities. When it becomes unthinkable that refusing to wear a mask is an expression of freedom; when it becomes unthinkable for anyone to perceive persons of color as lesser than themselves; when it becomes unthinkable that in our society African-Americans would have less access than other Americans to medical care, decent housing, adequate nutrition, safe neighborhoods, and education;

. . . When to white people it becomes unthinkable to imagine that their wealth contains only the fruits of their own labor and not the labor of the dispossessed, unthinkable to condone a justice system built upon historically embedded asymmetries, and when it becomes unthinkable to deny the justice of making restitution to those who have suffered from racist laws and practices for 400 years, when all of these things become unthinkable, then public health as a guiding ideal will have done its work.

¹² Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, 98. Addams was well placed to become an early advocate for thinking of venereal diseases as public health issues rather than issuing from sin or a degraded character, which were the dominant views at the time. One of the leaders in the social hygiene movement, as it was then called, was obstetrician Dr. Rachel Yarros, a resident of Hull House and a staunch advocate for birth control.

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