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**Fostering Unity Amidst Diversity:
The People's Institute and Great Books Idea, 1897-1930**

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Abstract (Not to be read)

My paper traces intersections of the great books idea and immigrant/working-class reading by examining the history of the People's Institute in New York City. The Institute was founded in 1897 as an offshoot of the Cooper Union Mechanics School. After establishing information about the Institute's history and goals – through its founder Charles Sprague Smith, participants, programs, and future directors – my work dwells in particular on the 1920s. In that decade, a number of Columbia University academics worked for the Institute under an effort – funded by the Carnegie Foundation – to teach the great books to working-class and immigrant citizens of New York. This effort existed within a subsidiary of the People's Institute called 'The School of the People's Institute.' Everett Dean Martin, then director of the Institute, made Scott Buchanan (future co-founder, with Stringfellow Barr, of the great books program at St. John's College – Annapolis) director of "The School." The cohort that came together under Buchanan and Martin at the People's Institute would go on, with Mortimer J. Adler being an important prime mover, to promote the great books idea for the rest of the twentieth century. Under Martin, this community of discourse gained confidence at the Institute that people from disadvantaged educational and economic backgrounds could, with some help, read the best literature as it was then defined. In sum, the leaders of the Institute came to believe that the great books idea could be a democratic cultural form: by coming together around the great books, readers might overcome their ethnic and class differences. Cooper Union ended the People's Institute in 1934, but the spirit of the Institute partially survived through derivative institutions of great books promoters, such as the Great Books Foundation.

Brief Intro:

Thank you for coming! This paper grew out of my dissertation, titled "Making a Democratic Culture: The Great Books Idea, Mortimer J. Adler, and Twentieth-century America." The dissertation traced the history of the great books in the English-speaking world from 1869 to early 2006. This paper is an expanded excerpt from chapter two. This crowd doesn't likely need a full explanation of the phrase 'great books,' but I'll hazard a brief definition for the uninitiated. Great books are both an idea and a material entity. The idea grew out of the writings of Matthew Arnold and cohort of English peoples, spreading to the U.S. slowly during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. It is also sometimes known as 'The Canon.' The material entity of 'Great Books' is a physical set created by the Britannica Corporation in the 1940s and published in 1952. The set was revised and published again in 1990, where it met with a great deal of criticism after the Stanford Debates over Western Civ. course readings and Allan Bloom's promotion of the classics with his 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. ...I apologize in advance for the glancing over of some names without further biographical information. I also apologize for the lack of multimedia that might make my presentation more exciting.

In tracing the development of the great books idea, historians generally begin their stories with Columbia University English professor John Erskine's 1920s era General Honors course. But my thesis is that New York City's People's Institute may be the most influential institution in determining the trajectory of the idea for the twentieth century. Moreover, because of the

Institute's links to adult education, higher education, immigration, and labor, it served as a laboratory for working out the practical problems of democratizing intellectual life—of creating the unity of a common intellectual culture amid the diversity of the United States. While no explicit connection to the great books idea existed in its early years, the Institute's spirit allowed it to host a great books experiment in the 1920s.¹ The People's Institute assumed educational – and cultural – uplift for all, and the democratic intentions of 1920s great books supporters proved congenial to that premise. For, as the historian Lewis Perry noted, the notion of culture in this period was often used as “a concept that established social differences as problems to be understood and ameliorated.”² But to explain this and the Institute's links to the great books, an abridged exploration of the Institute's founding is needed.

Professor Charles Sprague Smith formed the People's Institute as an off-shoot of the Cooper Union mechanics school in 1897. Smith taught modern languages and foreign literature at Columbia University. The Institute resembled other turn-of-the-century, Progressive Era-urban efforts to extend education to the working poor, such as the Lowell Institute in Boston, Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago, and other settlement houses.³ Smith's effort came when, after his 1882 appointment at the University, he experienced “a growing repugnance toward his

¹ A number of scholars of the great books idea also cover the People's Institute (i.e. Kass, Moorhead, Reynolds, Rubin). Most focus either on (1) Everett Dean Martin's term as president (1922-1934) or (2) the years in which Scott Buchanan, Mortimer Adler, Richard McKeon, and Mark Van Doren participated (mid-to-late 1920s). Almost no effort has been made to connect the Institute's early years with the great books idea. Only Robert Fisher's 1974 dissertation, “The People's Institute of New York City, 1897-1934,” covers its early years. Thomas Bender's *New York Intellect*, chapters seven and eight passim, covers Columbia's various relations with the intellectual life of New York City.

² Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America: A History* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 269. The ‘democratic culture’ thesis is supported over a longer historical term in my dissertation, “Making a Democratic Culture: The Great Books Idea, Mortimer J. Adler, and Twentieth-Century America” (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2006).

³ Robert B. Fisher, “The People's Institute of New York City, 1897-1934: Culture, Progressive Democracy, and the People” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1974), 1, 9; Hugh S. Moorhead, “The Great Books Movement,” (PhD diss. University of Chicago, 1964), 110-111; Bender, 113-115, 283; Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 306-316; Perry, 270, 274-276. Charles Sprague Smith is not mentioned in *A History of Columbia College on Morningside* (1954).

own style of living. He was no longer able to justify his genteel, scholarly existence at Columbia, while 100 blocks to the south people lived under appallingly inhuman conditions.” One year later, in 1883, Smith constructed a plan to “bring Columbia and the city into closer contact.” He concretized that plan in a document called “The American University,” but the plan was rejected by Columbia administrators.⁴

After that rejection and a period of indecision about how to act on his “repugnance,” in 1895 he founded the Comparative Literature Society. The meetings of Smith’s Society consisted of educational lectures on literature, including “a comparative study of the supreme monuments of related civilizations...viewed as expressions of race experience.” An historian of the Institute, Robert Fisher, concluded that “the Society thus was designed to induce an understanding of the importance of literature in all civilizations, while, at the same time, prais[ing] all ethnic cultures and denounc[ing] segregation and ethnocentrism.” Smith’s Society echoed the beliefs of Progressives like the writer Frederic C. Howe, who argued that sojourns in “a world that had confidence in literature and the power of ideas” was liberating. After two years, however, Smith decided the effort was not sufficient. He reconfigured the Society into the People’s Institute.⁵

The Institute’s primary mission consisted of educating the working poor of New York City, especially of its lower East Side, in the areas other than mechanical or vocational skills. The Cooper Union supported the Institute’s work because Peter Cooper, primary trustee and namesake of the Union, had “instructed his trustees to supplement...the mechanical arts with

⁴ Fisher, 9-10. Despite Smith’s prominence as a professor in Columbia’s literature department, he is not referenced in Graff’s account of the profession.

Also, I believe it is only a coincidence that the institution at which John Erskine worked in Beaune, France after World War I was also known as “American University” [Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 161-164].

⁵ Fisher, 14-15; Perry, 274; Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 212-13. Robert Fisher is currently a professor in the University of Connecticut’s School of Social Work.

regular evening lectures...on social ethics and politics[,] or on any other branch of knowledge.”⁶

According to an 1897 *New York Times* article on the Institute’s founding, Smith’s idea helped with the Union’s needs. The *Times* reported:

The [Institute’s] purpose ...is two-fold – First, to furnish to the people continuous and ordered education in social science, history, literature, and such other subjects... Second, to afford opportunities for the interchange of thought upon topics of general interest between individuals of different occupations, in order thereby to assist in the solution of present problems. ... The institute shall ally itself with no party of sect.⁷

The activist endeavors of the Institute’s initial Advisory Committee, which included notables such as Samuel Gompers, Jacob Riis, E.R.A. Seligman, and Charles Dudley Warner, confirm Smith’s attempt to reach various stratifications of the working class.⁸ Although most lectures took place at the Cooper Union’s “Great Hall,” later Institute activities occurred at some of New York’s public libraries. For instance, when the *School of the People’s Institute* (an off-shoot of the original People’s Institute) conducted classes they were held at the Muhlenberg Branch of the New York Public Library system.⁹ The Institute’s idealistic rhetoric, diverse advisors, and accessible locations clearly suggest an inclusive vision.

But Smith’s sensitivity to working class life had limitations, and so did his experiment in democratizing culture. The Institute’s lectures on transcendent subjects masked genteel, elitist underpinnings. Smith’s motivation for uplifting the poor included preventing “the disruption, and

⁶ Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Random House, 1962; reprint, Vintage Books, 1965), 180; Amy Apfel Kass, “Radical Conservatives for Liberal Education” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1973), 1-2. Kass references the work of Henry De Forest Baldwin, “The People’s Institute” (1928), on Cooper’s intent. Fisher indicates in his dissertation that Baldwin’s piece was a memorandum located in the Cooper Union’s files, and does not list it singly in his bibliography.

⁷ “The People’s Institute,” *New York Times* (June 27, 1897), 13.

⁸ “Institute,” NYT; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 134. Gompers concentrated on organizing skilled laborers through the American Federation of Laborers, but he apparently believed in the efforts of the Union and the Institute to reach all kinds of working class poor.

⁹ Lola Jean Simpson, *People Who Want to Be Educated: The Story of the People’s Institute and Its Director, Everett Dean Martin* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1929), 4-6; Kass, 6. The Simpson story is simply a hardcover reprint of a *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* article from 1929.

possible ruin, of civilization.” Although the contemporary activist and historian Charles Beard noted Smith’s sense of “devotion to duty” and “humanitarianism,” Beard perhaps unwittingly captured Smith’s condescension by writing that both were based on “an exalted impulse, rather than a definite goal.”¹⁰ Historian Robert Fisher argued that Smith’s vague notion of uplift carried the taint of enforced Americanism and Western ethnocentrism. Fisher wrote:

Smith feared...the intellectual poverty that might come to any society inundated by so many persons foreign to its way and ideals. [He] possessed strong convictions on the value of his intellectual tradition and that of others, and was determined for everyone’s benefit not to allow civilization to decline into cultural mediocrity.¹¹

These sentiments clearly colored the Institute’s early education efforts.

Although notable Americanization proponents, such as Francis Kellor, appear nowhere in leadership of the Institute, Smith’s rhetoric corresponded with what historian John Higham called “a conscious drive to hasten the assimilative process, to heat and stir the melting pot.”¹² But historian Moses Rischin analyzed the Institute positively. He saw the Institute as “the crowning expression of the impulse to interpret a metropolitan civilization to its citizens.” Rischin noted “the democratic spirit [of]...its founders” and its diverse roster of speakers: Booker T. Washington, John R. Commons, and even non-U.S. citizens such as the New Zealander Hugh Lusk. The focus of Rischin’s study – Jewish immigrants in New York – may have skewed his perspective. Scott Buchanan, an assistant director of the Institute in the mid-1920s, noted that “fully half” of lecture attendees were Russian Jews and that they demonstrated an “unusual intellectual interest and persistence” in the Institute’s activities.¹³ But nevertheless, the early efforts of the Institute highlight, at a minimum, the efforts of Progressive-era

¹⁰ Fisher, 12-13. For more on the relations of specific intellectuals to New York City’s populace, see Thomas Bender’s *New York Intellect*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 235, chap. nine *passim*.

¹³ Harvard University, The Houghton Library, Scott Millross Buchanan Papers (bMS Am 1992 1207), p. 3; Rischin, 212-3, 215.

intellectuals to bring culture to the masses. And the Institute's mission and activities in its formative stages explain its later receptivity to a great books experiment.

That experiment became a part of the Institute, later, during the directorship of Everett Dean Martin. He began with the Institute in 1917, working his way up to director in 1921—and staying in that position until its 1934 closing.

Martin brought a Midwestern sensibility to the Institute. Born in Jacksonville, Illinois in 1880, he graduated from Illinois College in 1904 and McCormick Theological Seminary in 1907. Before joining the Institute had he served as a Congregational preacher in Des Moines and played the part of “a soap-box orator in Chicago.”¹⁴ Martin's education and activities mark him as a Progressive, empathetic intellectual with a democratic ethos.

In New York, Martin articulated the educational philosophy of the Institute in his 1926 work, *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*. He argued therein that education's task is to “reorient the individual, to enable him to take a richer and more significant view of his experiences, to place him above and not within the system of his beliefs and ideals.” To Martin a liberal education meant “the kind of education which sets the mind free from the servitude of the crowd and from vulgar self-interests.” He added, “Education is simply philosophy at work. It is the search for the ‘good life.’ ”¹⁵

Martin's rhetoric consciously echoed that of his spiritual predecessor, the British cultural critic and poet Matthew Arnold. Arnold had inspired a positive, “read-to-power” legacy in Martin and other nineteenth-century positive, non-genteel Arnoldian promoters of the great

¹⁴ “Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association: Fifteenth Annual Report of the Board of Officers,” *The Philosophical Review* 51, no. 2 (March 1942), 184; “Dr. E. Martin Dies,” *The New York Times*, 11 May 1941, 44; “Cooper Union Ends People's Institute,” *The New York Times*, 26 August 1934, N2. I would speculate that his term as a “soap-box orator” included time spent in Chicago's Bug-House Square.

¹⁵ Everett Dean Martin, *The Meaning of a Liberal Education* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1926), viii, 300-301.

books idea. Martin acknowledged, however, the mixed perceptions of Arnold among contemporaries (and from scholars today I might add), when Martin mentioned the latter by name later in his book:

I hesitate to mention Arnold because those who are still guilty of the errors he exposed will say he was a Victorian, and how could his ideas of education have any value for a progressive twentieth century population? Like Nietzsche, [Arnold held] that the multitude gives evidence that it does not really want education. ... Arnold's phrase 'sweetness and light' is a little suggestive of a Unitarian sermon, or some cult of the 'higher life' [or high culture]. ... *You may rest assured that Arnold had nothing of this sort in mind.* ... Arnold had in mind characters like Socrates, Erasmus, Montaigne – no muddle-headed, opinionated or narrow-minded men, but men who had attained clarity of thought and the insight which pierces *the glamour of things and the follies of men.*¹⁶

In solidarity with Arnold's essentially democratic view of culture, Martin articulated an educational philosophy that transcended the Western and American parochialism of his predecessor, Charles Sprague Smith, the Institute's founder.

The structure that would mix Martin's Arnold-inspired, liberal arts program with the great books was an subsidiary of the Institute called "The School of Philosophy." It was founded in 1917. After a period of growth and expansion it was renamed "The School of the People's Institute," or simply "The School." Its mission included teaching philosophy, psychology, biology, and literary criticism. When the Institute's "School" branched into these new disciplinary activities, a former Columbia faculty member, Frederick Keppel, became involved. By this time Keppel was also President of the Carnegie Corporation. Because of Keppel's enthusiasm for The School, Carnegie awarded the Institute an ongoing, \$10,000 per year grant. With these monies the Institute hired a Harvard-trained philosopher, Scott Buchanan, to run "The School" in 1925.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid (italics mine).

¹⁷ Harris Wofford, ed., *Embers of the World: Conversations With Scott Buchanan* (Santa Barbara: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1970), 41-42, 71; Kass, 4, 6-7, 16-17; Moorhead, 110, 117-120; Adler,

Buchanan's work as a teaching assistant at Columbia brought him into contact with Mortimer J. Adler and other Columbia graduate students, who Buchanan eventually solicited as lecturers for the School. At one point the book enthusiast Clifton Fadiman served as secretary for the staff of lecturers. About the same time, the Institute brought on the Aristotelian philosopher Richard McKeon. He was a philosophy graduate student who had studied with the famed historian-philosopher-medievalist Etienne Gilson at the Sorbonne in France. Like Adler, McKeon taught a section of Columbia University's famed great books course, General Honors, founded by John Erskine in 1920. Buchanan also exhibited an interest in others who worked in General Honors. Sometime in late 1925 or early 1926, Buchanan and Adler proposed to Martin the idea of conducting General Honors-style classes through the Institute's School. Martin agreed with their proposal, and the Institute began its great books experiment in 1926 with a series of seminars.¹⁸

Nearly everyone in Adler's Columbia community of discourse participated in the seminars. All together the Institute's School formed thirteen discussion groups averaging fifteen working-class New Yorkers per group, with each headed by one discussion leader. The discussion leaders in the first years were Adler, Buchanan, Fadiman, McKeon, Houston Peterson, Philip Youtz, Charles Prager, Whittaker Chambers, John Storck, Herbert Solow, Moses Hadas, Donald Slesenger, and Mark Van Doren. The groups were organized "to represent a cross-section of educational and social level, age and race." Six of the thirteen groups studied "general interest," great books-like programs. Of the six, four focused on "Classic and Medieval

Philosopher, 77, 87-88, 103-104. Both Moorhead and Kass spend an extensive amount of time on the minutiae of the development of the Institute's School. There exists some disagreement about whether the large Carnegie grant of \$10,000 was given explicitly for great books style courses. Kass and Adler asserted it was, in the form of an "additional" grant (Kass, 23; Adler, 88). But Moorhead points out, convincingly I believe, that the Carnegie money was for "a general experiment in liberal arts reading and discussion." Adler and Buchanan's proposal, with Martin's permission, became funded by the grant already given by the Carnegie Corporation (Moorhead, 119).

¹⁸ Ibid.

Thought” and two on “Renaissance and Modern Thought.” The other seven covered American history, economic theory, English literature, ethics, philosophy, and psychology (two).¹⁹

Little is available on the working-class reader’s experience in these groups. But the great books’ effectiveness can be inferred, at least somewhat, from the experiment’s continuation.

Since nearly all of Buchanan’s experience with the Institute was with its “School,” his reflections tell us something about the great books experiment and its audience. He described attendees as follows (with thanks to Katherine Chaddock Reynolds for finding this quote):

Certain members of the audience were noticeable as underprivileged slum dwellers who found a free lecture a physically and socially warm place to take a nap. But the great body of the audience was first- or second-generation immigrants whose migration to this country had uprooted them from the intellectual and educational traditions that they had come to fear they would lose in America. . . . There were also internal migrants, remnants of native American intellectual and political movements who spent their summers in harvesting on the Great Plains or in lumber camps and rode the rods back to New York for the winter. . . . They knew Jack London. . . . These two groups, the East siders and the Wobblies, as we used to call them, were, with the graduate students from local universities, probably the best read audience in America.²⁰

The experiment in the People’s Institute’s “School” constituted a special event in the history of the great books idea and the assimilation of immigrants. In his study, “The Great Books Movement,” Moorhead argued that six general interest sections of this experiment constituted the first great books classes conducted in the U.S. *outside of higher education*. The School’s working-class and immigrant readers were the forerunners of later, 1940s-era participants in the Great Books Foundation’s reading groups. After the Institute experiment ended in 1928, Buchanan accepted an academic position at the University of Virginia, but both McKeon and Adler stayed on with The School. Adler even took Buchanan’s assistant director

¹⁹ Kass, 26; Moorhead, 121-123. Adler met and befriended John Storck while both were undergraduate classes at Columbia. Moses Hadas would later write a review of the Britannica’s first edition of the *Great Books of the Western World*.

²⁰ Katherine Chaddock Reynolds, “A Canon of Democratic Intent: Reinterpreting the Roots of the Great Books Movement” *History of Higher Education Annual* 22 (2002): 13 (underlines mine). Here Reynolds quoted directly from Scott Buchanan’s “A New Introduction” in *Poetry and Mathematics*, 2nd ed. (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1962), 11. I was not able to obtain Buchanan’s work in time for this conference.

position until he too left – for for the University of Chicago in 1930.²¹

But after moving on, nearly all of the “Adler cohort” in the experiment would later cite their experience with the Institute’s great books program in two ways. First, as proof that *great books could in fact be taught outside the academy*. And second as the source of their optimism about the possibilities of great books style reading groups.²² Their Institute experience caused them to believe in the accessibility of great books among the unschooled. Their experiment with ethnically diverse working-class New Yorkers seeded a movement based on fostering a more unified intellectual life. While the merits of the kind of unity fostered are open for debate, few can question the motives of the Martin-Adler cohort—nor the popularity of the Institute.

Of this large cast of Institute instructors, Mortimer Adler would prove to be the most effective popularizer of the great books in the twentieth century. He catalyzed the formation of great books reading groups with his 1940 bestseller, *How to Read a Book*. That book also caused, with the support of former University of Chicago president, Robert M. Hutchins, the creation of the aforementioned Great Books Foundation and the construction of Britannica’s 1952 set of the *Great Books of the Western World*. While Erskine’s General Honors at Columbia class was important, Adler’s experience with working-class, immigrant, and migrant adult learners at the People’s Institute cinched an optimistic, democratic conviction that great books could and should be read, understood, and discussed by people from all walks of life.

²¹ UCSC/MJAP, Box 39, Folder: “People’s Institute” (from the “1897-1929 Report”); Moorhead, 122, 137, 144; Kass, 29-30.

²² Adler, *Philosopher*, 88; Fadiman, *Party of One*, 320-323; Van Doren, *Autobiography*, 158-59.