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"Give This Man Work!"

Josephine Shaw Lowell, the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, and the Depression of 1893

"Give This Man Work if you would keep his wife and children alive; one child has already died from starvation," wrote a concerned citizen to the East Side Relief Committee (Devins 1905: 322). The East Side Relief Committee was a special work-relief unit set up in 1893 by Josephine Shaw Lowell, the founder in 1882 of the Charity Organization Society (COS) of the City of New York (COSCNY) to combat the effects of the depression. That industrial depression in the early 1890s resulted in major unemployment and much suffer-

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ing among the city's working class. The imperative of the letter ("Give This Man Work!") illuminates the COS's policy toward relief before, during, and after the depression of 1893, a landmark date in social welfare history. Earlier, Lowell and the COS were best known for their concerns about the role that "indiscriminate" relief played in harming the moral character of the recipients and undermining the living standards of employed workers, *not* how it could be used to ameliorate joblessness. "I believe that among the many causes of poverty," Lowell asserted in a speech, "one of the most potent is careless relief-giving, whether by what are called charitable societies, by private individuals, or from public funds" (quoted in Stewart 1974 [1911]: 216).

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Lowell and the COSCNY were determined to provide leadership in "teaching the rich how to give and the poor how to live." Indeed, at least as early as 1890, the press, the public, and other charities acknowledged the national charity organization movement as representing the cutting edge in the philanthropic field. "In Anglo-American cities in the later half of the [nineteenth] century," Peter Mandler (1990: 21) observed, "the relief of families was almost totally handed over to the 'scientific charities,' such as the various Charity Organization Societies." And nowhere did a charity organization society enjoy such prominence and power as the one led by Josephine Shaw Lowell in New York City, which, as another scholar (Butners 1980: 279) has claimed, "served as a model for similar organizations throughout the country and was deeply involved in shaping private philanthropic and public policies toward the dependent individual."[1]

The COSCNY was especially proud of its reputation for developing modern preventive programs, for its advocacy of civil service reform in public charitable institutions, and for its strong ideological stance in advocating a professional, businesslike brand of welfare. This new type of welfare was quite consciously shaped to complement corporations, whose new business practices were similarly imbued with efficiency and professionalism, and whose leaders were frankly admired by many Gilded Age reformers and intellectuals.[2]

The specter of joblessness and despair raised by the economic disaster of 1893, however, prompted the leadership of the New York Society to acknowledge, for the first time in its short history, that relief, under some circumstances might be a *right* for working people. Lowell's East Side Relief

Committee was designed to be a model of judicious work-relief that could be used, not only throughout New York City, but also throughout the country, in 1893–94 and for any future depressions. Thus, after 1893 there was a noticeable shift in COS ideology and practice. In order to trace this change and analyze its significance, I will examine the charity organization career of Josephine Shaw Lowell, whose policy initiative shaped the response of the COS to the greatest depression of the nineteenth century. I argue that contrary to its historical reputation as an organization existing more for the "prevention of charity" than for providing actual charitable relief, Lowell and the COS leadership responded with flexible and innovative work-relief programs to meet the exigencies of the desperate winter of 1893–94.

Historians, Lowell, and the Organized Charity Movement

This article will begin with an examination of the way in which historians have viewed Lowell's career, along with her movement for scientific, or organized, charity. George Fredrickson (1965: 212) wrote that Josephine Shaw Lowell (1843–1905) was "recognized as a representative figure of the war generation." In his influential book, *The Inner Civil War*, Fredrickson suggested that Lowell, born and bred a Boston brahmin, was an important figure in replacing an older tradition (pre–Civil War) of humanitarian charity with a businesslike efficiency, a belief in the God of the Christian church with the god of science, a belief in the limitless possibility of democratic reform with an embrace of social Darwinism and its limitations, and, finally, the goodhearted volunteer with the paid professional. This change of priorities from a humane, Christian-based philanthropy to a bleak and hard-professionalized charity based on science and statistics, claimed Fredrickson, is starkly portrayed by Lowell's own career.

Lowell's movement, scientific charity (and its institutional expression, charity organization societies), had its origins in the English industrial experience. In mid-Victorian England, a number of issues combined to elevate poverty and its eradication into a major focus of social and political attention from the 1850s to the early 1900s. These concerns were addressed in 1869 by the founding of the first Charity Organization Society (COS) in London. The charity organization idea soon found a flourishing home in a rapidly indus-

trializing America as well. Scientific charity was predicated on the belief that the principles of science could be applied to ending the problem of poverty. The practitioners, who named themselves "social scientists," represented a new breed of educated experts whose goal would be to identify, investigate, and solve various social problems that were too complex for ordinary citizens, who lived in an increasingly interdependent industrial environment, to tackle themselves.[3]

Fredrickson labeled scientific charity as repressive and elitist because it applied a systematic, and in his view, cruel, method to the understanding and *control* of charity and charitable relief. Control was the key concept, and one that was more precisely used by social welfare historians who built on Fredrickson's insights and borrowed from French historian Michel Foucault's (1988) observations about the rise of surveillance and discipline in the nineteenth century, particularly in regard to the body and sexuality, and to the physically and mentally incompetent. Paul Boyer (1978), Lori Ginzburg (1990), Michael Katz (1986), Nathan Huggins (1970), Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1971), and Amy Dru Stanley (1992) have all argued that the leaders and practitioners of scientific charity and charity organization societies were class oppressors who made poverty into a crime. Historians have especially noted the successful attempts made by Gilded Age charity reformers, including Lowell, to control the behavior of the poor through a combination of vagrancy laws and reduced benefits. The reformers' goal, then, was not social justice for the poverty-stricken but, rather, to save taxpayers money and eliminate charity fraud by systematizing the administration of welfare and relief programs, both public and private.

There are other ways of interpreting Lowell's and the COS's application of social science to philanthropy, however. One way is to consider that intimately tied to Lowell's understanding of charity organization principles—with its methodology of trained observation, investigation, and informed advocacy of change—was a growing ability to recognize the complexity of the conditions of poverty that were being observed and studied. This knowledge of contemporary conditions is precisely what led Lowell and the other COS leadership to an important awareness of the exploitation of labor in the last decade of the century, and, in short, made them leaders in recasting the response of the charitable world to industrial capitalism. Lowell's willingness to change course, to adapt to new conditions and adopt new policies, is what

makes her life story, and her institution's history, one of dynamic innovation (Greeley 1995; Leiby 1984; Waugh 1997).

Lowell's COS of the City of New York: A Background

When the 38-year-old Josephine Shaw Lowell founded the COS in 1882, she had already established a brilliant career as a specialist in charity and welfare concerns. Born into a wealthy, abolitionist Boston family that in the 1840s resettled in Staten Island, New York, Lowell was related to two Civil War heroes—the sister of Robert Gould Shaw and the wife of Charles Russell Lowell. The teenaged Josephine volunteered her services to the United States Sanitary Commission, the premier philanthropic organization of the war. Along with her neighbor, friend, and colleague Louisa Lee Schuyler, Lowell learned the virtues of organization and efficiency in dispensing relief and aid to the northern soldiers. After she became a war widow, Lowell worked in Schulyer's New York State Charities Aid Association in 1871, where she specialized in studies that analyzed the rise of pauperism, which was considered a massive social problem throughout the 1870s. In 1876, Governor Samuel Tilden, impressed with Lowell's influential reports on pauperism for the State Charities Aid Association, appointed her to fill a vacant spot on the New York State Board of Charities, a regulatory agency created in 1867. Commissioner Lowell was the first woman to ever occupy a state office in New York. During her 13-year tenure on the State Board of Charities, Lowell inspected, reported on, and recommended changes for many different kinds of institutions for the poor and dependent. She worked closely with various interest groups and state legislators in an attempt to reform the way welfare operated in New York State; this work included a successful campaign in the late 1870s to end all outdoor relief in New York City (Kaplan 1978: 202–14).

A few years after she was appointed commissioner, however, Lowell felt that her work on the state board was not really addressing the disarray and confusion in the *private* realm of charities. There were too many such charities in New York City, providing what Lowell termed "indiscriminate relief." No one really knew, she claimed, how to account for all the relief that was being distributed to the poor. It was, Lowell believed, a terrible waste of time, effort, and money.

Lowell's concerns should be contextualized within and without the charitable field. The blossoming of social science, the creation of state boards of charities, and the proliferation of private charities in the 1870s all occurred within an explosive and unstable social and political environment. For many Gilded Age Americans, the situation demanded a concerted effort to restore harmony and ensure order. Strikes and other forms of social protest, which were, in turn, often attended by violence and riots, were believed to threaten the present and future well-being of society. Lowell believed that the organization of charity offered one solution to reining in the social chaos unleashed as the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration transformed the country's institutions.[4]

In response to these concerns, Josephine Shaw Lowell founded the COS of the City of New York in 1882. In the beginning, she relied on the advice and example of other leaders of the American scientific charity movement, including Buffalo's Stephen Humphreys Gurteen and Boston's Robert Treat Paine and Annie Adams Field. But it is clear that it was on Lowell's initiative, and her initiative alone, that the COS in New York City came into existence. No one else, she reported, "had the courage to take hold of it" (Lowell to Baker 1881). Lowell recruited the all-male founding officers, including Robert Weeks de Forest, the president of the COSNYC for 40 years and a major presence in New York philanthropic and political circles. Lowell also kept her position on the State Board of Charities until 1889, thereby ensuring her continuing involvement with both the public and private aspects of charity and relief in New York State.[5]

The Early COS: The Ideology

At the beginning of her stewardship of the COS of New York City, Lowell published a small book, *Public Relief and Private Charities* (1884), which quickly became the classic statement of charity organization ideology. Lowell argued that the goal of an industrializing society is to bring about a stable social order at whose center is the productive individual. A critical step in that direction would be to make a clearer dividing line between charity (private) and relief (public). How would this be done? Number one, according to Lowell, would be to abolish all outdoor relief (defined as cash or other assistance given

to those in need so that they could remain at home). "It is not right," Lowell declared (ibid.: 1), "to tax one part of the community for the benefit of another part, it is not right to take money from one man and give it to another, unless for the benefit of both." This abolition was not unconditional. Lowell observed that many groups—the aged, widows with small children, the mentally ill, the disabled—must be taken care of by public agencies. If they were not, the social order would be threatened. But the majority of people currently receiving relief in the public sphere, Lowell claimed, would be better taken care of by a group of private charities run under scientific principles and closely monitored by the charity organization societies.

In the second part of her book, Lowell invited readers to envision along with her a new and expanded role for private charity, which she defined (ibid.: 89) as "a voluntary, free, beneficent action performed toward those who are in more destitute circumstances and inferior in worldly position." If all public, state-supported relief was ended, she wrote, the vacuum would be filled by a reinvigorated private philanthropy with a solid foundation of knowledge, efficiency, and organization. In a nutshell, *Public Relief and Private Charity* redefined the charitable impulse. In addition to (but never replacing) Christian sentiment, there now had to be a realization that poverty was a serious social problem requiring expert scientific study. The benefits of applying scientific principles to charity would accrue to both the well off and the poor, softening the edges of the impersonal urban world. The selfish wealthy would be forced out of their contented world of material pleasure and would take on an intelligent responsibility for the poor. The poor would benefit the most: they would emerge as productive citizens, guided and inspired by their betters.

In contemplating the costs of this reform, Lowell (1898: 214) later remarked: "What is a little ease or comfort or pleasure worth compared to nobility of character?" And this, of course, was the "heart" of the charity organization message: scientifically directed material relief must always be associated with moral uplift. Lowell (1884: 94) wrote: "The fundamental principle is that all charity must tend to raise the character and elevate the moral nature, and so improve the condition of those toward whom it is exercised, and must not tend to injure the character or conditions of others." Even more bluntly, Lowell (ibid.) asserted: "The public should refuse to support any except whom it can control."

The Valley of Industry

Lowell's views on relief policies were refined and publicized throughout the 1880s and early 1890s in speeches, articles, and newspaper interviews. A particular point of pride for Lowell and other COS leaders was the fact that, throughout the 1880s, applications for private charity did not rise when public relief had been abolished, thus confirming their deeply cherished principle that much public relief was superfluous and harmful. Historians have pointed out that the COS so effectively stigmatized public relief that thousands of poor people were too ashamed to ask for aid.[6] Whatever the exact truth, the giving of relief by public and private charities continued to be an ideologically charged issue, even in the relatively prosperous years of the 1880s and early 1890s. Undoubtedly, privatization's harmful potential was mitigated by the surging economy. Yet Lowell worried about any resurgence of what she called "make" jobs (public or government-sponsored work programs) or other kinds of outdoor relief (coal, food, blankets). They were, she insisted, harmful to individual character and harmful to the economic health of society. "Human nature," declared Lowell (1884: 66), "is so constituted that no man can receive as a gift what he should earn by his own labor without a moral deterioration." The needs of the poor, she argued, would be met without turning to outdoor relief.

It is worth spending some time analyzing the thought and practice of the 1880s charity organization movement on relief. Lowell articulated her own and her organization's ideological position on relief in a remarkable paper, "The Economic and Moral Effects of Public Outdoor Relief," which she gave at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1890.[7] Lowell supposed that every citizen of the country would receive a guaranteed annual income, distributed by the state, with no stigma attached. What would happen, Lowell asked, if such a policy were instituted? Her answer: a calamitous moral decline in society, followed shortly by economic ruin. Lowell desired to make her point crystal clear. To do so, she presented her audience with an allegory she called "The Valley of Industry." In the story, water served as the central metaphor for life. Thus, all citizens in the valley received their water from a mountain reservoir, and each person received his or her own water supply by pumping what they needed through a small pipe. One day, a few of the inhabitants of the Valley of Industry de-

cided to move up the mountain to be nearer to the water supply. Their new settlement was dubbed Prosperity Hill and, once they were established, they installed a large pipe from the reservoir to carry water for their own use. The labor, however, was still supplied by the hardworking majority who remained in the Valley of Industry.

One of the pleasant benefits that the newly elevated (both literally and figuratively) community enjoyed, now that they did not have to spend any time pumping their own water, was the leisure to survey the countryside. And what they found was startling. There was another valley, right next to the Valley of Industry, that contained a large group of people who had no access to the life-giving water and who, as a result, were in dire poverty and distress. Yet, strangely, the people of this other valley, the Valley of Idleness, did not seem to want to lift a finger to help themselves. Saddened, the Prosperity Hill residents decided to install, free of charge, a pipe from the Valley of Industry to bring water and relief to these pathetic people. Workers from the hard-pressed Valley of Industry were now pumping water for themselves, as well as for the people who lived on Prosperity Hill *and* in the Valley of Idleness. Not surprisingly, Lowell concluded, there was a trickle and then a flood of migrants from Industry to Idleness, and soon there was nobody left to pump water at all. "We have seen," Lowell remarked to her audience of professional philanthropists, "that it is not in human nature to refuse any gift which comes hampered by no disagreeable or dishonorable conditions; we have seen also that energy and the power of self-support must be diminished, as are all other faculties, by disuse; and . . . it follows that no greater injury can be done to a human being . . . [than to] induce him to give up the use of his self-supporting faculties." Lowell ended her analysis of the fable with the question she had already answered: "Can anything [guaranteed security] more certain be devised for destroying manhood?" (Lowell 1890, quoted in Stewart 1974 [1911]: 170–71).

Lowell was repeating her by-now polished argument that public relief must be limited to the chronically dependent and not tempt the poor to consider relief a right, by removing the stigma presently and rightfully attached to it. Lowell was most concerned with the effect on the average working-class person, whom, she claimed (ibid.) would suffer the most from both the increased taxes for relief and the temptation to take it: "When we consider the hardships, the struggles, the sufferings, of the mass of those who are com-

monly called the working people, of those who earn from day to day the support of themselves and their families, when we remember how much hard work it takes to earn one dollar, and often how hard it is even to get the hard work to do, and then think of the reckless way in which a dollar is given here, there, and everywhere, often simply for the asking, can we wonder that many succumb to the temptation to ask?" (ibid.: 89).

Lowell's views highlighted charity organization's self-appointed task, which was to ask the tough questions about industrial poverty in the last decades of the nineteenth century. What were people entitled to? What was the state's responsibility? What was the private charitable community's responsibility? Lowell and the COSCNY were thus influential in defining the problems that set the local and state agenda for the discussion and formulation of welfare policy in the Gilded Age. In the 1870s and 1880s, Lowell and other charity organization reformers were optimistic that pauperism could be cured through individual correction and discipline. In her view, poverty was largely the result of behavioral failures, so that the moral adjustment of the individual was the key to uplifting the "degraded" population and bringing them into mainstream American life.

In the 1880s, Lowell integrated scientific principles into the "real" programs and policies of the charity organization society. As will be seen, an ideology that emphasized institutional social control and individual self-control inevitably clashed with the harsh consequences of the economic upheavals of the 1890s.

The Early COS: The Practice

Lowell went to work to make the COS a formidable institution. In doing so, she immediately demonstrated that she was a practical-minded reformer, as well as a visionary. Lowell personally enrolled both the volunteer and the salaried personnel of the society. After dividing the city into districts, she opened offices in each district, hired the staff and agents to run them, and began the hard work of introducing charity organization to the city. Charles Kellogg, the new general secretary Lowell hired away from the Philadelphia COS, remarked that "the principles laid down at the outset were so wise as to require but trifling new adaptation for many years, and the high character and thoroughly representative capacity of the citizens who worked with Mrs. Lowell

to found the Charity Organization Society, and their unity of purpose, were such that the inauguration of the society was accompanied by far less distrust and jealousy than was encountered in other of the large cities" (quoted in Stewart 1974 [1911]: 131).

The early COS emphasized almost exclusively its repressive programs. The removal of beggars from city streets, the exposure of charitable fraud, and a careful separation of the worthy from the unworthy supplicants for relief through the case method occupied much time and energy. The COS's early tough image was reinforced by a Committee on Mendicancy, which maintained a special department for the control of vagrancy and beggary on the city's streets. The emphasis on punishment and repression meant that the COS often found itself under attack from the press, the public, and other charitable societies for its supposedly harsh and cold-hearted approach to poor relief and the problem of poverty. One early critic (Davis 1877) lamented the new "scientific" approach to charity, saying, "If their arguments are right . . . the wind blows due east in the world to-day and cold." A more caustic remark was made in a well-publicized attack on the COS by an Episcopalian minister, the Reverend B. F. De Costa, when he accused it of "making pumice stone of [the poor] to polish up the values of their patrons" (quoted in Griffin 1971: 201). Thus, even as the COS established itself throughout the 1880s and 1890s as the cutting edge in charitable circles, they would do so challenged by many critics who disagreed with the society over basic issues of welfare.[8]

The District Committee Worker

Any evaluation of Lowell and the COS in these years must take into account its district committee system, which brought the human dimension of scientific service to the poor. Indeed, the best way to really appreciate Josephine Shaw Lowell's contribution to the COS, and to find the source of her flexible approach to her philanthropic career, is to examine her leadership of, and immersion in, the society's district committee work in the first decade of its existence. It is here that ideology and practice clashed and here where COS policies were transmuted in a way that reflected a more practical and humane attitude toward the poor it sought to serve.

This creative process occurred primarily within the society's district committees, each of which initially was composed of approximately 14 "gen-

tlemen of clear minds and kind hearts" (Lewis 1954: 137). (By the 1890s, however, much of the committees' work was done by volunteer women.) These men were charged with recruiting friendly visitors, doing some visiting themselves, and reviewing agents' and visitors' reports and making recommendations for the relief and rehabilitation of the clients. At least five of the members would ideally live in the district they served, as a big part of the work would involve educating community institutions as to the proper ways of dispensing charity (Lewis 1954; Waugh 1997).

The district committee members—the corps of volunteer friendly visitors and the paid district agents and their assistants—were the linchpins of COS ideology. This triad comprised the much-vaunted "personal service" ideal of charity organization that made meaningful the COS's motto, "Not alms but a friend." The system worked this way: A notification would be made to a COS representative of a family or an individual in distress. Often this would be in the form of a letter written by a landlord, friend, minister, boss, newspaper, or patron. The notification began the investigation process, and a district agent would be assigned to the case. The agent would write letters to anyone and everyone (parents, children, employers, ministers) who could give information regarding the "worthiness" of the supplicants. The agent was required to keep an ongoing record of the case, and these records were reviewed regularly by the district committee—and in some case a special standing committee—until the case was closed. This could happen in a week, as was usually the case, but some cases remained, on and off, in the files for 5, 10, or even 20 years. The opening of a case file by an agent was accompanied by the assignment to the family of a friendly visitor whose interest in their problems would provide the human dimension, counteracting the businesslike demeanor of the agent.

The disposition of the cases was decided in weekly meetings by the district committee, in which four represented a quorum. Service to the poor came in varied forms and could be speedy or slow, depending on the particular urgency of the case. Because it was the official policy of the COS not to give immediate cash relief but to study the long-term needs of the family involved, the relief package could include access to food or heating supplies, legal advice, arranging a long-term welfare stipend through a church or patron, or simply providing information on the many medical, educational, or charitable services that the city had to offer.[9]

Lowell's involvement with the society's district committees' work was intense and long lasting. She helped set overall policy through her chairwomanship of the Committee on District Work. This committee's policy was subject only to review by the COSCNY's Central Council and its Executive Committee, both of which Lowell served on as well. The district work committee was also a sounding board for many of the sticky issues encountered by members and agents throughout their service. These issues included agents' training and salaries, along with the establishment of proper rules, regulations, and guidelines for the relief of the poor. In 1892, Lowell joined the third district (later known as Corlears) as a committee member and also volunteered there as a friendly visitor. She came to know intimately the lives and problems of the working poor of her own district, as well as most of the other COS districts.

COS agents were being trained to evaluate the "worthiness" of a case, and they gathered data that revealed complex and contradictory information on the causes of poverty. How these data were interpreted changed during the first 10 years of COS, expanding from (but not discarding) a highly individualistic focus to an emphasis on a multicausal explanation of poverty. The hands-on work required by the district committee system and the knowledge it provided drove Lowell and COS to develop proactive programs for the poor. One such program was the Penny Provident Fund. This fund, established in 1888, created a banking institution that accepted savings under a dollar; its purpose was to encourage children to begin developing habits of thrift and independence. Between 1891 and 1897 the COS opened a workroom for unskilled women laborers and a Wayfarer's Lodge for the homeless. It began a Provident Loan Society to complement its Penny Provident Fund. Other programs such as the Laundry (a particular favorite of Lowell's) provided unemployed women with job training and wages. Infant kindergartens and summer camps for children complemented the adult programs, and they all underscored the society's growing commitment to providing opportunities to working-class people, not just to punishing the charitable impostors. In its annual report of 1892, the year before the depression struck, the COS announced proudly that it had helped lead the movement "to promote the general welfare of the poor by social and sanitary reforms" (COS *Eleventh Annual Report* 1892: 25).

In short, the COS became a standard bearer for "preventive charity." Preventive charity encouraged people to engage in personal "self-help," but

it also promoted the establishment of community-developed social services, which would give the environmental incentive for people to be independent. The COS thus promoted individual improvement as embodied in their case-method approach, coupled with a growing and significant emphasis on prevention through improving social conditions. The society's greatest triumph in this area occurred in 1901 when it opened its famous tenement house exhibition, which not only laid bare the shocking conditions in the slums for the edification of the prosperous classes but also provided a detailed program for reform, culminating in the New York Tenement Act of 1901. Just as the disciplinary approach aimed at *cleansing* the environment of baleful examples of individual misbehavior, so the preventive approach aimed at *creating* modes of proper behavior.[10]

Lowell was a leader in the COS's efforts toward preventive philanthropy. Her district committee work provided her with the exposure she needed to face some facts about what caused poverty and unemployment—facts, it must be noted, that did not mesh well with the ideological purity of charity organization principles about relief giving as expressed in *Public Relief and Private Charity*. Lowell was learning a lesson: the onus of being poor could not always be placed on the shoulders of the individual; rather, structural conditions of inequality also had to be addressed to alleviate poverty. Indeed, within a few short years after founding the COS, Lowell realized that there were far too many "worthy" poor whose lives were made miserable by events out of their control.

Lowell pursued several options as these ideas crystallized. She continued to urge that the COS expand its preventive programs and, in addition, join hands with other groups to challenge the unfair disparity of power between industrial power and the working masses. Thus, Lowell made allies of the budding settlement house movement, declaring, "What we ought to have are settlements in every street, to help civilize and lift the people" (Stewart 1974: 365). She linked the movement's leaders and workers in the city to her charity organization society in concrete ways. Lowell realized that settlements could assist the COS district committees in their study of tenement conditions. She made sure that the research undertaken by the local settlement houses was included in the society's reports, recommending workers' protective legislation. To facilitate the friendly sharing of research and resources, the COS district committees were ordered to include settlement house workers in their ranks.

Together, Lowell believed that the COS and the settlement houses could be potent allies in the fight against poverty.[11]

Significantly, Lowell was a prominent figure in New York City's labor reform circles beginning in 1885 (Stewart 1974 [1911]: 357–415; Waugh 1997: 184–209). She played an active role in settling labor conflicts, defended workers' rights to strike, and advocated industrial conciliation on fair terms. In 1891 Lowell founded the Consumers' League of the City of New York, an advocacy group formed to protest the oppressive working conditions of department store female clerks. Lowell's simultaneous involvement in district committee work and the labor movement prompted her to pose new questions about poverty: "Where is fresh air to be found?" she asked, referring to the tenement slums, which confined thousands of the poor. She continued in this vein: "Where is there any refuge from crowds and filth and vileness? There is scarcely an open place to be found in the crowded parts of the city; the children can only play in the gutters. . . . The dead monotony of a life of poverty and labor must have some break, something to change the horror of incessant squalid misery. The mere physical exhaustion consequent on bad air, bad food, insufficient clothing, calls for a stimulant" (1885: 6–7). Lowell's support of working-class issues occasionally turned her against her own movement: "If the charity organization societies of the country are going to take the position of defenders of the rich against the poor which I do think is the danger . . . then I shall be very sorry that I ever had anything to do with the work" (1895: 46).

While Lowell continued to be concerned with the troublesome moral effects of unregulated relief, her viewpoints on the causes of poverty would also reflect an equal concern with the troublesome moral effects of unregulated capitalism. "Almost alone among her colleagues," wrote one historian (Bender 1987: 203), "she grasped the economic complicity as well as the philanthropic and cultural responsibilities of the elite." Lowell's more balanced, and sophisticated, perspective as she grappled with the issues of social welfare in the 1880s and 1890s led to a creative tension in her thought and work. This tension is clearly seen in Lowell's response to the 1893 depression. She relied on charity organization principles in formulating policies. But when implementation of the principles proved untenable to the success of the overall relief effort, she cast them aside. This was the case with the work-relief programs in 1893–94. In the end, Lowell's outstanding quality was pragma-

tism and not a blind adherence to an oppressively rigid set of ideas about the causes and effects of poverty.

The Depression of 1893

The COS's premier position among New York City's charities in the 1890s and into the twentieth century was forged by its innovative response to the 1893 depression (Pumphrey and Pumphrey, 1961). COS's Josephine Shaw Lowell assumed her expected leadership position when she started the East Side Relief Committee in the late fall of that year. Here she drew on her charity experience first and foremost, but she gathered forces with churches, labor unions, and settlement houses as well to launch an all-out, if only temporary, assault on the extreme suffering caused by the depression. "Of course there were able and devoted men and women working with Mrs. Lowell, but she was the animating spirit," remembered Lillian D. Wald (quoted in Stewart 1974 [1911]: 363).

The 1893 depression was by far the worst in American history. The booming years of the Gilded Age had raised the standard of living for the working class, as it increased the strength, number, and influence of a rising, powerful, and dominant middle class. In other words, not just plutocrats, but a majority of Americans, native-born and immigrants, benefited from the prosperity that characterized post–Civil War America. Yet as bad financial news from overseas began to trickle in, by 1892 Americans became uneasily aware of their involvement with an international economy that made them dependent on the good health of foreign economies. Then, early in 1893, partly in response to overconstruction at home, the stock market crashed. Confidence in the economy plummeted, financial panic ensued, farmers and factory workers alike suffered heavily, and within the year there were approximately 3 million people out of work, or an estimated 20% of the American workforce.[12]

The East Side Relief Committee

Lowell and the COS leadership recognized earlier than most the grim signs of impending disaster. The COS agents noted a sharp increase in the number of applications for relief throughout the summer of 1893. As the summer progressed into fall, Lowell's worst fears were confirmed: October witnessed

an increased application rate of 98% over the previous year, with November and December keeping pace with an increase of 46% and 86%, respectively (COS *Twelfth Annual Report* 1893: 8–19). The anticipated, and much dreaded depression had arrived. In the nineteenth century, welfare was a state and local issue, and it was to their churches, charities, private relief agencies, and local government that people turned in hard times. Much was expected of the New York City philanthropic community during this crisis.

For their part, Lowell and the society worried that relief giving would slip out of their control. They were well aware that dire economic times brought out in the open the deep divisions that were always present in the charitable community. Anticipating this division, 17 major philanthropic organizations, led by the COS, but including a fair representation of Catholic, Jewish, German, and Protestant charities, issued a statement in September 1893, published in all the major dailies, warning against any and all who would promote or support "spasmodic and indiscriminate" methods of relief. Rather, the plan put forward by the group envisioned the reasoned gathering of resources of the city's best and most experienced benevolent agencies, together with the coalition of public and private support groups, all closely monitored, to meet the necessities of New York's own poor in the coming winter. In fact, this scenario was largely carried out as resources were marshaled, and large amounts were raised in both goods and cash, making New York City the most generous of all American cities in the harsh depression of 1893 (Burgess 1962: 249–68).

Josephine Shaw Lowell was particularly adamant that all direct relief to sufferers be ruled out as injurious to moral character. "We should be willing to suffer ourselves and see our poor friends suffer to save them from this fearful permanent evil," she asserted in a widely quoted speech; "we exaggerate the importance of physical suffering" (Lowell 1894b). Lowell was not being deliberately hardhearted in saying this; rather, she was concerned about emphasizing the long-term benefits of tying relief to work: "Benevolent people will not take any trouble to help their fellow-creatures in distress, but they will give money. . . . Energy, independence, industry, and self-reliance are undermined by free giving and the capacity for future self-support taken away" (ibid.). Lowell had long-standing beliefs about the deleterious effects of relief, or ill-conceived relief-work programs, on the moral character of the poor. She also believed in social justice for the working class. Simply, the East Side Relief Committee was created out of her twin desires to control the conditions

of welfare while easing the real deprivation that workers' families were experiencing during the depression winter and thereby ensuring their ultimate well-being.

Despite the small-scale proportions of the East Side Relief Committee's program, it was nonetheless a major departure in policy for Lowell and her organization. A special section of the society's annual report explained: "For the first time in many years, measures were taken to provide relief-by-work for the unemployed" (COS *Twelfth Annual Report* 1893: 11). Lowell created two committees to facilitate the COS effort: a fund-raising group, named the Citizens' Relief Committee and headed by Seth Low, president of Columbia University, and the East Side Relief Committee, whose function would be to create and supervise the work-relief programs.

Lowell's East Side Relief Committee was formed with several critical factors in mind: it was to be local and temporary, serving only the needs of the East Side neighborhoods in which the Third District was served. And it was to draw on the talents and experiences of a whole range of people, who were already deeply involved in reform and welfare organizations, especially the COS, University Settlement, and College Settlement. Lowell reported: "The members brought to their task not only experience and knowledge of the people whom they wished to help, but also a deep-rooted determination that their moral character, their souls must not be sacrificed in the efforts to save their bodies" (Lowell 1984a: 323; see also Devins 1905).

The temporary nature of the committee's work was stressed, as the worst outcome would be to take away or degrade existing employment. "Will you not remind employers," went Lowell's letter to the editor (1893b) of the *New York Times*, published on Christmas Day,

> whether individuals, firms, or corporations, that, notwithstanding all the appeals for "relief for the unemployed," which this sad season renders necessary, by far the better way for them is to retain in regular work all their employees whom they possibly can, giving half or quarter time, if full time is out of the question? . . . Will you not also point out to those who have been accustomed to spend extravagantly, that, although the "luxury of the rich" is not a benefit to the community, yet, in this emergency . . . they have no right, suddenly and capriciously, to change the direction of their expenditure, thus throwing in to the crowded ranks of the

> "unemployed" those whom they have trained to depend on them for a living . . . ?

Lowell warned about the dangers of relief, whether given through public or private agencies, or whether in the form of coal, food, money, or jobs. The realities of this particular depression, however, which hit the working people whom she now knew so well, so hard, determined her course in setting up a work-relief program that would be closely supervised by experts.

By October 1893, the East Side Relief Committee readied itself to offer employment to as many as possible. The committee was also prepared to pay a decent salary, allowing the unemployed to survive the winter with their pride and independence intact. The committee had a delicate balancing act to perform as well. The wages could not be too high, lest the "workfare" program undermine or compete with existing jobs, thus defeating the purpose of restoring economic stability. To this end, three carefully selected job programs—street cleaning, sewing work, and whitewashing buildings—were funded through the Citizens' Relief Committee, as well as from discreet newspaper solicitations. The East Side Relief Committee established its headquarters, not at the COS headquarters at 105 East 22nd Street, near midtown, but at the College Settlement at 95 Rivington Street. The East Side Relief Committee opened its door for business.

Street Cleaning

The committee members had consulted with George Waring, the Cleaning Commissioner, and determined that extra employment on the East Side streets would not threaten any current jobs. In November, the East Side Relief Committee issued work tickets to trades-unions, churches, and approved charitable societies. In this way the work-relief would be controlled on a neighborhood basis. Unemployed men applied for work at one of the abovementioned agencies, where they underwent a short but thorough investigation, and, if approved, were assigned to the street-cleaning team in a certain area. The men earned $1 a day and worked seven days a week.

The project began on a small scale: at first only 16 men were hired to work on the streets between Houston and Broome Streets, but very shortly, 854 sweepers had been hired, along with 25 foremen and 7 clerks. "The

streets of the East Side had not been so clean in a decade" (Devins 1905: 322). Each street cleaner was responsible for keeping a certain area of his assigned section clean. The men were grouped in work crews of 30 and were supervised by a foreman. The foreman was required to record the quality of performance of his crew in a log, which was reviewed every week by a subcommittee. Responsibility, high levels of workmanship, and "professional" standards were stressed at every level. The workers were warned that they should treat this job as if it were a "real" one, and not just a temporary stop. The mostly skilled workers—barbers, bricklayers, bakers, janitors, plumbers, and weavers—gladly accepted the conditions of work to support their families. The program was so successful that the demands from desperate East Side residents for work tickets soon exceeded the supply and the committee's ability to provide jobs. It was clear that street cleaning could not be the only work-relief program offered by the COS (Lowell 1894b: 325–27).

Sewing Work

The second work-relief program was specifically designed "to relieve the great distress of Hebrews." Tailor shops were established with the intention not to interfere or compete with any of the regular business of the clothing trade. Work tickets were distributed by the East Side Relief Committee to approved trades-unions of the clothing industry and by 11 selected charitable societies and churches. Men applied and were investigated in the same manner as for the street cleaners. The majority of applicants were recent Jewish immigrants who had lived and worked in New York City, and most had been out of work for at least six months.

The first shop opened on 4 December with four men. In short order, three more shops were opened, one after another, and 220 tailors were working for ESRC shops. Eventually 997 tailors found employment in the work-relief program. They quickly went to work filling orders placed by Clara Barton, president of the Red Cross, for the victims of a disastrous cyclone in South Carolina. When those orders were finished, the men sewed clothing that was distributed to numerous charities and churches around the city. The tailors were paid $4 a week, a considerable cut from their average wage of between $12 and $20 per week. There were also a small number of female garmet workers hired in the shops, which proved inadequate to the number of applicants. "Let

us send out work to the women and girls who cannot go to the factory," urged Lowell, recognizing the special needs of young, single unemployed female piece-workers who were facing a winter of poverty. She soon established a separate relief program for them and eventually hired 433 women. Committee members found that job placements in the sewing shops soon reached their limit, and a new and bigger relief program was put into operation by early winter of 1894 (ibid.: 327–29).

Whitewashing Tenements

The East Side Relief Committee's investigations uncovered the sad details of the misery of unemployment in that hungry winter. The conclusion: more work-relief programs were needed. In January 1894, acting on the suggestion of member Miss Edith Kendall, and with the enthusiastic agreement of the president of the Health Board, Charles G. Wilson, the committee again combined work-relief with improvements in sanitation when they hired men to whitewash tenements. This program consisted of renovations to a targeted number of tenement houses in the district. The men applied a coat of lime (added as a disinfectant) to the house, then the whitewash. In addition, the workers were to remove all refuse from cellars, a notorious attraction for rats and disease. From January to April, 700 houses were whitewashed and 3,485 barrels of refuse (including dirt, iron, rags, and the remains of dead dogs, cats, and rats) were removed from 550 cellars. The whitewashing work-relief program was the largest and most ambitious of the three established by the ESRC. Some 1,115 men were employed, representing more than 70 different occupations and 27 ethnic groups (ibid.).

The whitewashing program, as with the other two work-relief efforts, was carefully monitored by a subcommittee who sent out "visitors" to inspect the work, made suggestions for improvement, and were generally responsible for the quality of the men and their efforts. This careful supervision was important because it prevented the demoralization of character that would have accompanied a sloppy or careless program that would have "made work" instead of making the men work. This was an important distinction. The members of the ESRC, led by Lowell, carefully explained to the public why their work-relief was not harmful to the applicants. They cast their explanation in terms of the "dangers avoided" because of the rational approach to philanthropy of

the Charity Organization Society. First of all, there was no sensational "advertising" of the work-relief programs in the newspapers, so the applicants were all from the local area and could be easily investigated as to their worthiness. Second, the economy was strengthened because these local men (and women) were paid in wages, and that cash flowed back into the neighborhood and would help provide the basis of a renewed prosperity. Most important, from Lowell's perspective, was that the moral pitfalls of "easy" relief were avoided because the men and women had to earn their relief. Thus, they did not develop a reliance on handouts, no "hard to break idle habits" were encouraged, and there was no stigma attached to the good, and temporary, jobs provided by the ESRC. Finally, the work-relief programs not only helped thousands of poor working-class people retain their independence and pride but also measurably improved the quality of life for the community in the third district (ibid.: 335).

Josephine Shaw Lowell threw herself into this work with her usual dedication, working day and night in order to execute successfully the ESRC programs. She attended committee meetings at College Settlement four times a week and took it upon herself to attend personally to details such as hiring shops, foremen, and the sweeping superintendent. "And now," she wearily wrote to her sister-in-law, "I am chairman of the Committee that runs the shop and also a member of the Executive Committee that runs the whole thing" (quoted in Stewart 1974 [1911]: 365). As ESRC chair, Lowell brought her administrative skills, honed by many years in the COS, to bear on the committee work, ensuring its smooth running and efficient distribution of resources.

In the end, the East Side Relief Committee proved to be a smashing success *if* judged by the terms its founders set out for it. During the five critical months of the winter of 1893–94, some 4,541 men and 468 women had been aided, and almost $180,000 had been expended to pay their wages. "The Committee is now able to look back at its winter's work," Lowell summed up, "and although never, at any time, has the amount of relief provided through its means been adequate to the demand, it has the satisfaction of feeling that its effort has been made upon the right lines" (1894a: 332–38). (Lowell herself contributed $2,162.75 to the effort, and the Fund-Raising Committee collected $102,269.99.) That is to say, in Lowell's opinion, no moral damage was done, despite the outlay of relief and jobs, because of the careful oversight in

distributing the work tickets to selected churches, unions, settlement houses, and charities.

Lowell's COS-directed East Side Relief Committee showed the results of the flexibility and innovation that she brought to every one of her previous positions: as volunteer charity worker for the State Charities Aid Association, as commissioner of the New York State Board of Charities, as leader and district committee worker of the Charity Organization Society, and as a force behind the Consumers' League of New York City. The ESRC was just one part of a huge, privately dominated relief effort which, in one year, raised approximately $2,500,000 for the estimated 50,000 unemployed in the city. The private mobilization of funds and resources in the depression of 1893 provided a successful model for the distribution of social welfare services in future depressions and catastrophes. Yet it was not enough. The next 40 years brought increased agitation for government-sponsored social insurance programs that would render the 1893 effort somewhat, although by no means totally, anachronistic. The next great depression, beginning in 1929, brought the kind of structural changes to the American welfare system only dimly perceived in the wake of the 1893 depression (Burgess 1962: 252; Sexias 1988: 35–36).

Josephine Shaw Lowell closed the committee's door soundly with a resolution condemning relief efforts in normal times. "The East Side Relief-Work Committee desires to place on record its conviction that the methods by which it has been able to alleviate the distress prevailing on the East Side during the past winter . . . should be adopted only under abnormal conditions, such as have existed in New York for nine months" (Lowell 1894a: 336). The committee showed her determination to fashion a welfare program that would preserve the integrity of scientific charity yet accommodate a severe crisis through a humanitarian program of work-relief. Lowell emerged with a renewed commitment to helping the working class live dignified and prosperous lives. After all, she wrote (ibid.: 359), "the interest of the working people is of paramount importance, because they are the majority of the whole people."[13] Lowell now knew that their struggle would not end with the advent of a more favorable economy. Afterward, she wrote to a friend, "what I feel now is that we must all try and do something which will be *permanent* and deal with the permanent evils, which will remain after the temporary distress has passed" (Lowell to Fields 1894). Acting on her sentiments, Lowell installed

new leadership in the 1890s, which, in turn, transformed the programmatic goals of the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York.

End of an Era in Social Welfare

The East Side Relief Committee can be seen as a bridge linking the past and the future of social welfare. It was a link to the past because the early history of the charity organization movement in which Josephine Shaw Lowell played so large a part was ending. That is to say, the Lowells, the Paines, the Fields, and the de Forests—the upper-class leaders of American philanthropy of the late nineteenth century—were no longer going to be in the vanguard, though their influence would linger for decades. "The experience of the depression of 1893–94," argued welfare historians Ralph and Muriel Pumphrey (1961: 139), "forced upon charity organization leaders a degree of humility which made it possible for this movement to survive the tendency to institutional decay and to become the focus for the study and invention of different ways of treating the multiple causes of economic deprivation and personal inadequacy." I would add to this insightful statement an element of personal agency to the motives of the leaders. Because of the forces they themselves set in motion with their support of a "science" of charity, professionals were replacing devoted, unpaid volunteers (leaders and workers). With the change, which took place with great rapidity after the 1893 depression and into the first decades of the twentieth century, a professional ideal of objectivity replaced the passionate advocacy of the amateurs.[14]

The East Side Relief Committee was part of the future because the members of the committee, led by Lowell, recognized that there was a *need* on the part of the unemployed that had to be addressed. This need was socially and politically justifiable but did not necessarily fit in with the limited role of the state as it had developed in Lowell's (as a standard-bearer for the COS) previous thinking and writing on the role of relief in the political economy. The committee, led by Lowell, was also forward-looking because it tentatively proposed fundamental changes in the way relief was considered and distributed. The Gilded Age industrial system with its power to wreak havoc in so many lives demanded that social welfare activists and intellectuals respond with new approaches that did not hold ordinary workers at fault for sudden and precipitous poverty. Lowell realized this fact, and one of her responses

was to identify and encourage a new, college-educated generation of charity professionals to assume progressive leadership in the field.

In the history of the COSCNY another forward step was taken when Lowell hired Edward T. Devine as general secretary in 1896 (Devine 1939). Devine, a brilliant economics Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, brought a much different sensibility to the leadership and the programs of the COS, and his name would become synonymous with the development of twentieth-century social work. Devine set a fresh agenda for the COS as it moved toward the millennium. He prodded and pushed the COS to explore the social, rather than just the individual, causes of poverty and, most important, helped to research, define, and publicize a normal "standard of living" for American workers. Devine and Lowell worked well together, as they both believed in encouraging the structural and environmental aspects of charitable reform. They also urged even closer ties with settlement houses, churches, and like-minded organizations that would make the city government more responsive to social welfare concerns.

Indeed, the example set in 1893 by the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York at the dawn of the Progressive Era influenced other major charity organization societies in Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Baltimore, and other cities to participate fully in what Ruth H. Crocker (1992: 1) has called "the central drama of the era's crusade for social justice." A myriad of reformers and reform organizations investigated industrial abuses and advocated a wide variety of laws imposing new and stringent regulations on health, education, labor, and living conditions. Although their goals and successes were limited by present standards, Lowell's COSCNY challenged the abuses of power that the mighty industrial system fostered. The phrase "Give This Man Work!" assumed new layers of meaning after the 1893 depression.

Notes

1 Recently, a scholar wrote: "The COS opened in 1882 and soon became the major charitable agency in New York City" (Abel 1998: 33). See also Abel 1997.

2 Lowell was especially admiring of Andrew Carnegie; see Riley 1992. For a general consideration of the charity organization movement, see Abramovitz 1988; Bremner 1956; Lewis 1954; Watson 1922.

3 Excellent background on nineteenth-century social science can be found in the following sources: Brock 1984; Fitzpatrick 1990; Haskell 1977; Ross 1991.

4 Examples of Lowell's battles with New York City charities are "Communication to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, City of New York, December 24, 1877" 1878; "Bad State of Public Charities" 1877; "Aid to Local Charities, What Mrs. Lowell Says" 1880a; "The City Charities: Discussion of the Per Capita Allowance—A Meeting without Results" 1880b. For Lowell's explicit call for organized charity in New York City, see New York State Board of Charities 1882.

5 The story of Lowell and the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York can be found in Waugh 1997, especially chapter 6. See also Brandt 1942; Rich 1954; Taylor 1963; Stewart 1974 [1911]: 122–227.

6 Paul Ringenbach (1973) has argued that it is impossible to estimate how many unemployed people needed aid in New York City during the late nineteenth century. Barry J. Kaplan (1978), by contrast, asserted that 60,000 people suffered unduly when public aid was cut off.

7 This paper was a response to Massachusetts State Board of Charities secretary and founder of the American Social Science Association Franklin B. Sanborn (a close friend of Lowell's husband), who had the temerity to assert in his NCCC paper that outdoor relief was more humane and less expensive than indoor, or institutional, relief. Lowell (1890: 81) immediately responded, writing, "I have not been able to assent to the report of the Chairman of the Committee on Indoor and Outdoor Relief, only because, as it seems to me, he does not draw the distinction which is necessary between public and private relief." Lowell's paper is deftly analyzed in Hartley 1985: 79–83.

8 The story of De Costa's grudge against the COS can be found in "Press and Social Work: Lawsuit 1888 De-Costa-Howell," Box 156, Community Service Society Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University; the *New York Times*, 20 February 1888; and the *New York Daily Tribune*, 21 February 1888. Just a small sample of other complaints lodged against the COS: "Mr. Peters attacks charity: He sees no merit in the work of prominent citizens," *New York Times*, 19 September 1893; Robert W. de Forest (1891), "The Christmas Society and its critics," *Charities Review* I (December): 105–14; "Charity for women," *New York Times*, 22 September 1893; and "Charity for homeless women, *New York Times*, 24 September 1893.

9 The preceding details of the COS district office practice are from "COS: Committee on District Work, 1887–1909," Box 117, and selected case files, Boxes 240A, 240, 241. Community Services Society Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

10 Its preventive programs are described in COS *Seventh Annual Report* (1889): 48; *Eighth Annual Report* (1889): 49; and *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report* (1907). Michael Katz (1986: 172–74) has written about the society's tenement house exhibition.

11 For her thoughts on settlement houses, see Lowell, "Poverty and Its Relief: The Methods Possible in the City of New York," (1895): 44–54. An example of joint COS and settlement house projects can be found in the COS *Eleventh Annual Report* (1892): 54 and the COS *Twenty-Fifth Annual Report* (1907): 178. Ruth H. Crocker's excel-

lent 1992 study of the settlement house movement stresses the close ties that were formed between the charity organization societies and the settlement houses. A book that finds more conflict between the movements is Davis 1967.

12 The faltering economy and its social consequences is well documented in Katz 1986; Painter 1987; and Ringenbach 1973.

13 For a good discussion of the concept of "need," see Joseph 1975.

14 For an elaboration of the process of professionalization, see Furner 1975; Greeley 1995.

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