Frank Parsons: The Professor as Crusader

By Arthur Mann

The quest for social justice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rested on social science. Whereas transcendentalism, faith in democracy, love for mankind, and belief in natural rights served as intellectual weapons for the abolitionist, the post-Civil War reformer had need of the law, economics, sociology, and political science that would lay bare the workings of his complex, industrial culture.[1] In the three critical decades preceding the election of Woodrow Wilson liberal scholars identified themselves with the progressive movements of the day and placed social science in the service of humanity.[2] Among these academicians was Professor Frank Parsons of Boston, lawyer, expert in public utilities, and ardent devotee of the social gospel. He wedded ethics to political economy and, through his prolific writings, provided contemporary left-wingers with briefs against monopoly capitalism and with arguments for the social welfare state.

The key to Frank Parsons' philosophy is the man himself. He was attached to no religious denomination but his writings are saturated with Christian principles. Foremost in the Boston radical's makeup was a sense of duty. He regarded life as the fulfilling of the calling of proper living, which, when translated into action, meant the striving for noble, serious, and selfless ends. Early in the nineties, when the country was stirred by the aspirations of the Populists for social democracy, Parsons gave up a lucrative and respectable job of textbook writing in order to devote more time to the profitless task of working for the common man.[3] He never married, took little time out for play, lived in Tolstoyan simplicity,

[1] For a comparison of ante-bellum and post-Civil War reformers, see Thomas Wentworth Higginson's penetrating appraisal of Wendell Phillips, parts of which are quoted by Lillian Whiting, *Boston Days* (Boston, 1902), 70.

[2] Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought; An Intellectual History Since 1815* (New York, 1940), 296-99.

[3] Benjamin O. Flower, *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements of the Past Twenty-Five Years* (Boston, 1915), 113.

and labored incessantly in two rented rooms in downtown Boston, which overflowed with piles of books, magazines, newspapers, and galley proofs.[4] Characteristically, he wrote on the "mathematical demonstrability of the wisdom of righteousness," [5] laughed little but lectured on the "laws of laughter," [6] and could declare with utter seriousness that it was a "moral duty to perspire at least once every day." [7] This stern devotion to high-minded pursuits drove Parsons to an early death, for, after a serious illness in 1907, he returned to his reform activities against the advice of his physician, and then literally killed himself with overwork the following year. He died penniless.[8]

Frank Parsons was born in Mount Holly, New Jersey, November 14, 1854. His family, an amalgam of English, Welsh, and Scots-Irish strains, dated back to the American Revolution and, on his mother's side, boasted a long line of doctors, teachers, and lawyers. A brilliant and precocious student, Frank entered Cornell University at the age of fifteen and was graduated three years later at the head of his class with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering. He lost his first job, that of engineer with a railroad in western Massachusetts, when the depression of 1873 bankrupted the company, and after several trying months as a common laborer, became a public school teacher in Southbridge, Massachusetts. Convinced by friends that his talents were best suited for law, he took the bar in 1881 after one year's private preparation "and passed an examination which the examiners said showed the best grasp of the subject, in all its bearings, that had been displayed by any candidate who had appeared before them in the twelve years of their term as an examining board." But the New Jersey boy, endowed with a weak constitution that would plague him throughout his life, broke under the strain of cramming three years' work in one and was obliged to spend three years in New Mexico to recoup his strength.[9]

[4] Interview with Philip Davis, associate of Frank Parsons in settlement work, Boston, April 15, 1949; "Edwin D. Mead's Tribute to Professor Frank Parsons," *Arena* (New York, Boston), XL (December, 1908), 640.

[5] Frank Parsons, "The Philosophy of Mutualism," *Arena*, IX (May, 1894), 783.

[6] Frank Parsons Collection (Yale University Library, New Haven), quoted by permission.

[7] Frank Parsons, "Youth and the World," Chap. II, 6, *ibid.*

[8] Flower, *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements*, 113; interview with Ralph Albertson, Parsons' best friend and literary executor, Washington, April 1, 1949.

[9] Benjamin O. Flower, "An Economist With Twentieth Century Ideals: Professor

From the land of little culture in the Southwest the lawyer came to the Hub of the Universe to seek his fortune. He set up his own office but private practice did not appeal to him. Little, Brown and Company engaged him as a writer of legal textbooks, and from his pen came revisions of *May on Insurance*, *Perry on Trusts*, and *Morse on Banks and Banking*. His scholarly achievements won him recognition in the form of a lectureship at the law school of Boston University, a position which he held from 1892 until 1905, when his excessive research projects forced him to resign. A born teacher, Parsons was extremely popular among the students, impressing them with his fairness, honesty, and prodigious memory.[10] In addition to his legal writing, Frank, who was amazingly well read in the classics, augmented his income by lecturing on English literature before various groups in the city.[11] In 1889 Little, Brown and Company brought out his literary reflections in *The World's Best Books*, a slender volume which won generous praise from Francis Parkman and Phillips Brooks.[12]

In the 1890's Frank Parsons gave up scholarship for scholarship's sake to turn his knowledge over to the cause of reform. In the industrial revolution he saw both the promise and the degradation of American life. The magnificent inventions of the nineteenth century bade fair to raise the standard of living of the average person to unbelievable heights. But the age of the Carnegies and the Morgans — torn by strikes, polluted by money in politics, cheapened by the commercialization of values, and festering from the open sores of the slums — convinced the Boston professor that science and industry were conferring benefits only on the plutocracy.[13] This contrast between what was and what could be cata-

Frank Parsons, C. E., Ph. D., Educator, Author, and Economist," *Arena*, XXVI (August, 1901), 157-60.

[10] *Ibid.*, 160. For Parsons' outlines and teaching techniques at Boston University, see scattered memoranda, Parsons Collection.

[11] *Industrialist* (Manhattan, Kan.), XXII (July 15, 1897), 164; handbill advertising Parsons' lectures, Parsons Collection.

[12] Francis Parkman to Parsons, May 2, 1890, Parsons Collection; Phillips Brooks to Parsons, October 1, 1889, *ibid.*

[13] Frank Parsons, *Our Country's Need, or, the Development of a Scientific Industrialism* (Boston, 1894), xvii-xix. For Parsons' social criticism, see also the following series of articles in the *Arena*: "The Wicked Fact and the Wise Possibility," XXV (May, 1901), 526-30; "Great Movements in the Nineteenth Century," XXVI (July-August, 1901), 1-14, 141-53; "Political Movement of the Nineteenth Century," XXVI (September, 1901), 258-73; "Causes of the Political Movement of Our Time," XXVI (November, 1901), 466-80.

pulted him into a multitude of movements which aimed at placing the machines and the monopolies in the service of the common man.

Frank Parsons' capacity for work was simply enormous. In addition to the one volume on literature and the three works on law, he wrote ten books, several of them stout tomes which number seven hundred pages. After the campaign of 1896, in which he supported William Jennings Bryan, he met Dr. Charles Fremont Taylor, a wealthy Philadelphia physician and editor of the liberal journal, *The Medical World*. With the aid of Parsons, Taylor brought out another magazine, *Equity*, to which Parsons was the chief contributor.[14] Ultimately, the Philadelphian published the latter's works in book form: *Rational Money* (1898), *The Telegraph Monopoly* (1899), *The City for the People* (1899), *Direct Legislation* (1900), *The Story of New Zealand* (1904), and *The Trusts, The Railroads, and The People* (1906). Parsons, because he was a respectable reformer, had other publishers for *Our Country's Need* (1894), *The Heart of the Railroad Problem* (1906), *Choosing a Vocation* (1909), and *Legal Doctrine and Social Progress* (1911). The last two appeared posthumously under the preparation of Ralph Albertson, the Bostonian's literary executor.

Pamphlets, newspaper articles, magazine essays, speeches, and special reports were still other vehicles of expression for the professor turned reformer. His pamphlets number more than half a dozen and were widely read and distributed. He contributed more than 125 pieces to the leading journals, most of them to the *Arena*, of which his good friend and staunch admirer, Benjamin Orange Flower, was editor. William Dwight Porter Bliss, the founder of Christian Socialism in America, printed his contributions in the *Dawn* and in the *American Fabian*.[15] In 1896 Parsons became one of the contributing editors of the latter magazine.[16] By 1906 the Bostonian's reputation as an expert in public utilities was so well

[14] Charles F. Taylor, "The Past Work of Equity Series," *Equity Series* (Philadelphia), VIII (January, 1906); *Arena*, XXXVI (November, 1906), 568. For falling out between Parsons and Taylor over a personal quarrel, see Parsons to Taylor, undated; Taylor to Albertson, July 2, 1908, Parsons Collection.

[15] See Parsons' articles, "Municipal Railways," *Dawn* (Boston), VII (January, 1895), 8-9; "National Ownership of Railroads," *ibid.*, VII (February, 1896), 10-11; "Municipal Street Cars," *American Fabian* (Boston), I (January, 1895), 5; "Gabriel's Trumpet," *ibid.*, III (October, 1897), 3; "The Wisdom of Glasgow," *ibid.*, II (December, 1896), 1; "Compulsory Arbitration," *ibid.*, III (March, 1897), 6-11.

[16] James Dombrowski, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York, 1936), 105.

established that the National Civic Federation commissioned him to study the municipalization of tramways in England as part of a bigger project on the public ownership of natural monopolies; and Parsons' report, made after a visit to Great Britain, is one of the most important in the multivolume publication of the federation.[17] In the midst of this activity Parsons somehow found time to write "The Capture of Fort William and Mary, December 14 and 15, 1774" [18] and to run a poor third in Boston's mayoralty campaign of 1895 on the radical ticket.[19]

When Parsons was not writing he was teaching. Because his lectureship at Boston University engaged him only part of the year he was free to teach at other colleges. In 1897 he joined the staff of Kansas State Agricultural College where, because of the Populist victory that year, a liberal administration came into power under President Thomas A. Will, a staunch advocate of the social gospel. Among the newly appointed faculty members were Professor Edward Bemis, dismissed from Chicago because of his radical leanings, and Helen Campbell, an outstanding eastern progressive. Professor James Allen Smith, having been dismissed from Marietta College, was invited to join the staff but turned down the offer at the last minute to take a position in Washington.[20] Admired by both his colleagues and students, Parsons taught political science and history, interjecting into them his belief in progress through evolution and the general welfare state.[21] In 1899 the Boston radical and his fellow colleagues were dismissed by the newly returned Republicans on the grounds that the College was teaching more about the distribution of wealth than its production.[22] Following

[17] Frank Parsons, "History of the British Tramways," *Report of the National Civic Federation Commission on Public Ownership*, 3 vols. (New York, 1907), I, 261-303. For events leading up to the report, see Frank Parsons, "The National Civil Federation and Its New Report on Public-Ownership," *Arena*, XXXVIII (October, 1907), 401-408.

[18] *Proceedings of the New Hampshire Historical Society* (Concord), IV (1903), 18-47.

[19] John M. Brewer, *History of Vocational Guidance* (New York, 1942), 55.

[20] *Industrialist*, XXII (July 15, 1897), 164-65.

[21] The following lecture notes have been preserved in the Parsons Collection: Fanny G. Noyes, "Notes on Nineteenth Century History"; Harriet A. Nichols, "Notes on Chapel Lectures"; "Civics Lectures for Winter Term, 1899."

[22] Frank Parsons, "The Regents' Investigation," *Industrialist*, XXV (June, 1899), 381-82. Thomas A. Will tried to make the college a center for liberal aspirations and turned the *Industrialist*, the college agricultural journal, into a reform organ. Parsons' contributions to the *Industrialist* reveal the general tenor of the magazine: an attack on Spencerian laissez faire called "The Functions of Government," XXIV

his dismissal Parsons helped to organize the Ruskin College of Social Science, the center of the Oxford movement of America, and became dean of the lecture extension division.[23]

At the time of his death the Boston reformer was deep in a number of projects. Through his closest friend, Ralph Albertson, he became interested in settlement house work; and in 1905 he organized Breadwinner's College in North End's Civic House in imitation of Toynbee Hall's Workingmen's Institute. Together with Albertson and an ardent coterie of Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology students as aides — among them young Morris Raphael Cohen — the Professor brought enlightenment and culture to the dwellers of the slums. Three years later he secured the financial backing of Mrs. Quincy Shaw, the well-meaning daughter of Louis Agassiz, to open a vocational guidance center in Civic House with branches in several institutions in the city.[24] His personal papers reveal that he was working on several books when he died.

For all his self-sacrificing and prolific activity Frank Parsons has been consigned to relative oblivion by historians. His liberal contemporaries, however, mourned his death as a serious loss to the progressive cause. He was compared to Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and Governor John P. Altgeld.[25] "Every earnest scholar respected him," noted Edwin D. Mead, editor of the *New England Magazine*, and everyone recognized him as "a 'worker together with God' in the long and painful process of transforming human society in this old earth of ours into some reflection and bailiwick of the kingdom of God." [26]

(January, 1898), 22-35; XXIV (February, 1898), 100-107; XXIV (March, 1898), 162-75; XXIV (May, 1898), 289-99; "Parties and the People," XXIV (November, 1898), 589-95; "Municipal Liberty," XXV (January, 1899), 3-11; XXV (June, 1899), 372-77; XXV (May, 1899), 267-75; "Glimpses of the Future," XXV (July, 1899), 438-44.

[23] President George McArthur Miller of Ruskin College "To Whom it May Concern" (given to Parsons when he went abroad in 1901), June 22, 1901, Parsons Collection.

[24] Interview with Albertson, April 1, 1949; interview with Davis, April 15, 1949; Brewer, *History of Vocational Guidance*, 57-61.

[25] Flower, "Economist With Twentieth Century Ideals," *Arena*, XXVI (August, 1901), 157; George H. Shibley, "Memorial Services in Memory of Professor Parsons in the Nation's Capital," *ibid.*, XL (December, 1908), 638.

[26] "Edwin D. Mead's Tribute to Professor Frank Parsons," *ibid.*, XL (December, 1908), 640-41.

Like many another reformer of the late nineteenth century, Frank Parsons drank deep of the European and native American currents that were remaking the intellectual life of the nation. From his friend, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Parsons derived the concept that the law should be guided by the needs of society and not by the dead hand of precedent.[27] The social gospel, in general, and his spiritual mentor, Bishop Phillips Brooks, in particular, inspired him with the idea that Christianity was "a life not a creed."[28] America's economic nationalists, Professors Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, Edwin R. A. Seligman, and others, strengthened Parsons' own belief in the social welfare state.[29] It was Herbert Spencer, though, the intellectual giant of the age, who most influenced the Boston reformer. Although Parsons was to take issue with the Englishman's devotion to laissez faire, he built his own system in the "foothills" of Spencer's massive sociological structure, taking from him philosophic materialism, the organic conception of society, the conflict theory of progress, and the evolutionary stages in human development.[30] By a brilliant *tour de force* Professor Parsons turned the last three elements, which were essential to the inert determinism of Social Darwinism, into powerful arguments for social reform through a regulated economy.

Out of these diverse intellectual forces and his own moral bent Frank Parsons compounded an original synthesis. His first taste of social philosophy was at Cornell where, like many another college student of the day, he studied the economics of laissez faire. The college textbooks disturbed him, for they described only what was instead of predicting what could be and treated the creation of wealth without reference to morals.[31] With the passage of time he came to believe with John Stuart Mill that the crucial problem of

[27] Frank Parsons, *Legal Doctrine and Social Progress* (New York, 1911), dedication page.

[28] Frank Parsons, "My Philosophy of Life," manuscript lecture, Parsons Collection. Parsons revered Phillips Brooks and stated that Brooks's "splendid genius inspired" him. "Youth and the World," dedication page, *ibid.* For influence of social gospel on Parsons, see his praise of Josiah Strong, in Frank Parsons, F. E. Crawford, and H. T. Richardson, *The World's Best Books* (Boston, 1889), 40, 46, 68.

[29] See, for example, Frank Parsons, *The City for the People; or, The Municipalization of the City Government and of Local Franchises* (Philadelphia, 1901), *passim.*

[30] For Parsons' estimate of Herbert Spencer, see Parsons, Crawford, and Richardson, *World's Best Books*, 21-22, 41, 49, 68.

[31] Flower, "Economist With Twentieth Century Ideals," *Arena*, XXVI (August, 1901), 161; Brewer, *History of Vocational Guidance*, 53.

political economy was the reconciliation of "individual liberty with public ownership of the means of production and equal division of the product." [32]

The former engineer was obviously in search of a blueprint for the future, and there were at least two he could choose from. He rejected Henry George's panacea on the grounds that the Single Tax would leave the financial, industrial, and transportation monopolies untouched.[33] Although in 1889 Parsons had remarked that only "blissful ignorance" could call *Looking Backward* a great book,[34] by 1892 his devotion to the ideals of brotherhood and industrial democracy, which Bellamy stressed, had made him a "thorough going nationalist." [35] Two years later, however, he broke away because he thought that the discipline of the industrial army and the nationalization of the entire economy would destroy individual liberty.[36]

If the economics of David Ricardo and the socialism of Edward Bellamy could not solve the problem of freedom and authority, then Frank Parsons had to create a system that would. In "The New Political Economy" he urged economists to study the production and distribution of goods and services, not as ends in themselves, but in relation to their furtherance of "manhood" and happiness — the true measure of wealth. Because his economic science would center in the welfare of man, he wished to coordinate it with relevant data from the sister social studies. Finally, he would replace the older discipline which assumed "existing conditions to be right and eternal" with a bold and experimental economics which could devise a plan for "cooperation or socialization" to be "tested under conditions that will give it a reasonable chance of success." [37]

Mutualism was the name which Parsons gave to his plan for the cooperative commonwealth. As early as 1890 the Boston liberal had begun to grope for an original synthesis;[38] but four years passed before his ideas appeared in systematic form in *Our Country's Need*

[32] Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, 154.

[33] *Ibid.*, 86-91.

[34] Parsons, Crawford, and Richardson, *World's Best Books*, 64.

[35] *New Nation* (Boston), II (April 16, 1892), 250.

[36] Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, 8.

[37] *The Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oberlin, Ohio), L (January, 1899), 120-21, 125, 138-39. The elements of the new political economy are scattered throughout Parsons, *Our Country's Need*. See also "Course in the New Political Economy," 1895, place where given unknown, Parsons Collection.

[38] Parsons to Miss Holley, November 24, 1890, Parsons Collection.

and in "The Philosophy of Mutualism." [39] The basic principle of mutualistic society is brotherly love, which, as Parsons pointed out, was simply the ideal of mutual help which lay at the foundation of family life. Specifically, the social engineer's vision of the future would rest on a planned economy in which the government would possess and manage public utilities but would leave manufacturing and agriculture to voluntary cooperatives owned and operated by the workers.[40] By this mixed economic system Parsons hoped to eliminate the waste and conflict of competition and the evils of private monopoly and to avoid the perils of bureaucratic state socialism.

The controlling principle was freedom from want, not so much as an end in itself, but rather as a means to enable man to pursue the higher things of life. Like Herbert Spencer, Frank Parsons believed that "sudden changes are apt to be injurious," and therefore proposed a slow growth into economic equality. For the immediate first step he urged that the government set a "Subsistence annuity," an annual minimum wage guaranteeing basic comforts to the laborer. Proper education would prepare the people for the second stage, the equal division of wealth, when men would work for honor and prestige in their chosen fields rather than for the profit motive. The final product in the evolutionary ascent would be "Familyism" — from each according to his ability and to each according to his needs — and would be attained when "human nature has evolved to . . . perfection," when men would labor out of love for society.[41]

Part of Mutualism's defense is couched in the language of Spencer's sociology, which Parsons used in ways which the Englishman would have denounced. The Bostonian pointed out that his vision for the future met the Englishman's criteria of progress: cohesion, flexibility, power, and symmetry.[42] It was necessary — society being organic — that the government provide for economic equality, since an equitable distribution of wealth was to the "Social Organism what the circulation of blood is to the individual body." [43] Parsons agreed with the British philosopher that civilization had

[39] Parsons, "Philosophy of Mutualism," *Arena*, IX (May, 1894), 783-815.
[40] *Ibid.*, 801-802, 812.
[41] *Ibid.*, 798-99; Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, viii-x.
[42] Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, 176-86.
[43] *Ibid.*, 61.

evolved from lower to higher forms through the conflict between antagonistic forces and that it would one day reach a perfect state of equilibrium; and then added that Mutualism could best promote that equilibrium. Finally, in accordance with the "historical parallel," which stated that all institutions were governed by the same laws of evolution, Parsons argued that since government and religion had achieved democratic forms, then despotic capitalism would have to follow suit by giving way to an "Industrial Republic." [44]

Parsons also defended his system of thought by attacking the passive determinism of Herbert Spencer. If history was demonstrably on the side of Mutualism, it was proper to direct the course of events rather than wait for the future to work itself out blindly and automatically. He was acid in pointing out that the struggle for existence did not provide for the survival of the fittest but more often for the supremacy of the most cunning, selfish, and unscrupulous. Moreover, in the race for life the truly gifted frequently fell behind: slyly the Professor noted that Spencer was the "Shakespeare of Science," yet his books did not sell as well as pulp literature.[45] Because the future civilization would rest on perfect individuals, Parsons would produce the desired type, not through the haphazard methods of natural selection, but through the predictable "intelligent selection" of the biologist. "Life can be moulded," the reformer asserted, "into any conceivable form. Draw up your specifications for man . . . and if you will give me control of the environment and time enough, I will clothe your dreams in flesh and blood." [46]

Spencer's formulation of the problem of liberty and authority the Bostonian found both inadequate and inaccurate. The Englishman wrote that man was at liberty to do what he wanted provided he did not infringe on the "equal freedom" of another to do the same thing. Parsons replied that Spencer's law was a mockery, for class inequalities ruled out equal opportunities for action.[47] Further, Spencer's deduction *en vacuo* that government existed solely for restraint — to enforce the "law of equal freedom" — did not square with the empirical evidence of the Common Law and

[44] *Ibid.*, 2, 5, 174; Frank Parsons, *The Drift of Our Time* (Chicago, 1898), 7-10.
[45] Frank Parsons, *Government and the Law of Equal Freedom* (Boston, 1892), 23.
[46] Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, 2.
[47] Parsons, *Government and the Law of Equal Freedom*, 1-11.

nineteenth century industrial history, which gave abundant evidence that government also existed for economic enterprise.[48] The Boston reformer passionately believed in the free individual, but "subject to the limitations as the good of the community requires";[49] and the government could do all that the people wanted it to. In a passage that bears striking resemblance to Nikolay Lenin's formulation of the withering away of the state, Parsons said: "As a coöperation of all for the restraint of each, governmental activities will be needed less and less as humanity approaches perfection; but as a coöperation of all for the service of each, I hope to see the functions of government continually grow." [50]

In the 1890's Parsons was undisturbed when called a socialist because socialism was then, in spite of Daniel De Leon, a respectable asylum for sensitive souls who condemned competition and who advocated the cooperative society through peaceful means. After 1900, however, the growing strength of native and European Socialist parties tended to identify the movement with class hatred and uncompromising ends; and the Professor found it necessary to distinguish his creed from doctrinaire Marxism. He condemned the Marxists for their violent language and for their unwillingness to compromise on ultimate aims. Their omniscient bureaucracy, in charge of all sectors of the economy, he noted, would leave no room for voluntary cooperatives and would destroy individual freedom.[51] Whereas Eugene V. Debs and company drew inspiration from dialectical materialism, Parsons explained that Mutualism rested on the belief that the "Golden Rule ought to be the basis of business life as well as of life in the church and the home." [52]

Once satisfied with the validity of his philosophic system, Frank Parsons devoted the rest of his life to make it a reality. According to his rigid laws of historical determinism, Mutualism "would come whether we lift a finger to help it or not." [53] But the Pro-

[48] "Civics Lectures for Winter Term, 1899," Parsons Collection, *passim*; Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, 160-62.

[49] Parsons, *Government and the Law of Equal Freedom*, 29.

[50] Frank Parsons, "The People's Highways," *Arena*, XII (April, 1895), 218.

[51] Frank Parsons, "The Great Coal Strike and Its Lessons," *ibid.*, XXIX (January, 1903), 3-7; Frank Parsons, "The Truth at the Heart of Capitalism and of Socialism," *ibid.*, XXXVII (January, 1907), 7-10.

[52] Parsons to Dr. W. F. Warren, president of Boston University, June 7, 1902, Parsons Collection.

[53] Parsons, *Drift of Our Time*, 7.

fessor was bent on giving the future a push. Because he believed that human beings first had to be prepared for new institutions, he regarded education as the great engine of social change.[54] Essentially a Fabian in his outlook, he tried to convert all classes, but he believed that the motor power for progress would come largely from "the great middle classes of the people who are not unbalanced by misery . . . or the fever for wealth and mastery." [55] In his campaign to enlighten the American *petit bourgeois*, the Boston reformer championed a wide range of practical measures, which, in their entirety, would ultimately lead to the cooperative commonwealth.

In the nineties Parsons became vitally interested in the money question. He attributed the "booms and busts" of the late nineteenth-century American economy to the contriving of the private bankers to manipulate prices through their control of the volume of specie and credit. The power to produce prosperity or panic, which drastically affected the economic life of the nation as a whole, Parsons declared, was "an attribute of sovereignty and ought to belong to none but the sovereign people." [56] He ruled out Greenbackism as leading to unregulated inflation and declared that Free Silver was only a "temporary palliative." [57]

Under the Professor's plan the Secretary of Treasury, with the advice of a staff of economists, was to maintain a constant price level by regulating the volume of currency and credit. In times of stringency, when private bankers were most loathe to make funds available, the Postal Savings Bank was to lend money at reasonable rates of interest. Parsons proposed that America go off the gold standard and adopt a national unconvertible currency. The Secretary of Treasury was to regulate its value by pegging its volume to the volume of several hundred basic commodities, keeping the ratio constant at all times. In this way the dollar would no longer fluctuate with the international price of gold and silver.[58]

The wretched condition of labor disturbed the Boston reformer. As a lawyer he looked upon the savage railroad and coal strikes of

[54] Frank Parsons, "The New Political Economy," 137, Parsons Collection; Parsons, "Philosophy of Mutualism," *Arena*, IX (May, 1894), 815.

[55] Parsons, "Parties and the People," *Industrialist*, XXIV (November, 1898), 594.

[56] Frank Parsons, *Rational Money* (Philadelphia, 1898), iii-iv.

[57] *Ibid.*, 126.

[58] *Ibid.*, 126-28, *passim.*

the day as the modern, economic counterparts of feudal trial by battle, and therefore suggested the judicial remedy of compulsory arbitration in which the trade unions would have a voice.[59] Shocked by the rookeries of the North and South Ends, the Professor called for government slum clearance and model tenements for workers.[60] Following the Panic of 1893 he urged that the unemployed be provided for by "public works, making good roads, planting forests, digging canals, building ships, establishing schools, etc." [61] In 1905 the Bostonian organized a national campaign in support of the eight-hour day on the grounds that it would promote "a longer life, more opportunity for self-development, a higher citizenship and a nobler manhood." [62]

Like many of his liberal contemporaries Parsons saw grave perils in unrestricted immigration. Part of his animus derived from the belief that foreign workers undercut their American brethren, but more fundamental was his fear that the Eastern European would pollute the Anglo-Saxon blood of America. Steeped in the racism of Social Darwinism he identified the American "race" with the English speaking peoples who had led the world in democracy and declared that further progress was impossible if the United States lost its "heroic blood by the foul admixture of serfhood . . . pouring in from Europe." [63] Echoing the Know-Nothing sentiment of a half century earlier, he proposed that immigrants pass an English literacy test before admission and that they wait twenty-one years for naturalization papers.[64]

The specter of monopoly capitalism haunted every reformer of the 1890's, and Frank Parsons devoted the major part of his life

[59] See Parsons' articles, "Chicago's Message to Uncle Sam," *Arena*, X (September, 1894), 494-96; "Compulsory Arbitration," *ibid.*, XVII (March, 1897), 663-76; "Great Coal Strike and Its Lesson," *ibid.*, XXIX (January, 1903), 1-7; "The Abolition of Strikes and Lockouts," *ibid.*, XXXI (January, 1904), 1-11.

[60] Parsons, "Philosophy of Mutualism," *ibid.*, IX (May, 1894), 810.

[61] Parsons, *Rational Money*, iv. Parsons first suggested public works in "Philosophy of Mutualism," *Arena*, IX (May, 1894), 808.

[62] "The 8-Hour Movement Endorsed by Eminent Men," address before Boston Central Labor Union, January 7, 1906, Parsons Collection. See special folder on the details of the campaign, *ibid.*

[63] Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, 4.

[64] Parsons, "Philosophy of Mutualism," *Arena*, IX (May, 1894), 809. Parsons kept writing in this vein up to the time when he went into the slums. See, for example, Frank Parsons, *The Story of New Zealand* (Philadelphia, 1904), 472; Frank Parsons, "Australasian Methods of Dealing with Immigration," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Philadelphia), XXIV (July, 1904), 209-20.

to put the trusts in the hands of the people. He resembled his good friend, Henry Demarest Lloyd, in his passion for facts, his ardor for muckraking, his emphasis on morality, and his insistence on the socialization of the natural monopolies. But whereas Lloyd achieved competence in only one industry, oil, Parsons was an acknowledged expert in several fields: railroads, telegraph, tramway, telephone, gas, and electricity. Further, his legal training gave him fresh insights into government ownership, and in recognition of this talent Edward Bemis had the Bostonian write a chapter on "Legal Aspects of Monopoly" for *Municipal Monopolies*, a basic textbook in reform.

Parsons ruled out both the smashing and the regulating of the monopolies as remedies. Supervisory and rate-fixing commissions, while affording some relief, failed to alter the unfair concentration of wealth, and in some cases actually intensified the need of big business to corrupt politics.[65] In pamphlets, magazine articles, and finally in two stout tomes, the Bostonian pointed out that even as late as 1906, in spite of government prohibitions, the railroads were still charging unfair and discriminatory rates.[66] The solution was not the return to smallness and competition by way of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, for unlike his friend, Louis D. Brandeis, Parsons looked upon monopoly as inevitable and considered it superior to the waste and conflict of a competitive economy.[67]

Public monopoly was the only way out. Parsons pointed out that it was legally mandatory for the government to own utilities operating under franchise, for monopoly carried with it the taxing power, and the legislature, as agent for the people, could not consign that power to private sources.[68] Further, the tenor of the Constitution required that the government make the telegraph and the

[65] Parsons, *City for the People*, 251-53.

[66] Frank Parsons, *The Railroads, The Trusts, and The People* (Philadelphia, 1905), 451-62. This work is a good example of scholarly muckraking. Parsons toured the country for information, went abroad and consulted with officials, businessmen, and such reformers as G. B. Shaw, Keir Hardie, and Sidney Webb. Ralph Albertson aided him in the research. *Ibid.*, iii-iv. Out of his researches Parsons came to believe that discriminatory rates lay at the botton of the problem and argued this view in *The Heart of the Railroad Problem* (Boston, 1906), which Little, Brown and Company published after Parsons fell out with Taylor.

[67] Frank Parsons, *The Public Ownership of Monopolies* (Boston, 1894), 5. Louis D. Brandeis criticized Parsons' approach in the public utilities struggles of Boston. Alpheus T. Mason, *Brandeis, A Free Man's Life* (New York, 1946), 136.

[68] Frank Parsons, "Legal Aspects of Monopoly," Edward W. Bemis (ed.), *Municipal Monopolies* (New York, 1899), 466-76.

telephone parts of the post office as instruments for the "transmission of intelligence." [69] Public ownership, Parsons noted, by removing the dichotomy of interest between producer and consumer, would shower economic blessings. He declared that private monopolies were inferior to nationalized and municipalized plants with respect to service, treatment of labor, use of new inventions, and fairness of rates. These assertions he backed up with statistics, financial statements, charts and graphs culled from his readings, and interviews with Continental, English, and American businessmen and officials. Germany's railroads, Switzerland's telegraph, Berlin's telephone, and Glasgow's tramways and gas and electrical works were but a few of the examples he used with telling effect.[70] For nonmonopolistic big business, Parsons, who was afraid of too much government control, proposed voluntary cooperatives to be owned and managed by the employees.[71]

Direct legislation was another reform that Frank Parsons championed. It had been one of his interests in 1894, but it was not until six years later that it became crucial for his entire program. He agreed with Wendell Phillips that progress never "came from the upper classes" and felt that his proposals would be hammered into the statute books only when the "common people" controlled the government. Hence he advocated the initiative, referendum, recall, direct primaries, proportional representation, and woman suffrage.[72] The Boston reformer prophesied that without these measures there

[69] Frank Parsons, *The Telegraph Monopoly* (Philadelphia, 1899), 21-23; Frank Parsons, "The Telephone," Bemis (ed.), *Municipal Monopolies*, 354.

[70] Parsons, *Railroads, The Trusts, and The People*, Pt. II, Chaps. XXI-XXX; Parsons, *Telegraph Monopoly*, 69-77; Frank Parsons, "Reasons for Public Ownership of the Telephone," *Municipal Affairs* (New York), VI (Winter, 1902-1903), 683-700; Frank Parsons, "Glasgow's Great Record," *Arena*, XXXII (November, 1894), 461-71. These are only a sample of Parsons' works on the subject, the complete list being too extensive to enumerate. *Railroads, The Trusts, and The People* is perhaps the best sample of Parsons' approach to the economics of public monopoly.

[71] For Parsons' identification of equal sharing and cooperative labor with Mutualism, see in the *Arena*, "The Rise and Progress of Co-operation in Europe," XXX (July, 1903), 27-36; "Co-operative Undertakings in Europe and America," XXX (August, 1903), 159-67; and "The City of the Future," lecture at the Filene's Co-operative Association meeting, June 10, 1904, Parsons Collection. Parsons was very active in the movement, helped to organize the Cooperative Association of America, and lost money in the project. Interview with Albertson, April 1, 1949. The profit-sharing plan of Filene's Boston department store aroused his warmest support; he made valuable suggestions to Filene and spoke many times to the Association. Mary La Dame, *The Filene Store; A Study of Employes' Relation to Management in a Retail Store* (New York, 1930), 430.

[72] Frank Parsons, *Direct Legislation; or, The Veto Power in the Hands of the People* (Philadelphia, 1900), *passim.*

would be a revolution. "Anglo-Saxon manhood," he warned, "confined beneath the pressure of accumulating injustice, is the most dangerous explosive known to history." [73]

In 1899 Frank Parsons made a significant contribution to the cause of municipal reform. *The City for the People* was a stout tome, replete with the aims and achievements of the crusaders for urban progress, and bulging with the legal and technical data that the lawyer and engineer took delight in. Throughout, however, there is the same stress on moral ends that characterizes all of the Bostonian's works. In a sense the book ranks as Parsons' major synthesis. Within the framework of Mutualism he brought together his favorite causes to focus more sharply on "the problem of the city," which, because it was the center of population and of wealth, had become "the problem of civilization." [74]

Anticipating Lincoln Steffens, he told the story of the shame of the cities. City by city he traced the history of corruption, pointing out that even in staid Boston such scandals as the West End Railway and Bay State Gas Company affairs were not uncommon. Clearly the central issue was whether the citizens would "own the city . . . or . . . be owned by the politicians and monopolists." [75] Parsons' solutions were three: public ownership of utilities, direct legislation, and municipal home rule. The last was the *sine qua non* of his program, for in accordance with American practices of local government, the city was the creature of the state, having little and in some cases no autonomous jurisdiction over its economic life.[76]

The social science of Frank Parsons came complete with a laboratory, for like fellow academicians turned reformers, he sought proof for his theories in what Benjamin O. Flower euphemistically called "Foreign Experiment Stations." [77] Parsons found his in England and Europe, but above all, in New Zealand. Henry Demarest Lloyd encouraged Parsons to write *The Story of New Zealand*, for

[73] Parsons, *City for the People*, 328.

[74] *Ibid.*, 7. *City for the People* came out in expanded form in 1901; citations throughout this paper are to the later edition.

[75] *Ibid.*, 5. See also Frank Parsons, *The Bondage of Cities* (Philadelphia, 1900), a reprint of Parsons' charges against city corruption.

[76] *Ibid.*, *passim*. The entire book is devoted to a factual description of these reforms — the obstacles confronting them, practical measures to attain them, and the benefits deriving from them.

[77] Flower, *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements*, 134.

Lloyd's own work was an account of contemporary conditions, whereas the Bostonian planned a "story of cause and effect" — a history of the origins and practices of progressivism on the island.[78] Parsons' book, the product of a prodigious amount of research and personal correspondence with New Zealand politicos, is poorly organized, dull, rambling, and overlong (eighty-two chapters and eight hundred pages). Although poor history, it is nonetheless important for its underlying assumptions, its scattered and unsystematic generalizations, and the type of society that the Boston reformer portrayed as a "Cooperative Industrio-Political Combine." [79]

The New Zealand social welfare state had set up "Manhood as king." [80] The inhabitants, of "the same stock . . . as ourselves, the good old Anglo-Saxon," [81] had solved the crucial problem of liberty and authority by making the former "yield wherever the public good required it." [82] Under this formula New Zealand had accomplished the following: public ownership of coal mines, railroads, telegraph and telephone, and voluntary cooperatives in several fields; the restriction of immigration, government life insurance, old age pensions, the eight-hour day for most industries, suburban working-class homes, public works for the unemployed, and government loans to farmers at reasonable rates of interest; direct elections, woman suffrage, and municipal home rule.[83] These gains, Parsons was especially careful to point out, were achieved without the aid of either a Carlylean great man or doctrinaire socialists. The "common people" — farmers, workers, and small businessmen — simply voted in a liberal slate in 1890 and then worked out the best measures by trial and error, having learned that "in politics and industry as in science, experiment is the best method of arriving at the truth." [84]

Frank Parsons ranks with Lester Ward, Henry George, and Edward Bellamy as a major critic of Social Darwinism and as a

[78] Parsons, *Story of New Zealand*, x, xi, 806. Henry Demarest Lloyd was a friend as dear to Parsons as Phillips Brooks had been. *Ibid.*, x.
[79] *Ibid.*, 510.
[80] *Ibid.*, 710.
[81] *Ibid.*, 646.
[82] *Ibid.*, 347.
[83] *Ibid.*, 710, *passim.*
[84] *Ibid.*, 503.

chief proponent of progress through social experimentation. Mutualism is as systematic as either Nationalism or the Single Tax, and if it failed to make many converts, it was only because it did not rest on a single, catch-all slogan. In a sense, Frank Parsons went beyond the other three men; for whereas they were merely architects of a model society, he was both architect and builder. By the middle of the nineties the dreamers had done their work, and the future of American liberalism lay with the patient, hardheaded specialists who could dig into the facts, come up with concrete as well as moral indictments of monopoly capitalism, and suggest, through model city charters and the like, the how and wherefore of specific measures. Professor Parsons, by tempering his legal and engineering training with liberal doses of applied Christianity, met that task with admirable efficiency.

Probably few of the common people read the Professor, but his books and ideas reached strategic places. He won over his good friend, Bishop Phillips Brooks, to his philosophy of Mutualism, and James Russell Lowell, although too old to embrace a new cause, approved of Parsons' blueprint of the future.[85] President Thomas E. Will of Kansas State Agricultural College stated that the turning point in his life came when he read *Government and the Law of Equal Freedom*, Parsons' polemic against Herbert Spencer.[86] Liberal politicos invited Parsons to state his views on public utilities before the Industrial Commission; Senator Marion Butler had *The Telegraph Monopoly* placed in the *Congressional Record*; and Senator Richard F. Pettigrew presented two of Parsons' papers when arguing for the nationalization of railroads.[87] By far his most widely circulated book, *The City for the People*, was a veritable bible for reformers. Eugene Debs, Governor Hazen S. Pingree of Michigan, Mayor Samuel M. Jones of Toledo, Josiah Strong, Edward Everett Hale, Washington Gladden, Henry Demarest Lloyd, Felix Adler, Professor John R. Commons, and a host of others who

[85] See Brooks and James Russell Lowell letters to Parsons, in Parsons, *Our Country's Need*, xiii-xv.

[86] Thomas E. Will, in "Memorial Services in Memory of Professor Frank Parsons in the Nation's Capital," *Arena*, XL (December, 1908), 637.

[87] "Testimony of Frank Parsons," *Report of the Industrial Commission* (Washington), No. IX (August 6, 1901), 883-90; Frank Parsons, "A Postal Telegraph," *Senate Documents*, No. 65 (January 8, 1900), 56 Cong., 1 Sess., 1-170; Frank Parsons, "Public Ownership," *ibid.*, No. 69 (January 10, 1900), 56 Cong., 1 Sess., 1-20; Frank Parsons, "Nationalization of the Railways," *ibid.*, No. 420 (May 18, 1900), 56 Cong., 1 Sess., 28-59.

read like the Who's Who of reform heaped lavish praise on the volume.[88] Finally, as president and organizer of the National League for Promoting the Public Ownership of Monopolies, the National Referendum League, and the Massachusetts Referendum Union, Parsons brought together such reformers as Bellamy, Samuel Gompers, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, George P. Herron, "Golden Rule" Jones, Lloyd, and many others to give cohesion to liberal aspirations.[89]

We live today in the shadow of many of Frank Parsons' ideas. John M. Brewer, the historian of vocational guidance, credits the Bostonian with being the founder of that movement;[90] and out of Parsons' Vocation Bureau developed the idea, and ultimately the practice, of the scientific hiring of personnel.[91] The initiative, referendum, recall, direct primaries, and woman suffrage have become realities, and several American cities now own their own public utilities. Long before the New Deal hammered them out into the statute books, Parsons advocated the eight-hour day and public works for the unemployed. Herbert Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation operates on Parsons' principle that the government should lend money to industry in times of stress; and President Harry S. Truman's three-man board of consulting economists is reminiscent of the Bostonian's financial commission working for the Secretary of the Treasury.

We also live in the shadow of racism — and that, too, is part of the Professor's legacy. As a person, he was above all prejudice and bigotry. He was sincerely devoted to his immigrant students at Breadwinner's College; and his colleagues, for the most part of Eastern European origins, admired and respected him.[92] However, as a social engineer he believed that he could create the cooperative commonwealth only if he could choose the stock to go into it as well as the environment to mold that stock. Blood was important

[88] In the Parsons Collection there is a box of letters written by eminent people to either Parsons or Taylor praising the book. See also the critical but favorable book reviews of Charles Zueblin, *International Journal of Ethics* (Philadelphia, Chicago), XI (January, 1901), 268-69; Samuel E. Sparling, *Municipal Affairs*, IV (June, 1900), 405-406; Edward W. Bemis, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (January, 1901), 124-26. B. O. Flower's review, *Arena*, XXV (February, 1901), 234-36, is laudatory.

[89] Parsons, *City for the People*, 218, 611-13.

[90] Brewer, *History of Vocational Guidance*, 52.

[91] Roy W. Kelly, *Hiring the Worker* (New York, 1918), 1-17.

[92] Interview with Davis, April 15, 1949.

to Parsons, for like the biologists of the day he thought that acquired characteristics were inherited. Hence he attributed the superiority of Western over Eastern Europe — in the face of the new immigration — to the hereditary traits of the residents of the British Isles. Unwittingly then Parsons and other well-meaning scholars joined hands with the not so well-meaning to forge the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

Historians have ignored Frank Parsons because they have been content to pass over the last decade of the nineteenth century in the belief that it was either mauve, brown, or Indian Summerish. Yet the career of the Boston reformer and those of his liberal contemporaries demonstrate that it was a period of germination for conceptions of social reform centering in the social welfare state. Sensitized to the problems of the industrial revolution, the Professor worked out his philosophic system and specific measures during the 1890's and then elaborated on them for the remainder of his life. By constant hammering away at the same issues he and others made social engineering respectable, creating thereby a climate of opinion within which Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson functioned.

The men who embraced the brands of progressivism identified with Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson came to their position in either of two ways. Roosevelt and Wilson were conservatives in the 1890's who became liberals in the twentieth century when political responsibility was thrust upon them. Frank Parsons illustrates the eighteen-ninety visionary, who, after entertaining ambitious hopes in Bellamy socialism and Mutualism, gradually drifted into the position of an Independent Roosevelt Republican. Roosevelt's strenuous living struck him as adolescent, and Teddy's unpredictability sometimes dismayed him, but in the hero of San Juan he saw a vigorous executive who might succeed in realizing at least part of the aims of Mutualism.[93] As the "Trust-Buster" labored for his own version of industrial democracy, Parsons learned to accept half a loaf as better than none, and thus merged erstwhile dreamers and conservatives in the common intellectual atmosphere of the twentieth century which sanctioned the quest for social justice through government planning.

[93] Frank Parsons, "An Open Letter to President Roosevelt," *Arena*, XXXII (August, 1904), 122, 126-28; "Why I Prefer Theodore Roosevelt to Alton B. Parker," *ibid.*, XXXII (October, 1904), 391-93.