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Simon Nelson Patten¹

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Simon Nelson Patten (1852-1922) was an American economist and social theorist. He was born on May 1, 1852 in Sandwich, Illinois and died at the age of 70 on July 24, 1922 in Browns Mills, New Jersey.

Patten is credited with inventing the term social work and with first expression of the idea of a society of affluence or abundance later also developed by another economist, John Kenneth Galbraith (French, 1970). Patten argued that “poverty could be abolished if (people) would accept values and restraints appropriate to an age of abundance - and discard (ideas) developed through centuries of scarcity.” Industrialization, according to Patten, ushered in a new age of abundance that he termed the “new basis of civilization” (the title of his best-known book) (Patten, 1968). “Over the long run, he believed, economic advance would lead to cultural and spiritual uplift, as satiation with creature comforts and baser amusements would prompt the cultivation of higher aspirations and more refined tastes” (Lindsey, 2007).

Patten was one of dozens of members of the founding cohorts of U.S. students who studied in Germany in the 1870s and 1880s and became the first generation of leaders in higher education in economics, sociology and other social sciences in the United States. He studied at the University of Halle. Patten, like his future colleagues John Bates Clark, Henry C. Adams and Richard Ely, was strongly influenced by the group of German economists known as the Younger Historical School (*Jüngere historische Schule*), a loose confederation of economists who advocated for scholars to use their expertise to help solve social problems. His experience in Germany reinforced life-long commitments to social reform and planned change. In the American context, Patten argued, that primarily meant change and reform through voluntary action with minimal governmental intervention. His contemporary, the sociologist Lester Ward, termed this approach meliorism, which was, Ward said, the improvement of social conditions through the application of human intelligence.

In his career, Patten published more than twenty books and several hundred articles, both scholarly and popular. *The New Basis of Civilization* (1907), was arguably his most important work. The book was an outgrowth of lectures he delivered in 1905 at the New York School of Social Work. It went through eight editions between 1907 and 1923.

¹ The first version of this short biography was written and published on the Citizendium.com web site and later picked up and extended on Wikipedia.

After several years of teaching at the elementary and secondary levels and following publication of his first book, Patten was appointed in 1887 as an economist in the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where he remained until his anti-war stance forced his retirement in 1917.

From the 1890s to the 1920s, Patten made two types of important contributions to social work: His teaching, articles and books pointing toward a social work practice directed at adjustment to the new economy of abundance. He also played an important role in the education of national leaders of the emerging field, including Frances Perkins, Edward T. Devine, Samuel M. Lindsey, William H. Allen and Benjamin Marsh. His central theme was that the goal of social action and the social work profession should be facilitating adjustment to a developing economy of abundance. Following his death in 1922, these ideas were increasingly downplayed in social work due, in large part to the growth of the Freudian psychoanalytic approach (Lubove, 1965). They eventually fell out of favor entirely and did not resurface again until the 1960s - and then from sources who seldom cited Patten.

Beginning in the decade after 1910, Patten's ideas were bitterly attacked by Mary Richmond, head of the Charity Organization Department of the Russell Sage Foundation and probably the most powerful social administrator of her time. Patten was defended by Devine, Perkins, Lillian Wald, and others and a great debate over approaches to social problems ensued. Richmond and her supporters in the Charity Organization movement favored social adjustment, that is, individualized approaches to treating poverty emphasizing moral and individual causes. Patten's approach was to social change through economic and broadly policy-oriented strategies (French, 1970, 893). "By the end of World War I, it was clear that most social workers were more committed to social adjustment than to social change", an approach that dominated social work practice until the restoration of social change strategies in the 1960s.

Lindsay (2007) compares Patten's view with that of his better known contemporary Thorstein Veblen and concludes "Patten took an altogether sunnier view." "It is an interesting question," Lindsay adds, "whether Veblen or Patten left the bigger mark. Veblen's name has survived, his famous turns of phrase remain in general currency, and his books are still in print. Patten, on the other hand, has faded into obscurity. Yet his legacy lives on in an institution he did so much to build: the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, the nation's first business school..." And, of course, the Social Work profession, and in particular, its social change wings, particularly social planning and community organization.

Lindsay goes on, "whatever his hand in the matter, it is inarguable that events broke Patten's way. The progress of industrialization exposed a fundamental conflict between the two great expressions of the bourgeois Protestant ethos: the highly organized yet raucously competitive commercial order on the one hand and the religiously inspired repression of individual desire on the other."

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