



John Collier, "The People's Institute," *The Independent* 72 (1912): p. 1146.

**The People's Institute:
Working-Class Immigrant Political Participation, 1897-1917**

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In November 1897, the voters of a newly consolidated New York City elected Tammany Hall into office. After two years under the reform administration of William Strong, a Republican banker, the city broke out in celebration for the mayoral triumph of Robert Van Wyck, a little-known Tammany judge. North of Madison Square, all along Broadway, hordes of revelers caused a ruckus with horns and rattles. They marched and danced through the streets, chanting, “Well, well, well, Reform has gone to hell!”¹ Van Wyck, a puppet of Boss Richard Croker, had defeated Seth Low, the reform candidate running on the Citizens’ Union ticket.

The landscape of Gotham was undergoing drastic changes as it greeted a second wave of immigration. The Jewish population grew from 60,000 in 1870 to 300,000 in 1900, the Italian population from fewer than 12,000 to 250,000.² By 1900, immigrants and the children of immigrants comprised three-fourths of the city’s population.³ As they flooded into the squalid tenements of the Lower East Side, New York City came to embody many problems of modern life. Private corporations amassed extreme wealth as foreign-born men and women worked in factories for meager wages. Immigrants generated anxiety for their potential radicalism, their choice of leisure activities, and their ties to Tammany Hall. For a moment, the Democratic political machine, which thrived off Irish support, had appeared at risk of losing to the new demographics or to organized labor.⁴ But the results of the 1897 election suggested otherwise. To reformers, the outcome represented a collapse in the political judgment of the city’s populace.

Charles Sprague Smith, a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, felt the city’s unrest could no longer be ignored. Van Wyck’s election evinced the dangers of

¹ Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1206-1208.

² Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014), p.147.

³ David Reimers, “Immigration: 1900-present,” in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth Jackson, Lisa Keller, and Nancy Flood, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 752.

⁴ Golway, *Machine Made*, p. 148.

democracy, and he believed the solution lay in having intellectual, cultured men of the upper class lead the masses into becoming better citizens.⁵ Smith resigned from his professorial post in 1897. Enlisting the support of Abram Hewitt, then president of Cooper Union, and assembling an advisory leadership that included social reformers, businessmen, clergy, government leaders, and labor organizers, he founded the People's Institute. Though the Institute spearheaded numerous community projects, many of which ultimately detached into independent organizations, the mainstay of the organization was its free public lectures inside the Great Hall of Cooper Union, which regularly drew audiences of over 1,000 people.⁶ Helped by its elite academic ties, the Institute's leadership managed to solicit prominent speakers over the years to address the public. The Institute, soon after its founding, was hosting lectures four times a week on a variety of subjects, from ethics to natural science. Its forums on history, social science, and problems of the day in particular emerged as vehicles for popular political activism.

Scholars have advanced critical assessments of efforts to accelerate immigrants' adherence to American values and practices at the turn of the twentieth century. Robert Carlson has called the "Americanization" movement, as it is known, a monolithic "quest for conformity" that was "culturally imperialistic," amounting to "no more and no less than attempts at cultural genocide."⁷ The aggressive campaigns for loyalty waged during World War I account for the prevalence of this perspective. But historians maintain similar reservations about reform projects that began before the war. Gary Gerstle observes that, given the constraints of social structures

⁵ Sixth Annual Report (1903), Box 26 Folder 3, People's Institute Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library (hereinafter "P.I. NYPL").

⁶ The People's Institute's offshoot organizations, over the course of its entire lifetime from 1897 to 1933, include (but are not limited to) the People's Church; People's Club; People's Institute Harlem Branch; School of the People's Institute; Gramercy Park Area Experiment; community centers in Public School 63 and Public School 89; the Training School for Community Center Workers; Wage Earner's Theatre League; and the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.

⁷ Robert A. Carlson, *The Quest for Conformity: Americanization Through Education* (New York: Wiley, 1975), p. 165, p. 15.

and historical circumstances over which newcomers had little control, “Any analysis of Americanization, past and present, must accord coercion a role in the making of Americans.”⁸

This understanding, which stresses immigrants’ victimhood, has won widespread currency.

Other historians give reason to reject blanket condemnation, however. Edward Hartmann believes the Americanization movement provided in its earlier years a “positive program of education and guidance.”⁹ Oscar Handlin cautions readers not to discount the immigrant’s need for structure and direction in a context that was foreign, intimidating, and often dehumanizing.¹⁰ James Barrett, in his bottom-up history, calls attention to the everyday settings, like the shop floor or union, that gave immigrants “alternatives to the world view and the values advocated in programs sponsored by employers and the government.”¹¹ Studying these quotidian spaces, he suggests, can furnish insight into how immigrants “constructed their own identities.”¹²

In the lecture hall at Cooper Union, working-class immigrants were not subservient political pawns but, rather, assertive constituents who leveraged the Institute’s public platform to effect state and municipal reform. In particular, audiences demanded and achieved greater responsiveness from Tammany Hall. Examination of the Institute’s political activity reveals the undeniable influence of elites yet also serves to challenge the simple characterization of recent immigrants as passive recipients of force or nativism. Cultivating a politics that was both popular and informed, the Institute facilitated immigrant assimilation through democratic integration, as opposed to coercive Americanization.

⁸ Gary Gerstle, “Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans,” *The Journal of American History* 84 no. 2 (1997), p. 527.

⁹ Edward Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 8; See Allen Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), p. 86.

¹⁰ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951).

¹¹ James Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (1992), p. 998.

¹² *Ibid.*

The Institute's approach lends credibility to the thesis of historian Joseph Huthmacher, who has argued that much of the force behind progressivism appeared from immigrant working-class communities who "provided an active, numerically strong, and politically necessary force for reform," and that this urban lower "class was perhaps as important in determining the course of American liberalism as the urban middle class, about which so much has been written."¹³

Diagnosing this imbalance, John Buenker explains that historians have had scarce extant primary evidence from immigrants at their disposal. In addition, they have tended to focus on the national landscape, rather than on the state and local arenas where machine-reformism was most intense.¹⁴

The Institute is thus ideal for further investigation because of the regular coverage it earned in the press and the considerable interest participants showed in contested city and state issues. It was a debate on imperialism after the Spanish-American War that established the Institute's legitimacy. It was a protest on the subway that revealed the Institute's capacity for collective action. It was an assortment of campaigns for social and political reform that activated popular democracy. And it was World War I that put the Institute's political life to an end.

By the late nineteenth century, museums, neighborhood groups, and settlement houses were hosting public lectures on a wide range of topics, from "The Life Story of a Honey Bee" to "The Dictionary and its Uses."¹⁵ To some degree, the lectures at the People's Institute resembled

¹³ Joseph Huthmacher, "Urban Liberalism and the Age of Reform," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49 no. 2 (Sept. 1962), p. 235.

¹⁴ John Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p.

¹⁵ The idea of the public lecture as a form of organized adult education was not especially novel. It had roots in the lyceum movement, which originated in Massachusetts in the 1820s and encouraged the development of local societies for adult education by inviting speakers and lecturers. The movement began to flourish by mid-century throughout the northeastern and midwestern United States. The Chautauqua movement, which arose in the 1870s, sent circuits of lecturers, entertainers, and preachers throughout the country in an effort to educate the rural populace. The 1890s saw the emergence of the university extension movement, which encouraged the delivery of lecture courses to a wider public. "This Week's Free Lectures," *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1906.

others in the city. Newspapers advertised all upcoming lectures in a single list.¹⁶ Regardless of the auspices under which they were held, lectures offered intellectual and social stimulation to the public, free of charge. As Irving Howe noted, “To most immigrants the cafe seemed an exotic or frivolous place, appropriate perhaps for *intelligent* and associated idlers, but hardly for working people who had to earn their bread. What many of them did take seriously was the endless lectures that filled the nights of the East Side... At such evenings one could feel at home, perhaps even venture to ask a question or speak up without embarrassment.”¹⁷

The gatherings at the People’s Institute, nonetheless, were distinctive in many respects. Lectures hosted by smaller organizations like the Workmen’s Circle or the Educational Alliance attracted workers of more radical persuasion. The Institute, however, promoted “evolution” over “revolution.”¹⁸ Meetings presented an “opportunity for the representatives of the different environments and sections to come together and compare views and to work off their unrest and irritation in some good and efficacious way.”¹⁹ Condemnation of violence was, alongside knowledge and sincerity, the only criterion by which speakers were vetted.²⁰ In part because Great Hall could accommodate such a large audience, the Institute attracted a more balanced sampling of the general populace. The Board of Education led a public lecture program that matched that of the Institute in popularity, but municipal sponsorship constrained it to less

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 238.

¹⁸ “People’s Institute Opens Next Week: Forum’s Total Audience for 25 Years Number 2,500,000,” *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 1922.

¹⁹ The Institute’s conservatism resembled that of the National Civic Federation of the American Federation of Labor. Samuel Gompers was the president of the American Federation of Labor, and Samuel Donnelly was the secretary of the National Civic Federation. Both organizations touted modest reforms of work conditions within the existing order of capitalism achieved through harmonious negotiations. The two labor leaders served on the Institute’s advisory council. Ibid, p. 4; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 5-6.; “Seventh Anniversary of the People’s Institute,” *New York Times*, Apr., 16, 1905.

²⁰ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 15.

polemical topics like hygiene or literature.²¹ The Institute, in contrast, hosted discussions on contemporary issues as part of its mission to “assist in the solution of present problems.”²² Finally, it departed from its peers in its lecture format, which was as dialogic as it was didactic. The Institute was one of the earliest forums to build into its structure a designated period for questions and answers, such that audience members were not only given the opportunity to interrogate speakers but were encouraged to do so.²³ In addition to posing questions, audiences convened for protests and voted on referenda. The Institute, though formally non-partisan, drove the public lecture towards more political, democratic ends, using it to inform, register, and proclaim the opinion of the masses.

In its partnership with the Cooper Union, the Institute offered a site for regular deliberation well adapted to the metropolitan landscape. A public space to discuss issues of the day recalled the agoras of ancient Greece and the town meetings of old New England. A typical site for the latter could accommodate at least a majority of the town’s registered voters. Though impractical to meet this standard in New York City, Smith believed that, in an urban setting, “a well attended mass meeting... with the press to give broadcast report of the proceedings, strikes a note which is heard and in a measure heeded by all men in public office.”²⁴ Great Hall was ideal for this purpose. Situated at the northern border of the Lower East Side, Cooper Union

²¹ Constitution, Volume 1A, Board of Trustees, P.I. NYPL.

²² Charles Sprague Smith, *Working with the People* (New York: A. Wessels Company, 1904), pp. 13, 108-109.

²³ Margot Hoppe Savage, “The History of Sacramento Community Forum” (Master’s thesis, Sacramento State College, 1959), p. 32.

²⁴ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 49.

faced the neighborhoods that housed the very people it hoped to represent.²⁵ With a seating capacity of 1,600, Great Hall was the best venue in the city for hosting large lectures.²⁶

The Institute not only provided a meeting ground for democracy but forged a method for it as well. Glenn Frank, editor-in-chief of *The Century Magazine*, observed that the Institute's open forums "combined the best features of the old New England town meeting and the modern lecture course... An open forum provides an expert speaker to inspire and inform the mind of the audience, as the town meeting did not, but the lecture course does; it gives an opportunity, directly following the address, for general participation by all the people in questions and discussion, as the lecture course does not, but the town meeting did." In addition to the applause, laughter, booing, heckling, and outright disorder that decorated the lectures, the question-and-answer period was a special occasion to assent, dissent, and clarify.²⁷ Charles Zueblin, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago and leader of the university extension movement, showered high praise: "Nowhere else is there a forum where the public questions are discussed as freely, the verdict given as fairly, and the multitudinous voice of the people registered as effectively as in the meetings of the People's Institute."²⁸ Historian Kevin Mattson, in his survey of urban participatory democracy, confirms that the Institute was unprecedented in providing an open space for collective political deliberation.²⁹

²⁵ Great Hall had become known too as a platform for leaders who branded themselves representatives of "the people." It was there that Abraham Lincoln had delivered his famous "might makes right" speech in 1860, which catapulted him to the nomination of the Republican Party. In 1886, the popular, union-backed Henry George had demanded better working conditions, government ownership of railroads and telegraph, and higher taxation of the rich in launching his campaign for Mayor of New York. Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 1100.

²⁶ Though Great Hall seated 1,600, the Institute sometimes hosted crowds above capacity. In these cases, the audiences crowded in aisles and a large standing room. In other cases, the Institute turned guests away.

²⁷ Glenn Frank, "The Parliament of the People," *The Century* 98 (1919), p. 405.

²⁸ Charles Zueblin, *A Decade of Civic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1905), p. 118.

²⁹ Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1994), p. 45.

Of course, as Mattson points out, the moderator and speaker still held the reins: people on the floor could only “introject [sic], they could not redirect discussion.”³⁰ Guidance from elite reformers meant that the people were not able to weigh political issues entirely on their own terms. But what the Institute lost in this regard it arguably made up for in another. As intermediaries, elite reformers closed the distance between the working class and public officials. Edmund Morgan has argued popular sovereignty is a “modern fiction”; republican politics is, instead, a “dialectical dance (and sometimes a fierce fight) between leadership elites, hemmed in, to be sure, by popular expressions of approval or discontent.”³¹ However unromantic this view of American democracy, the Institute aided the demonstration of these “popular expressions” and their transmission to “leadership elites.”

Historian John Recchiuti identifies this “paradox of democratic elitism” as a defining tension of Progressive Era reform. At the Institute, where reform leaders and intellectuals tried to convince the lower class of the correctness of their beliefs, the tension between paternalistic elitism and grassroots democracy was ever present. The Institute tried to escape this seeming paradox by suggesting there need not be a paradox at all: if expertise were passed on to the populace, then, far from undermining democracy, it might prove to be a “great leveling and equalizing force.”³² Mass education, in which speakers proposed ideas in terms digestible to the greater public, could invigorate and even realize democracy by developing an informed, popular politics. Experts would not impose or coerce, but reason and persuade.

Of the Institute’s founding, Smith wrote:

³⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

³¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), pp. 237-306 in John Recchiuti, *Civic Engagement: Social Science and Progressive-Era Reform in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 13.

³² Ibid.

It is generally accepted as a corollary for our universal suffrage and our almost unrestricted immigration, that ordered instruction in Social Science and the free discussion of questions of the day should be provided for the great body of the people, in order to assist them in forming intelligent opinions, both in regard to social and economic theories and also touching those problems of the day whose decision rests in their hands or in those of their elected representatives.³³

The view of education as the “corollary for ... universal suffrage,” nevertheless, was not always as “generally accepted” as Smith’s rhetoric may suggest. For decades, Republican reformers, the elite press, and civic leaders had tried to introduce a taxpayer qualification on voting to combat the ignorance and impressionability they perceived of recent immigrants. It was only until the 1880s, when Tammany Hall mustered huge resistance, that it became clear such an approach was politically untenable.³⁴ The motivations of the Institute’s reformers, therefore, involved both benevolent humanitarianism and self-interested pragmatism.

In the Institute’s early years, audience members harbored deep skepticism towards the leadership. Many dismissed Smith’s bombast as “the usual platform claptrap.”³⁵ Historian Moses Rischin writes that the “aura of condescension” toward the working class was an unfortunate flaw that clung to the Institute not only at its founding but throughout its lifetime.³⁶ Some degree of condescension probably infiltrated most projects of uplift or reform at the time. Social historian Robert Fisher remarks, nonetheless, that if at the Institute “condescension and paternalism were evident to the people in the audience, they registered few complaints.”³⁷ Indeed, working-class immigrants felt fortunate to be able to hear from competent individuals who were willing to educate rather than turn away from them.³⁸

³³ Constitution, Volume 1A, Board of Trustees, P.I. NYPL.

³⁴ Golway, *Machine Made*, pp. 122-125.

³⁵ Letter, Walter Graham to Smith, March 31, 1907, Box 3 Folder 1, P.I. NYPL.

³⁶ Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870-1914* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 215.

³⁷ Robert Fisher, “The People’s Institute of New York City, 1897-1934: Culture, Progressive Democracy, and the People” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1974), p. 90.

³⁸ Marcus Ravage, *An American in the Making* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), p. 148.

Still, participants were also not oblivious to the elitism of those perched atop the stage of Great Hall, and their responses functioned as one form of resistance. When the well-known rabbi Stephen Wise preached about the importance of idealism in an hour-long sermon, an audience member inquired, “Can a man stay an idealist on an empty stomach?”³⁹ On another occasion, businessman Robert Ogden spoke on the need for individuality. When a woman pressed him on how she was to maintain individuality while working in a box factory, he answered she could do so through devotion to her husband and children. The lady responded, “You have answered the question in a spiritual sense, but not in a material one.”⁴⁰ Yet another speaker criticized the waste and imprudence of workers who toiled in search of diamonds and pearls. One baffled attendee asked if it had not occurred to him that the problem resided in those who demanded those diamonds and pearls, not those employed to excavate them.⁴¹ In any case, the rapid growth of the lectures suggests the presence or prospect of condescension failed to impede large-scale participation. The organization administered nineteen lectures in its first season in 1898, with a total annual attendance of roughly 19,000. By 1903, it was administering 120 lectures per season, with an annual attendance of around 140,000.⁴²

The early years of the People’s Institute coincided with national debates on U.S. policy in the Philippines, a territorial acquisition from the Spanish-American War. In 1898, Smith compiled a series of lectures to present various positions on the course of colonial policy.⁴³ On December 23, 1898, Charles Spahr, Talcott Williams, and Charlton Lewis convened in the final

³⁹ Jacob Riis, “The People’s Institute of New York: The Unique and Remarkable Work It is Doing Among the Poor,” *The Century* 79 (1910), 858.

⁴⁰ “Need for Individuality,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1901.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sixth Annual Report (1903) Box 26 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

⁴³ “Argument for Expansion,” *New York Times*, Dec 17, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.; “Tasks Before the Nation,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, Nov 19, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

lecture of the series, staging a debate which attracted over 1,000 attendees.⁴⁴ Spahr, a leading social reformer and Institute trustee, explained that capitalists wanted expansionism to exploit resources abroad and to detract attention from their domestic exploits. Williams insisted that if Western intervention were inevitable, the “only hope” for the protection of colonial subjects lay in “giving the half-naked savage of the tropics a chance to clothe himself and be a man.”⁴⁵ Lewis responded that this missionary zeal violated the doctrine of self-government and warned of succumbing to the “old fetish of sovereignty which is the central idea of the European nations.”⁴⁶ At the close of the lecture, Smith put forth two propositions to the audience—first, “That the United States retain the Philippines Islands and educate their inhabitants to self-government,” and second, “That the United States disposes itself as speedily as possible of these islands, giving them over to the Filipinos for their own independent government.”⁴⁷ 687 were opposed to expansion, and 112 were in favor.⁴⁸ Smith forwarded the results to President McKinley and Congress in Washington D.C.

The *World*, which had drummed up support for the Spanish-American War with its yellow journalism, called the vast opposition “something of a surprise.”⁴⁹ The press reported on the referendum to point out and criticize the discrepancy between the actions of the national government and public opinion. The *New York Evening Post* said of the vote:

This is the first vote we have observed as having been taken, after fair and open discussion, by the class whom Mr. Lincoln called ‘the plain people.’ Those who assembled at Cooper Union last evening were mainly artisans and shop-keepers, and were evidently eager for information and moved solely by a desire to cast their influence for the best interests of the country. They were fairly representative of the great body of Americans, and we have no doubt that a similar verdict would be the result of a fair and full discussion throughout the country, if the Republican politicians at Washington would allow time for it.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ “The Philippines Problem,” *New York Times*, Dec. 24, 1898.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “American Expansion,” *New York Evening Post*, Dec. 31, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; “The Philippines Problem,” *New York Times*, Dec. 24, 1898.

⁴⁸ “A Vote Against Imperialism,” *New York Journal*, Dec. 24, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

⁴⁹ “Voted Against Expansion,” *New York World*, Dec. 24, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

⁵⁰ *New York Evening Post*, Dec. 24, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

The reportage not only validated the *Evening Post's* editorial opposition to the war but also conferred legitimacy to the lectures, affirming the deliberative and popular basis of the referendum. Some were unconvinced of the vote's significance, however. In a letter to the *New York Times*, one commentator accused the audience of being indiscriminating in its judgment. The last of the three speakers, she pointed out, was "cheered and applauded by the very men who fifteen minutes before had expressed equal sympathy for directly contradicting statements."⁵¹ Smith replied that it merely reflected the audience's responsiveness to rhetoric and its adherence to fair play.⁵² Certain audience members were less involved than others, but many actively wrestled with the content, asking questions to test speakers' claims. As the *Times* observed, "some [questions] were irrelevant and some were silly," but others "were sharp and well calculated to tax the higher ability of the... lecturer."⁵³ Audiences maintained their anti-imperial stance in the years that followed.⁵⁴

The first referendum on the Philippines in 1898 made apparent that the press saw the Institute's position as a valuable benchmark of broader public opinion. The *Times* and *New York Tribune*, both elite, reform-minded papers, reported regularly on the Institute's lectures, often transcribing audiences' questions; popular daily papers, like the *World* and the *Journal American*, covered major protests, especially in the Institute's earlier years. The newspaper was, according to one reader of *The World*, a "people's institute" in itself, dispersing ideas to an audience even larger than the one inside Great Hall.⁵⁵ The press held that the stance of the Institute, more or less, reflected that of the masses.

⁵¹ Ethel Osgood Mason, "Some Characteristics of Cooper Union Audience," *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1898.

⁵² Letter to the Editor, Charles Sprague Smith, *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

⁵³ "A Lecture on the Philippines," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 1899.

⁵⁴ "Vote on Expansion," *New York World*, January 6, 1900.

⁵⁵ "The Greatest People's Institute," *New York World*, May 5, 1903.

Smith was accurate in his assessment, nonetheless, that “the audience [was] not in the fullest sense representative of New York City.” Very few uptown residents attended the Institute’s lectures.⁵⁶ Smith often adopted a rhetoric of fraternity that was deliberately gendered. The Institute’s work, he explained, “is grim and hard and involves application and study and earnest effort. Women are a negative quantity in this work.” Though the Institute had female advisors and appreciated women’s interest in social and recreational programming, Smith believed the “uplifting of the masses and the settling of the social problem” would take place “through the men,” and so it [was] to them... [the Institute’s leaders] address[ed] their main efforts.”⁵⁷ Still, lectures attracted female attendees, who numbered between fifty and 100 at each meeting.

The audience instead consisted of “the more intelligent and earnest representatives of the masses.”⁵⁸ The lectures brought together a diverse crowd that pulled heavily from the city’s downtown population.⁵⁹ A few students from City College and a few well-read, older residents attended discussions. But most participants were young men who dwelled in tenements and worked in factories.⁶⁰ Some were illiterate, and many had received little more than primary school training.⁶¹ One journalist with a heavy hand for stereotype recorded “dreamy Jews, alert Japanese, stolid Germans, and vigorous Americans” in attendance.⁶² Another commentator observed that participants were “Russian, Austrian, English, Polish, German, South African,

⁵⁶ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 122.

⁵⁷ “Seventh Anniversary of the People’s Institute – Its Founder and His Work,” *New York Times*, Apr. 16, 1905.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁹ Participants waited in line up to an hour before the lecture for doors to open. Poor weather did little to deter attendance. A few homeless men, seeking warmth, joined in from time to time only to be “repel[led]” by the “soberness” of the material they encountered. *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ John Collier, “The People’s Institute,” *The Independent* 72 (1912), p. 1145.

⁶¹ Lola Jean Simpson, “People Who Want to be Educated,” *Harpers Monthly Magazine* (1929), p. 770.

⁶² Isaac Marcossou, “A Practical School for Democracy,” *World’s Work* 19 (1905), p. 6415.

Armenian, Siamese, [and] Japanese.”⁶³ Historians estimate one third of young Russian Jewish men at the time attended at least one lecture each week, so they were especially well represented.⁶⁴ Most attendees were foreign-born but had a firm grasp of English; seventy-five percent were voting citizens.⁶⁵ Participants, finally, attended lectures on a regular, rather than occasional, basis.⁶⁶

As issues closer to home began to capture the city’s attention, the Institute’s leadership could make an even stronger case for the representative value of its audience than it could on the national question of the Spanish-American War. For local and state battles, either against Republicans or Tammany Democrats, it was helpful, too, that the Institute’s members tended to be fully united in their stances, allowing for communication of more coherent political messages.

The Institute’s aggressive fight on the construction of the city subway exemplified its potential for effective political action. A piece of legislation backed heavily by popular mandate, the Rapid Transit Act, as amended in 1894, had permitted and assured municipal investment and ownership of the subway system. It also stipulated the government would pay a private contractor to build the subway and operate it for a designated period of time. Construction was stalled in 1899, however, by the city’s inability to finance the project. The delay led the Rapid Transit Commission, a board of overseers, to consider the possibility of granting a perpetual franchise to a private entity. The Metropolitan Traction Company emerged with an offer to construct the subway and turn over five percent of its gross receipts to the city government every year. State legislators introduced a bill to allow for this transfer, and Albany, with the

⁶³ Simpson, “People Who Want to be Educated,” p. 770.

⁶⁴ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis*, vol. 2 of *City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 212.

⁶⁵ “900 Citizen-Voters Shout for Reprisals,” *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1906.

⁶⁶ “Great Work of the People’s Institute,” *New York Journal*, Apr. 7, 1901, Box 30 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

Commission's support, was inclined to vote in its favor. The plan would address the city's lack of funding, but it would also permanently deny municipal ownership.⁶⁷

The People's Institute was the first entity to demonstrate publicly against the proposal of the Metropolitan Traction Company, demanding city ownership.⁶⁸ On March 31, 1899, an audience of over 1,500 stood in favor of a motion that condemned the grant of the perpetual franchise.⁶⁹ As Thomas Scanlon, an Irish working-class man, said,

This is not a question of politics. Good citizens of every political opinion are against the outrageous surrender by the Rapid Transit Commission. They cannot understand what Tammany Hall, the dominant and responsible political organization, means. They cannot believe it serious when so soon it attempts what is virtually a breach of faith with the masses from whom it gets its votes.⁷⁰

The people thought the streets belonged to them and ought to remain theirs.⁷¹ The grant not only defied the Rapid Transit Act but also betrayed promises made in the previous election, in which both parties had included support for public ownership in their platforms.⁷² Backed by other civic groups and the media, the Institute arranged a mass meeting with the city's largest union, the Central Federated Union, to demonstrate against the proposed measure.

On April 11, 1899, representatives of organized labor and crowds of citizens filled the quarters of Great Hall. Speakers included John de Witt Warner, a former congressman, and Wheeler Peckham, a well-known lawyer.⁷³ William Perrine, an iron molder, insisted that, in constructing the subway, the "first thing a private corporation would do would be to go down to the South and bring up a lot of cheap workmen, while the workmen of New York look on and starve."⁷⁴ Government officials sent in letters that were read aloud at the meeting, remaining

⁶⁷ James Blaine Walker, *Fifty Years of Rapid Transit, 1864-1917* (New York: Law Print Co., 1918), p. 156.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Working with the People*, 55.

⁶⁹ "Protest Against Subway Plans," *New York Journal*, April 1, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁷⁰ "Labor and Rapid Transit," *New York Times*, April 3, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁷¹ "Against Proposed Franchise," *New York World*, April 4, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁷² "One More Popular Protest," *New York Tribune*, April 1, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁷³ "Against Perpetual Franchise," *New York Tribune*, April 12, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁷⁴ "No Free Franchises," *New York Daily News*, April 10, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

non-committal but suggesting that the assistance of private capital was better than no rapid transit at all. The audiences gathered at Cooper Union promulgated a twofold declaration—first, that public franchises belonged inalienably to the people and, second, that franchises could be bestowed upon individuals or corporations only for brief periods of time.⁷⁵ The Institute’s leadership sent the resolutions to Governor Theodore Roosevelt, the state legislature, Mayor Van Wyck, the municipal assembly, and the Rapid Transit Commission.⁷⁶

The need to ground actions in discussion did not escape the Institute, even as it planned a spectacular protest. “Organizing a protest of the entire citizenship,” Smith believed, should only be used “as a last resort.”⁷⁷ On April 25, the Institute drew an audience well above capacity in a debate on the subway issue, with John Crosby and Miles Dawson in favor of municipal ownership and Lawson Fuller in favor of private construction and ownership.⁷⁸ Dawson argued that the cost of partnering with the Metropolitan Traction Company would ultimately rise to more than the city government could afford. Crosby said the problem was not whether a corporation could build the road at less cost than the city, but which was right. Fuller understood the position of his audience before taking the stage. “Ninety-nine out of every hundred [of you] will vote for the city to build the underground railroad. But the vote won’t build it.” He explained that historically, municipal enterprises like the telegraph, cable, and elevated railroad had depended upon the assistance of private capital. He insisted too that the politicians in office were too corrupt to be entrusted with ownership. “We will have rapid transit by and by,” he said, “but it will take brains and money to build it.” Someone in the audience shouted, “We have

⁷⁵ “Declaration of the People,” Box 9 Folder 7, Cooper Union Activities, P.I. NYPL.

⁷⁶ Resolution, Box 9 Folder 6, Cooper Union Activities, P.I. NYPL.

⁷⁷ Smith, *Working with the People*, 56.

⁷⁸ *New York Journal*, December 16, 1898, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; “How Shall Rapid Transit Be Secured?” Box 9 Folder 2, Cooper Union Activities, P.I. NYPL.

both!”⁷⁹ To Fuller, however, the delay indicated a clear absence of municipal resources.⁸⁰ The audience voted at debate’s end: 1,690 favored public ownership and ten favored private ownership. The Institute mailed the result to Governor Roosevelt.⁸¹

The public outcry from the Institute and from other civic reform groups was so great that the governor declared his flat opposition to perpetual franchises. The Metropolitan Traction Company, Van Wyck’s primary ally, withdrew its bid, and the mayor worked with the Rapid Transit Commission to re-finance construction. By the fall of 1899, he determined City Hall would be able to supply funding for construction after all. In accordance with the Rapid Transit Act, he began soliciting bids from contractors willing to operate the system under a fifty-year lease, with a twenty-five year renewal option.⁸² The subway issue showed how the people, reform leadership, and the press could work in concert to compel action from public officials. Municipal ownership of rapid transit would remain the Institute’s most important policy objective for the years to come.

The Institute also sought increased state involvement in relation to the problem of trusts. In April 1899, Hazen Pingree, the governor of Michigan and a leader of the Progressive movement, argued at the Institute that trusts, constrained by financial expectations, tended toward cheapened quality of goods, increased prices, and lowered wages.⁸³ He also believed trusts were morally unsound, creating divisive national conditions unprecedented in their seriousness except by slavery and secession.⁸⁴ Out of respect for property rights, he advised

⁷⁹ “Rapid Transit Mass Meeting,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁸⁰ “Want City To Own Tunnel,” *New York World*, April 26, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁸¹ “A Vote at Cooper Union,” *New York Journal*, April 26, 1899, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁸² Charles Cheape, *Moving the Masses: Urban Public Transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880-1912* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 89-90.

⁸³ Hazen S. Pingree, *Address of Governor H.S. Pingree: Delivered Before the People’s Institute at Cooper Union, New York City, April 14, 1899* (Lansing: Robert Smith Print, 1899), p. 11.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

public regulation of corporations, not their dissolution.⁸⁵ In February 1900, the Institute hosted a five-session “Trust Conference” that brought together prominent laissez-faire capitalists and their opponents.⁸⁶ The stark polemics drew nationwide attention. W.H. Baldwin, Jr., president of the Long Island Railroad, spoke in defense of capital consolidation. A “good” trust, in his view, enabled the purchase of raw material at the lowest possible price, the payment of the highest rate of wages, and the sale of manufactured products at the lowest consistent price. He cited evidence to show that railway unification assured a substantial increase in the average wages of locomotive engineers and that consolidation prevented price discrimination.⁸⁷ But the Institute’s membership, by 1900, was set in its antipathy towards trusts and its desire for public regulation.

Tammany suffered from two major revelations of corruption during Van Wyck’s tenure. In 1900, the press reported that Boss Croker and Van Wyck had assured the American Ice Company a de facto monopoly by granting the corporation exclusive access to land ice at city docks, which triggered price inflation. The press also revealed that the police department had crafted elaborate schemes to accept bribes from gambling establishments.⁸⁸ In 1901, the Institute quietly celebrated when Seth Low, who had been defeated four years earlier, successfully ran on a Fusion ticket of Republicans, independent reformers, and anti-Tammany Democrats to replace Van Wyck as mayor. The Institute was nominally non-partisan. Members threatened to vote in Democrats when Republican officials behaved against their interests, and vice versa.⁸⁹ The Institute, championing good government, levelled attacks against Republican Boss Thomas Platt as it did towards Boss Croker. With political machines, Smith wrote, “it matter[ed] little who

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸⁶ Third Annual Report (1900), p. 25. Box 29 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; “Trusts Discussed at People’s Conference,” *New York Evening Journal*, Feb. 16, 1900.

⁸⁷ “Interest in Trusts,” Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁸⁸ Mike Wallace, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898 to 1919* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 107.

⁸⁹ “Meeting Attacks Grab Legislators,” *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 1904.

[was] elected since the candidate of neither of the two leading parties will represent their interests.”⁹⁰ But in practice the Institute’s opposition to Tammany Hall translated to more frequent support for Republican and Fusion officials than for Democratic ones. Of the Institute’s advisors and trustees involved in partisan politics, the vast majority identified with the Republican Party or with Citizens’ Union. A few assumed offices in Low’s administration. At the state level, the Institute received high regard from Republican Governor Benjamin O’Dell, who served from 1901 to 1904. At the national level, the Institute lauded the progressive orientation of Theodore Roosevelt, who rose to the presidency in 1901. Members wrote in a political bulletin, “The progress of social ideas, first driving their prows into the political system through President Roosevelt, promises to change the face and meaning of our government.”⁹¹

When the matter of saloon regulation arose during Low’s administration, the Institute’s leadership knew it was an issue to be navigated carefully. It was on the question of alcohol consumption especially that Tammany had criticized the paternalism of reformers towards the city’s immigrants.⁹² The Institute understood why immigrants flocked to the saloon. The Raines law, passed in 1896, had prohibited the sale of alcohol on Sunday, the only full day for drinking for men who worked six-day weeks. Adult men seeking social relief in New York City bore few enticing options. Though the Institute’s executives tried to cast the Institute as an alternative site for leisure, they realized Great Hall was simply “too institutional to seem homelike” and that most would derive little pleasure from educational lectures.⁹³ The vast majority of residents in New York hailed from European countries where “the daily use of mild alcoholic beverages ...

⁹⁰ Charles Sprague Smith, “The Place of the People’s Forum in American Life,” *Commons* 10 (1905): p. 281, People’s Institute, Main Collection, New York Historical Society.

⁹¹ Bulletin, 1909, People’s Institute, Main Collection, New York Historical Society.

⁹² Michael Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 23.

⁹³ Charles Sprague Smith, “Saloon Substitutes in New York and Elsewhere,” *Federation of Churches and Christian Organizations in New York City* 2 (1902), p. 53.

[was] universal.”⁹⁴ For this reason, Smith conceded, “the Sunday laws do not correspond any longer with either the convictions or the inherited customs of a considerable part of the population.”⁹⁵

Sensitive though the reformers may have been to the situation of immigrants, they believed the saloon to be a “distinct menace” to American life that was worthy of close oversight.⁹⁶ John Collier, the Institute’s secretary, criticized the saloon both for its moral depravity and for its facilitation of corrupt municipal governance. In New York, he wrote, “Politics ha[d] its focus in or about the saloon.”⁹⁷ As one speaker at the Institute pointed out, it was no coincidence that, in 1890, half of the New York City aldermen were saloon owners.⁹⁸ Tammany’s bosses relied on saloons both as sources of cash for bribes and as sites to dole out patronage and employment.⁹⁹ But reformers rightly feared alienating immigrants if they imposed their views too heavily.

Immigrants, after all, staunchly opposed the closure of saloons on Sundays. During a debate at the Institute, Robert Graham of the Christian Temperance Society argued against the desecration of Sundays. He objected to the close ties between the alcohol industry and city politics, and he insisted intoxication led to crime. His opponent, Reverend Thomas Slicer, did not disagree. The reverend, who was also a trustee of the Institute, said, “If I were asked to vote on the question of whether or not another drop of liquor should ever be brewed or distilled in the future, I should vote that it should not. But the question tonight is one between personal liberty and the convention which we call our Sunday.” The people had a right to obtain what they

⁹⁴ Smith, “Saloon Substitutes,” p. 53.

⁹⁵ Charles Sprague Smith, “How to Make an Ideal Sunday for a Cosmopolitan American City,” *New York Journal*, Jan. 13, 1902. Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹⁷ John Collier, “The People’s Institute,” *The Independent* 72 (1912): 1145.

⁹⁸ “Favor Sunday Saloon,” *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1902.

⁹⁹ Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, p. 24.

wanted, and the forced closing prescribed by the Raines law was so ineffective and ill-enforced that regulation would surely be superior. 1,200 people voted for saloons to be open on Sundays; 200 voted against it.¹⁰⁰

Unwilling to explicitly advocate increased access to the saloon, the Institute's leaders instead framed the situation, as Reverend Slicer did, as a matter of home rule rather than one of intemperance, though in practice both supported Sunday opening. The Institute's reformers would have preferred greater prohibition. Their restraint appears to reflect their recognition that the people would not simply heed whatever agenda they put forth. Instead, audiences' known position on the matter shaped the very way in which they decided to stage the question in the first place.

Forum participants thus debated whether the saloon's hours on Sunday should be determined by a referendum of the people of New York City or whether, as Governor O'Dell proposed in January 1902, the city should defer the question to the State Senate and Assembly. One man objected to the referendum as a dangerous precedent that had an arbitrary basis and bypassed elected representatives in Albany. Another judged it an excellent precedent that promoted popular sovereignty and warranted replication worldwide.¹⁰¹ A burly German wondered if this issue highlighted the merits of a possible secession of New York City: laws proposed by the state's more rural representatives often failed to accord with urban needs.¹⁰² The Institute's formal position, sent to Governor O'Dell and the media, recorded 1,300 for a city-wide referendum and four against.¹⁰³ Despite his personal distaste for liquor dealers and the

¹⁰⁰ "Favor Sunday Saloon," *New York Times*, Feb. 17, 1902.

¹⁰¹ "A Referendum Favored," *New York Tribune*, Jan. 20, 1902.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ "Wants No Referendum," *New York Herald*, Jan. 8, 1902. Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.; "Referendum," Jan. 6, 1902. Box 9 Folder 1, Cooper Union Activities, P.I. NYPL.

saloon in general, Mayor Low broke from his district attorney William Travers Jerome, his police commissioner, and the city's ministry by pushing for liberalized enforcement. Ultimately, Low was either unable or unwilling to convince his commissioner to loosen enforcement.¹⁰⁴ The Institute, in any case, continued to advocate home rule for various issues involving the city.¹⁰⁵

Entering the discourse on another matter deeply personal to them, immigrants at the Institute entertained various proposals for improving their living conditions. Tenements were constructed of shoddy building materials and allowed in little air or light. Jacob Riis' photojournalistic expose *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1889, had invigorated calls for reform.¹⁰⁶ In 1900, Riis, Elgin Gould, and Lawrence Veiller, all housing reformers who studied remedial legislation, delivered separate speeches in defense of their preferred solutions.¹⁰⁷ Veiller had previously "presented recommendations for new tenement laws to the committee of the board of aldermen, but they did not take [him] seriously, knowing as they did how firmly entrenched the building ring was in the government at that time." So he had "embark[ed] upon a plan to educate the people of New York City as to the evils of tenement life" through lectures and a public exhibition.¹⁰⁸ Gould, who owned a home building company, advocated reconstruction of tenements; Riis and Veiller argued for increased regulation of existing buildings.¹⁰⁹ As secretary of the Tenement House Commission, Veiller helped to draft the

¹⁰⁴ Gerald Kurland, *Seth Low: The Reformer in an Urban and Industrial Age* (New York: Ardent Media, 1971), p. 149.

¹⁰⁵ "Home Rule for the City of New York," Resolution. Box 9 Folder 7. Cooper Union Activities. P.I. NYPL.

¹⁰⁶ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.; Roy Lubove, "Lawrence Veiller and the New York State Tenement House Commission of 1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 47, no. 4 (March 1961), p. 662.; Third Annual Report (1900), p. 24. Box 26 Folder 1. Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁰⁸ "Lawrence Veiller," *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America*, edited by Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo (New York: R. Marek, 1979), p. 227.

¹⁰⁹ *New York Tribune*, Jan. 27, 1900, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

seminal Tenement House Act in 1901, which established basic safety and ventilation requirements for the buildings.¹¹⁰

By 1903, participants at the People's Institute were busy defending the act's provisions from attack. In March, the Institute held a mass meeting led by Robert DeForest, president of the Tenement House Commission, in response to legislative attempts to loosen regulations.¹¹¹ Like Riis and Gould, DeForest was already closely tied to the Institute.¹¹² In Great Hall, he insisted on preserving the integrity of the Tenement House Act as it stood. The audience voted 1,700 to one to maintain the act's stipulations. The lone dissenter was a real estate agent. As Riis commented, "By far the larger number of those who thus testified to their faith in and sympathy for [DeForest's] work themselves lived in tenement houses. They not only assured him of their support, but pledged themselves to arouse the entire East Side" if necessary, and the legislature heeded their warning.¹¹³ The Institute sent a letter to Governor O'Dell that reminded him of his support for the law's original enactment and expressed its expectation for his continued defense thereof.¹¹⁴ The Governor's response, circulated to the press, stated that he expected no successful legislation against the law. Every attack on the bill failed.¹¹⁵ On the issue of tenement housing, the Institute's reform leadership meant that audiences interacted directly with the primary policy architects. Recognizing their stake and their sway, participants tendered their endorsement and held foes accountable through threat of demonstration.

¹¹⁰ Lubove, "Lawrence Veiller," p. 662.

¹¹¹ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 57.

¹¹² Gould was a founding member of the Institute. Riis and DeForest both served on the advisory council. Constitution, Volume 1A, Board of Trustees, P.I. NYPL.

¹¹³ Riis, "The People's Institute of New York," p. 861.

¹¹⁴ "Real Estate Man Outvoted," April 1903, Box 31 Folder 1; Seventh Annual Report (1904), p. 6, Box 26 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹¹⁵ Smith, "The Place of the People's Forum in American Life," p. 282.

As mayor, Low found it difficult during his administration to satisfy the multiple factions behind his victory. In addition to his enforcement of the Sunday saloon closing laws, he abandoned his non-partisan stance to support Governor O'Dell and President Roosevelt. Consciously or not he was, according to historian David Hammack, "in effect giving up the effort to sustain an independent municipal party in order to strengthen the Roosevelt-led Republicans."¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, in 1902, Charles Murphy succeeded Croker as the new head of Tammany Hall, determined to bring an air of respectability to the organization. By 1903, Hammack writes, "both of the regular parties could appeal for immigrant votes more effectively than could the Citizens' Union."¹¹⁷ Having identified essentially as a Republican, Seth Low lost to Tammany's George McClellan in 1903. Undaunted, the Institute continued to promote popular will.

Members called for municipal regulation of many industries beyond public transportation. Water, electricity, gas, and telephone were also susceptible to monopolization and thus in need of government control. In early 1904, Republican state legislators introduced a series of "grab bills" that granted or extended utility franchises, charters, and development rights to private companies. Smith organized a mass meeting in March to amplify the Forum's stance on the issue. The popular and elite press threw their support behind the protest, as did other reform organizations.¹¹⁸ Stewart Woodford, a Republican corporate lawyer, contended that both corporations and the state legislature were exceeding their authority in exercising rights that in fact belonged to the people of New York City. Speakers targeted the bills up for discussion in the

¹¹⁶ David Hammack, *Power and Society in Greater New York* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1982), p. 156.

¹¹⁷ Hammack, *Power and Society*, p. 157.

¹¹⁸ "Mass Meeting Will Condemn Bills," *New York World*, Mar. 26, 1904, Box 31 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; "Organize for Protest," *New York Tribune*, "War To-Night on the 'Grab Bills,'" *New York World*, Mar. 28, 1904, Box 31 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

legislature one by one. James Lehmaier challenged the franchise and transfer provisions of street railroads; City Comptroller Bird Coler criticized the Smith Ramapo Water Bill; Judge Julius Henry Cohen took up the Niagara, Lockport, and Ontario Company Power Bill; and J. Aspinwall Hodge, a lawyer and Institute trustee, attacked the Remsen Gas Bill.¹¹⁹ Seated in the front row, a civilian named Francis Thurber posed five questions that stressed the benefits increased privatization might produce for the people. He asked: “Do we appreciate that the so-called ‘grab’ bills are simply privileges to extend...conveniences, of course with ultimate profit to the capital invested, but with dividends to the public in comfort?” But the people disagreed. When Smith asked those who agreed with a resolution all condemning the grab bills to stand, every one except Thurber rose.¹²⁰

The next day, the *Tribune* reported that, as for the railroad bills, Albany was “yielding at last to...widespread public condemnation” as displayed at a “crowded mass meeting.”¹²¹ One of the bills’ sponsors, Republican Assemblyman Louis Bedell, accused other legislators of making judgments not based on merit but based on public opinion. Still, he withdrew his bills from further consideration.¹²² In May, Governor O’Dell vetoed both the Remsen Gas Bill and the Niagara Power Bill over the objections of Mayor McClellan.¹²³ He signed the Smith Water Bill into law but mitigated its severity by promising to procure an additional water supply for New York City.¹²⁴ The fate of the grab bills showed the validity legislators assigned to popular

¹¹⁹ “Meeting Attacks Grab Legislators,” *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 1904; “Mass Meeting Batters Grabs,” *New York Tribune*, Mar. 29, 1904.

¹²⁰ “Meeting Attacks Grab Legislators,” *New York Times*, Mar. 29, 1904.

¹²¹ “Grab Bill Withdrawn,” *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 1904; “Grab Bills Arrested,” *New York Tribune*, Apr. 1, 1904.

¹²² “Bedell Withdraws One Railway ‘Grab’ Bill,” *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 1904; “Grab Bills Arrested,” *New York Tribune*, Apr. 1, 1904.

¹²³ “Odell Raps Mayor in Gas Bill Veto,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1904; “Niagara ‘Grab’ Killed: Odell Keeps Promises,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1904.

¹²⁴ “Signs Smith Water Bill,” *New York Tribune*, May 15, 1904.

sentiment shown at the Institute. Audiences declared their opposition to public officials, Republican and Tammany alike, who supported the proposed measures.

Participants' preference for government control reflect their socialist tendencies, though most did not identify with the Socialist Party. When Smith asked those who identified with the Socialist Party to stand, only sixty rose. Alternatively, when he called on "all those who think we should take back for the profit of the plain people that which has gone to swell the pockets of private capitalists," the entire audience stood.¹²⁵ Socialism was, indeed, a regular topic of discussion at the Institute. The most well attended lecture at the Institute was a debate on socialism in January 1903 between Professor Edwin Seligman, a political economist at Columbia, and Gaylord Wilshire, a socialist millionaire at Wilshire's magazine.¹²⁶ The debate, drawing 3,500 attendees, packed the Hall so tightly that audience members listened from atop the stage.¹²⁷

The potential challenge to capital posed by the Institute seemed at times incongruous with the organization's reliance on wealthy men and women for financial support. A speaker at the Trust Conference in 1900, for instance, launched a diatribe against Andrew Carnegie, a regular donor to the People's Institute.¹²⁸ A clause in Abram Hewitt's will had permitted Cooper Union trustees to lend space to the Institute at low rent on Sundays and without rent entirely on weekdays.¹²⁹ But for the administration of its programs, the Institute depended on the consistent financial support of private donors, many of whom were businessmen. Carnegie and John

¹²⁵ "900 Citizen-Voters Shout for Reprisals," *New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1906.

¹²⁶ "Debate on Socialism, Wilshire—Seligman: a verbatim report of the greatest debate in the history of socialism in the United States, which took place in Cooper Union, January 16, 1903, New York City," *Wilshire's Magazine*, 1903, Wilshire Leaflet No. 3, Butler microforms, Columbia University.

¹²⁷ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 19.

¹²⁸ "Against Trusts," *New York Daily News*, Feb. 19, 1900.

¹²⁹ Jacob Riis, "The People's Institute of New York: The Unique and Remarkable Work It is Doing Among the Poor," *The Century* 79 (1910), p. 858.

Rockefeller each donated at least one thousand dollars from 1897 until 1910.¹³⁰ V. Everit Macy, the Institute's treasurer, contributed amounts of two thousand dollars and more, in addition to forgoing a salary.¹³¹ For the Forum's season from 1904 to 1905, the Institute received two hundred donations, raising a total of \$14,257, but ten people supplied about half of the amount.¹³² The leaders solicited donations from philanthropists every year. They made appeals in newspapers and wrote personal letters, stressing the democratic achievement of the Institute and appealing to elites' sense of moral obligation to assist those less privileged.¹³³ The Institute appeared to operate season by season, immediately spending almost all of the money it raised in any given year.¹³⁴ Amy Kass, in her dissertation on liberal education, suggests, "Perhaps the poverty of the Institute brought it its freedom, for there were never any cults connected with it or any ulterior ends to serve or any outside influences or regulations."¹³⁵ No single donor could dictate the Institute's agenda.

The need for sponsorship still imposed limitations on the Institute, however, both substantive and symbolic. One of Smith's acquaintances pointed out the hypocrisy and potential conflict of interest of the Institute's elite funding.¹³⁶ Smith, indeed, once refused a proposed discussion on the ethics of accepting Rockefeller's donations.¹³⁷ Wealthy donors sometimes

¹³⁰ See Annual Reports, Box 26, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; Contributions, Volume 24, Financial Records, P.I. NYPL.

¹³¹ This is inferred, as the Institute regularly records salary payment to other officers aside from Macy.

¹³² Eighth Annual Report (1905), p. 25, Box 26 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; Contributions, Volume 24, Financial Records, P.I. NYPL.

¹³³ See Correspondence, Box 41, Financial Records, P.I. NYPL.

¹³⁴ See Annual Reports, Box 26, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹³⁵ Amy Apfel Kass, "Radical Conservatives for Liberal Education" (Ph.D dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1973), p. 2.

¹³⁶ Letter from Franklin Pierce to Charles Sprague Smith, June 4, 1903, Box 4, Folder 4, Director's Office, P.I. NYPL.

¹³⁷ Letter from Joseph Selbornick to Editor, *New York Press*, Feb. 17, 1907, Box 32 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.; *New York Herald*, Feb. 17, 1900, Box 30 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.; Letter from John Crosby to Editor, *New York Times*, Jan. 10, 1905, Box 31, Folder 5, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL. in Fisher, "The People's Institute," p. 45.

withdrew contributions in response to the Institute's progressivism.¹³⁸ In 1905, for instance, the Institute's opposition to a gas monopoly prompted one trustee to resign and halt his donations.¹³⁹ The action led Smith, in 1906, to the belief that the audience members themselves needed to put financial stake in the Institute for it to be truly "of the people."¹⁴⁰ He launched an aggressive grassroots campaign asking for ten and twenty-five dollar donations from workingmen themselves.¹⁴¹ This effort operated in tandem with a years-long operation, motivated by the same impetus, to build a permanent site for the Institute separate from Cooper Union.¹⁴² Though the donor base expanded, it remained a select few individuals who furnished the majority of the budget.¹⁴³ Efforts to relocate the financial base in the working class proved impossible to achieve.

Nevertheless, the influence of donors was likely limited because the Institute already represented the more conservative elements of organized labor. On labor issues, the emphasis the Institute placed on legislation reflected the leadership's belief that in a democracy, the ballot was the form of protest that remedied social troubles. Far from advocating the overthrow of the capitalism, workers supported piecemeal reforms to improve the conditions of capitalism. The Institute voted unanimously for child labor prohibitions.¹⁴⁴ Members sought higher wages and better working environments, pursuing tactical alliances with politicians who satisfied these immediate demands. One lecturer, surprised his personal views were more extreme than those of the audience, remarked that the workers demonstrated a "spirit of fairness towards the employers

¹³⁸ "General News," *New York World*, January 18, 1900.

¹³⁹ Fisher, "The People's Institute," p. 45.

¹⁴⁰ Ninth Annual Report (1906), p. 15, Box 26 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁴¹ "A Home Like the Garden," *New York Tribune*, May 4, 1903; "Propose People's Palace," *New York Times*, May 4, 1903.

¹⁴² "People's Palace Certain," *New York World*, Mar. 17, 1903.

¹⁴³ Twelfth Annual Report (1909), pp. 40-44, Box 26 Folder 5, Printed Material, P.I., NYPL.

¹⁴⁴ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 57.

that gains them my respect.”¹⁴⁵ The reform press took as a barometer of the Institute’s success the “several cases of conversion from radicalism of the socialistic and anarchistic types.”¹⁴⁶

Citing historian James Weinstein, Fisher suggests that affluent contributors donated to the Institute to pacify the working class, thus ensuring the “present system would progress.”¹⁴⁷ Such a view, nonetheless, “exaggerates Progressivism’s search for order and neglects its fervor for fairness,” according to political scientist Judith Sealander.¹⁴⁸ In her analysis of Progressive Era philanthropy, she finds that many wealthy individuals did sincerely come to the belief that modern institutions had a duty to improve the quality of life for more Americans. Elites who attended to benevolent causes were not simply defending a status quo but instead advancing a new system in which the upper class provided social assistance to the lower class even as it maintained power.

The Institute seldom worried the wealthy elite, but it attracted frequent objection from socialists and anarchists who preferred more radical approaches to problems of labor. The conservatism that seemed to many an admirable achievement of the Institute was, to others, its fatal weakness. *The People*, the daily publication of the Socialist Labor Party, commented sarcastically: “The People’s Institute, backed by various ‘philanthropic’ millionaires, gives a course of ‘lectures’ on various nights of the week of the week for the purpose of ‘educating the masses’—that is to say, to sidetrack them from any movement of toward the Social Revolution.”¹⁴⁹ As the publication noted, though, it was also true that audience members deliberately “put questions to the speakers that [were] at times extremely embarrassing” as a way

¹⁴⁵ “Capital and Labor to Meet,” *Journal American*, Nov. 27, 1898, Box 30 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁴⁶ “To Reach the Masses, New York Mail, Jan. 5, 1899.

¹⁴⁷ Fisher, “The People’s Institute,” p. 45.

¹⁴⁸ Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 68.

¹⁴⁹ “The People’s Insitute [sic]: An Institute for Mental Befogment, Which Does Not Always Work,” *The People*, Feb. 18, 1901.

to point out their conservatism.¹⁵⁰ Radical workers were the most consistent source of disruption during forums throughout the years. When Samuel Jones, Republican mayor of Toledo, spoke at the Institute, he extolled socialism as the antidote to the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. But when asked by an audience member whether he recognized the class struggle, he grew angry, denouncing the act of “arraying class against class” and any political party that partook in it.¹⁵¹ To radicals, his behavior was not only evidence of the hypocrisy of the Institute but of reformers in general. If capitalists used money to influence the working class, then reformers used empty rhetoric.¹⁵² Percy Grant, a prominent Episcopal reverend who supported socialism in name, spoke in April 1905 on the topic of railroad employment in the West and warned that native-born laborers who caused trouble might find their jobs lost to the Chinese. He suggested that their working conditions were much kinder than those of the Chinese. Marxists charged Grant as a “hireling of capitalism” intent on “blind[ing] the workers of America, while they fastened more completely the shackles of capitalism.”¹⁵³ One audience member questioned, “Is it not true... that the workingmen of America receive less than any other workers, according to their productiveness?”¹⁵⁴ Challenging Grant’s attempt to pit American workers against the Chinese, he questioned, “Is it not true... that the brains of the working class could be used for themselves, if they owned the machinery of production?”¹⁵⁵ Though objections like these were common, those truly dissuaded by the Institute’s conservatism opted to listen to designated socialist and radical lectures elsewhere.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Daniel DeLeon, “Two of a Kind—Jones and Chase,” *The People*, Jan. 29, 1899.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ “The Ethics of Labor,” Jan. 22, 1900, Box 30 Folder 2, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Jacob Riis, “The People’s Institute of New York,” p. 861.

In the 1905 mayoral race, McClellan faced William Ivins, a Republican reformer, and William Randolph Hearst, a newspaper magnate who hoped to topple Tammany Hall with an anti-trust platform centered on municipal ownership of public utilities. Hearst's opponents dismissed him as a self-seeking pseudo-populist who feigned radicalism to gain support when, in fact, he had ingratiated himself with Tammany just years prior. McClellan narrowly defeated Hearst and soundly defeated Ivins. Hearst, in response, raised well-founded allegations of voter fraud and called for a recount. Smith privately thought Hearst a "cheap, insincere demagogue" unsuited for office.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in the interest of fairness, the Institute backed his demands. It held three meetings in support of a ballot recount, but neither the courts nor the state legislature granted it.¹⁵⁸

Hearst's near-victory confirmed the Institute's belief that working-class immigrants had the electoral potential to challenge Tammany Hall. Jews and Germans in the Lower East Side had defected from Tammany to vote for Hearst in a showing that surprised even the candidate himself. Stunned, Smith reasoned Hearst was:

a mixed problem, politically speaking. The people look upon him as one who has, through his papers, spoken more frankly, boldly, effectively, for the people's cause than any other. They question somewhat his sincerity, but they say that whatever be his motive in acting as he has done, the result has been largely beneficial to the people's cause, and that therefore he deserves their support.¹⁵⁹

Voters' fervor appeared partially contingent on a more frank brand of politics that the Institute struggled to embrace. But, whatever the basis for Smith's personal opposition, Hearst was a populist whose calls for municipal ownership of public utilities echoed the very demands made

¹⁵⁷ Letter from Charles Sprague Smith to Richard Gilder, November 2, 1906, Box 15 Scrapbook 10, Richard Watson Gilder Papers, New York Public Library, in Fisher, "The People's Institute," p. 122.

¹⁵⁸ Fisher, "The People's Institute," p. 123; *New York American*, Jan. 16, 1906, Box 32 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; "People's Institute Favors a Recount," *New York American*, Mar. 25, 1907, Box 32 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; *New York American*, May 21, 1907, Box 32 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁵⁹ Letter from Charles Sprague Smith to Theodore Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University.

at the Institute. Boss Murphy was so troubled by Hearst's immigrant support that, as biographer David Nasaw writes, Tammany's acceptance of reform legislation "did not occur until—and it is safe to say, because of—the Hearst challenge."¹⁶⁰ Though Murphy indulged in patronage as ably as his predecessors, he became more permissive of reform as a means of placating constituents.¹⁶¹

The Institute, in addition to supporting Hearst's recount, promoted electoral reform in other respects. At a mass meeting in 1906, audiences adopted a resolution supporting legislation to improve the ballot form, require election officers to pass Civil Service examinations, and procure judicial oversight of recounts in the event of fraud.¹⁶² The Institute found, nevertheless, that its "public work... ha[d] not been as extensive as in previous years. The reform spirit awakened in [the] community ha[d] led to better control, in the public interest, rendering, therefore, action in opposition to proposed legislative measures largely unnecessary."¹⁶³ Public officials, the Institute suggested, increasingly took their constituencies' views into consideration preemptively, not solely in reaction. In Albany, the new Republican governor Frank Higgins, who succeeded O'Dell, often solicited the Institute's input on bills under consideration in the legislature.¹⁶⁴

The subway issue, nevertheless, continued to draw the Institute's attention. For years, the Institute advocated the passage of the Elsberg Bill, which would promote a more competitive bidding process for private transit companies and limit lease and renewal terms to twenty years.

¹⁶⁰ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), p. 241.

¹⁶¹ Nancy Joan Weiss, *Charles Francis Murphy, 1858-1924: Respectability and Responsibility in Tammany Politics* (Northampton: Smith College, 1968).

¹⁶² "Urges Ballot Reform," *New York Tribune*, Feb. 21, 1906; "Ivins Flouts Mayor, Raines, and D.B. Hill," *New York Times*, Apr. 2, 1907.

¹⁶³ Ninth Annual Report (1906), p. 9. Box 26 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁶⁴ Eighth Annual Report (1905), p. 10, Box 26 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; Ninth Annual Report (1906), p. 9. Box 26 Folder 4, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

The Rapid Transit Commission opposed the bill out of concern the short-term contracts would not attract financiers. Even some reform groups agreed, unsure about delaying subway expansion the people badly needed. In 1906, amidst these discussions, the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT) secured a virtual monopoly by merging with the Metropolitan Traction Company, its main competitor.¹⁶⁵ The move infuriated the public and diluted the impact of the Elsberg Bill, but the Institute maintained its support. In a mass meeting in February, William Ivins declared “[the people] would be driven to a revolution against the powers” of the IRT and the Metropolitan.¹⁶⁶ Asked who would rather walk for years than have the subway built in their interests, almost everyone in the audience stood up. Four men registered their disagreement, however, one especially adamant that he would not walk.¹⁶⁷ The bill ultimately passed the state legislature.

The 1907 election of Republican progressive reformer Charles Hughes as governor was grounds for celebration.¹⁶⁸ Immediately upon entering office, Hughes set about the creation of an agency to supervise and regulate corporations that performed a public service, such as electric and gas, under state-granted franchises. In spring 1907, Hughes took the stage of Great Hall to rally support for his Public Service Commission Law.¹⁶⁹ Two months later, he signed it into law, with the State Assembly overwhelmingly disposing of a veto by Mayor McClellan. The Institute’s participants had gladly acquiesced to helping Hughes overcome Tammany’s resistance.

¹⁶⁵ Thirteenth Annual Report (1906), Box 26 Folder 3, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁶⁶ “Ivins Attacks Orr: Stirs Transit Meeting,” *New York Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1906; “900 Citizen-Voters Shout for Reprisals,” Feb. 24, 1906, *New York Times*.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Bulletin*, March 24, 1907, p. 2, Box 27 Folder 5, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁶⁹ “Hughes Gets a Boom,” *The Sun*, Apr. 29, 1907.

The bill, called “one of the most far-reaching reform measures ever put together by an American Legislature,” authorized the creation of two public service commissions.¹⁷⁰ The jurisdiction of the first commission was limited to Greater New York City; though created by a state law and staffed by the governor, it was in effect a “city commission.”¹⁷¹ The Public Service Commission had sweeping regulatory powers and direct oversight over all utility corporations except the telephone and telegraph. It also assumed the “task of planning and constructing, possibility also of equipping and operating, rapid transit lines.”¹⁷² It supplanted the Rapid Transit Commission, which had endured criticism for its mercantile membership and slow pace.¹⁷³ The Commission began to knock down obstacles to subway construction.¹⁷⁴ First, it attempted to increase the city’s constitutional borrowing capacity. Second, to attract private capital, it hoped to repeal the provision of the Elsberg law that shortened leases to twenty years.

In April 1909, Milo Maltbie of the Public Service Commission appeared at the Institute, defending the use of municipal bonds to an audience of 2,500. The crowd responded receptively to Smith’s resolution, which called for the legislature to pass the amendment to raise the city’s debt limit. But the single pronouncement failed to satisfy a man in the audience named Patrick Donohue. Defying decorum, Donohue cried out six resolutions, all affirmed by the unanimous “ayes” of his fellow attendees. He agreed with Smith in demanding passage of the constitutional amendment, but he also condemned any attempt to tamper with the Elsberg law and denounced specific projects that bolstered the power of the transit companies, especially the dominant IRT. “The people,” he roared, must be “freed from the grasp of the Traction Trust, and accomplish the

¹⁷⁰ “Utilities Bill is Law: Hughes Signs Measure Passed Over McClellan’s Veto,” *The Sun*, Jun. 7, 1907.

¹⁷¹ Horatio Pollock, “The Public Service Commissions of the State of New York,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Social Science* 31 (May 1908): p. 118.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Hammack, *Power and Society*, p. 258.

¹⁷⁴ Walker, *Fifty Years of Rapid Transit, 1864-1917*, p. 215.

actual public ownership for which they voted in 1894” in the referendum on the Rapid Transit Act. When Donohue refused to sit down, a policeman dragged him “over half a dozen seats” and ejected him from the hall. Five minutes later “he was almost as forcibly dragged back to the hall by the same policeman, for Mr. Smith had not wanted the man thrown out, and the audience, demanding ‘fair play,’ repeatedly called for his return.”¹⁷⁵ His outburst embodied a refusal to yield to not only the more conservative ends but the more respectable means put forth by Smith.

The Institute was partially successful in its efforts. The constitutional amendment to raise the city’s borrowing capacity traveled swiftly through the legislature and was approved by popular vote later that year. The Institute then sent a report to municipal transit authorities that stated its desire for new rails to be built with public money and, if not, for the city’s complete ownership of lines within ten years.¹⁷⁶ It opposed any unilateral grant of new rail lines to the IRT monopoly. But overcome by the pressing need for expansion, the legislature ultimately chose to liberalize the term restrictions and empower the Public Service Commission to grant leases of city-owned rapid transit lines for any length of time deemed advisable. The Commission, nevertheless, did begin to weigh options for increasing competition in the field.¹⁷⁷

Governor Hughes and Commissioner Maltbie were only two of many public officials who appeared at the Institute to defend their positions or marshal political favor.¹⁷⁸ The practice had commenced five years prior when eight of Seth Low’s city commissioners agreed to speak at the Institute on behalf of the mayor. In 1908, William Howard Taft and William Jennings Bryan, who were running for the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations, graced Great

¹⁷⁵ “Traction Meeting Winds Up in a Row,” *New York Times*, Apr. 24, 1909.

¹⁷⁶ Eleventh Annual Report (1908), Box 26 Folder 5, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; Forum Committee of the People’s Institute, *A Communication to the Members of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment in Favor of a Competitive Subway System* (New York: People’s Institute, 1910), pp. 3-18.

¹⁷⁷ Walker, *Fifty Years of Rapid Transit*.

¹⁷⁸ “‘Heckling’ Candidates: That is Not the People’s Institute’s Ideal’s Method,” *New York Times*, May 30, 1909.

Hall on separate occasions. Thousands gathered to hear their platform, and audience members tested them with questions on their approaches to unemployment, racial strife, and the tariff.¹⁷⁹ Taft later returned in his campaign for a second term.¹⁸⁰ These appearances at Great Hall helped to close the space between public officials and the working class.

In May 1909, District Attorney William Travers Jerome asked the audience of the People's Institute if he could defend his record as he considered a run for re-election that November.¹⁸¹ Though he had come into office in 1901 on a Fusion ticket, he enjoyed some support in Tammany Hall, having performed various favors for district leaders.¹⁸² State Senator Thomas Grady, the Democratic minority leader, observed the gathering from a secluded seat in the audience. Six of Boss Murphy's representatives were also in attendance to assess the advisability of running Jerome for mayor.¹⁸³ Jerome said he had, over his time in office, fulfilled his twin campaign promises to investigate alleged misconduct of the Metropolitan Traction Company and represent the people of New York with integrity. He had voluntarily forgone representation of civil plaintiffs to avoid payment from outside parties. Some in the crowd received him with high regard. But the district attorney was visibly taken aback by the hostility he encountered otherwise. The audience cheered on one man's accusation that Jerome had enforced "one law for the rich and another for the poor" and had been slow in prosecuting corporations, especially the American Ice Company. Another participant brought up a juror's

¹⁷⁹ "Labor Taft's Topic," *The Washington Post*, Jan 11, 1908; "Bryan Questioned by Big Audience," *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1908.

¹⁸⁰ John Collier, *From Every Zenith: A memoir; and some essays on life and thought* (Denver: Sage Books, 1963), p. 70.

¹⁸¹ "Jerome Wishes to Account to Public," *New York Tribune*, May 3, 1909; "Jerome to Run Again Wins a Noisy Crowd," *New York Times*, May 3, 1909.

¹⁸² "Tammany Hall Favors Hearst," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 28, 1906.

¹⁸³ "Leaders Divided on Jerome's Showing," *New York Times*, May 28, 1909.

testimony that Jerome had treated traction magnates leniently in grand jury investigations.¹⁸⁴

After the appearance, Jerome attempted to state his case in greater detail in the *Times*, but, as Jacob Riis commented, the Cooper Union audience had already made evident his unviability for reelection as district attorney, let alone for a bid as mayor.¹⁸⁵

Instead, Boss Murphy, sensitive to the public mood, nominated civic reformer William Jay Gaynor for the mayoral position. Gaynor was a justice for the state Supreme Court with a reputation for rooting out corruption and fraud in Brooklyn. But he was also a realist prepared to make concessions to Murphy that included moderating his personal support for municipal ownership of rapid transit.¹⁸⁶ Tammany opponents took the nomination as a sign they might be able to win seats in municipal government on a Fusion platform. They submitted for the mayoral position businessman Otto Bannard. Smith urged Hearst to insert himself into the running “mainly because [he] represented the cause of public ownership of rapid transit.”¹⁸⁷ His campaign, reformers thought, would not result in actual victory but would “save the fusion ticket,” rescuing reform administrations from their “dizzy moral and intellectual heights they have condescendingly handed down... to an awed and expectant populace.”¹⁸⁸ The campaign pressure he provided would encourage a more “popular and progressive administration.”¹⁸⁹

In the November 1909 election, Boss Murphy appealed successfully to Democrats to turn out for Gaynor. But the Fusion slate was resoundingly victorious. John P. Mitchel was elected president of the Board of Aldermen; Charles S. Whitman district attorney; and George McAneny

¹⁸⁴ “Jerome A Victor in Cooper Union Fight,” *New York Tribune*, May 27, 1909; “Leaders Divided on Jerome’s Showing,” *New York Times*, 1909;

¹⁸⁵ “Jerome States His Case in Full,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1909; Riis, “The People’s Institute in New York,” p. 862.

¹⁸⁶ Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, p. 508.

¹⁸⁷ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, p. 76.

¹⁸⁸ “Hearst as Prophet,” *New York Tribune*, Dec. 15, 1909

¹⁸⁹ In exchange for his sacrifice, Hearst asked for a dinner of appreciation, which the reformers granted. *Ibid.*

Manhattan Borough president. McAneny thanked Hearst for his debt, saying Fusion would keep its campaign promises.¹⁹⁰ He and Whitman, both well-known leaders in the reform movement, reported to the People's Institute shortly after their victory. Their performance, they said, revealed Tammany's inability to survive the united opposition of citizens; it furnished, in McAneny's words, "conclusive proof that [reformers] [could] do the same next time and not let this administration land where the other reform administrations ha[d] landed."¹⁹¹ They believed Gaynor, despite his nominal association with Tammany, was a genuine reformer better able to fulfill his personal visions with them than with any person from the Democratic ticket. Mayor Gaynor pledged his commitment to good government in a letter of acknowledgment.

Tammany Hall could survive elite opposition, but it was forced to reconfigure when protest arose from the people. When Smith and his secretary addressed the City Club in Philadelphia on the management of reform movements, they emphasized the clear advantage secured when reform found its basis in the masses. "The reform movement which stands away from the plain people will never succeed," Smith advised. "You must work with them and they must have confidence in you."¹⁹² Indeed, many progressives might have preferred reform run unilaterally by an enlightened leadership.¹⁹³ But in a democracy, they had to turn to the people to some extent to gain legitimacy and support.

The elite's agenda and its control over lectures, Mattson argues, "hampered the development of a truly powerful and effective democratic public."¹⁹⁴ Smith was aware of this problem. He organized a decentralized network of clubs and councils to encourage citizens to

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ "Tammany Done For," *New York Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1909.

¹⁹² "How to Run Reform Movement," *The Inquirer*, Jan. 5, 1908, Box 34 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁹³ Recchiuti, *Civic Engagement*, p. 14.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

choose and discuss political issues on their own terms at the neighborhood level.¹⁹⁵ Yet, the effort required in these cases for participants to reach public officials was far greater than it was at Great Hall, where well-connected leaders who engaged in social reform full-time eased many of the practical burdens of civic engagement for the working class. At the Institute, reformers were mobilizing the people to their advantage. But the people enjoyed power in numbers and a reliable, if not direct, line of communication to decision-makers thanks to the Institute's leaders, speakers, and press. The platform the people acquired came at the expense of complete control, but it also allowed them to move beyond deliberation alone to effect tangible policy change.

Smith passed away in 1910.¹⁹⁶ Shortly after his death, Hearst offered the Institute his financial support, "suggesting no concession in return."¹⁹⁷ Though hard-pressed for funds, Secretary Collier and the board turned him down, unwilling to "risk such a possibly entangling alliance" with the "serpent."¹⁹⁸ As executives searched for Smith's replacement, the Institute's leaders shared the task of forum supervision.¹⁹⁹ In 1912, the trustees brought in Frederic Howe, a reformer well-versed in the governance of European cities, to serve as the new director.

Howe believed there to be "no training school comparable to politics," and the subway remained at the heart of the Institute's political activity.²⁰⁰ Existing infrastructure had for years failed to accommodate population growth and geographic dispersion, but the city was deadlocked on the appropriate course of action. In January 1911, at the People's Institute, Mitchel and the municipal comptroller endured the uproar of participants again opposing monopolization by the IRT and demanding construction of an independent subway, positions

¹⁹⁵ Fisher, "The People's Institute," pp. 154-159.

¹⁹⁶ Fourteenth Annual Report (1911), Box 26 Folder 6, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

¹⁹⁷ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, p. 76.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ Letter from Secretary to Robert Goldsmith, October 29, 1914, Box 5 Folder 6, Director's Office, P.I. NYPL.

²⁰⁰ Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public*, p. 40.

they re-affirmed in written communication.²⁰¹ Six months later, McAneny recommended the negotiation of dual contracts with the IRT and the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company (BRT) for upgrades as well as new construction and operation.²⁰² “When the subway contracts were being put through by the Gaynor administration,” Howe said, “I organized a campaign for their rejection; they were a betrayal of the city’s interests and the pledges on which the administration had been elected.”²⁰³ The contracts would break the monopoly of the IRT, which the People’s Institute had long challenged. But, as a representative from the Institute testified to the legislature, the proposal violated “the proper safeguards of the Rapid Transit Act” of 1894 that recognized the people’s desire for municipal ownership and operation.²⁰⁴ The bill’s proponents in City Hall argued that the arrangement kept open the possibility of municipal operation in the future. A profitable investment, it brought in capital for an expansion the city could not otherwise afford.²⁰⁵ McAneny and Mitchel returned to Great Hall to offer their perspectives on the city’s needs, and in March 1913, Mayor Gaynor, constrained by financial and social pressures, signed the dual contracts into law.²⁰⁶ The Institute’s leaders admired Gaynor—Collier called him a “Jeffersonian democrat” who rarely conceded to Tammany—but saw his abandonment of public ownership as “apostasy.”²⁰⁷

Nonetheless, with the second decade of the twentieth century, the Institute’s leaders were coming to understand that “the American ideal of democracy [could] never be fully realized if the life of citizenship is to be confined to mere political activity of a partisan sort.”²⁰⁸ They

²⁰¹ “Big Audience Cheers Attacks on Gaynor,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1911.

²⁰² Roger Roess and Gene Sansone, *The Wheels That Drove New York* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), p. 186.

²⁰³ Frederic Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer* (New York: C. Scribner Sons, 1925), p. 240.

²⁰⁴ “Subway Bill Has Many Advocates,” *New York Times*, Mar. 27, 1912.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Sixteenth Annual Report (1913), p. 2, Box 26 Folder 6, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; Roger Roess and Gene Sansone, *The Wheels That Drove New York*, p. 188.

²⁰⁷ Collier, *From Every Zenith*, pp. 73-74.

²⁰⁸ Fourteenth Annual Report (1911), p. 14, Box 26 Folder 6, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

needed to “simulate and train in the individual a broader, more constant, and better informed community spirit, and to awaken in the community a more vigorous, responsible policy with reference to the social life and leisure time of the people.”²⁰⁹ Howe thought the benefits of political deliberation would be muted so long as citizens remained in conditions that made them susceptible to poverty, crime, or vice.²¹⁰ The Institute thus shifted its attention away from direct political engagement towards urban environmental improvement.²¹¹

The Institute was swept up in reformers’ growing faith in the promise of experts and social science to tackle the perils of urban life. Charles Beard called New York the “greatest social science laboratory in the world,” with public intellectuals using theory and statistical methods to help organizations address everything from unemployment to consumer abuse.²¹² They found an ally in Mitchel, who ascended to the mayoralty in 1913 and implemented scientific management during his time in office. At the Institute, Collier wrote:

The time has passed when democracy in America can succeed simply thru broad, smashing movements, wasteful, technically inefficient, mainly emotional in their nature. The period of efficient democracy has come. Our taxation problem has its philosophical but likewise its acutely technical side; equally so our problem of conservation, our problem of electoral efficiency. No longer can American municipalities continue to ignore the need for a carefully planned civic growth...²¹³

Through its various committees and offshoot organizations, the Institute would, over the next decade, research street vice, study commercialized recreation, and, most prominently, expand the use of public schools as community centers by night.

That experts should be in charge of resolving urban problems did not free them from the need to educate the public on their policies. In its lecture season from 1913 to 1914, the Institute

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

²¹⁰ Fisher, “The People’s Institute, p. 259; Frederic Howe, *Confessions of a Reformer* (New York: C. Scribner Sons, 1925), p. 252.

²¹¹ Fourteenth Annual Report

²¹² Recchiuti, *Civic Engagement*, p. 3.

²¹³ John Collier, “The People’s Institute,” p. 1148.

replaced its usual schedule with two public conferences on “A Better New York” and “Problems of Today.”²¹⁴ Sessions addressed “The People’s Play”; “The Immigrant”; “The Prisons of New York”; and “The Conditions of Labor.” The Institute continued to tout home rule as the solution to many civic ills, but its selection of speakers reveals newfound confidence in technical expertise.²¹⁵ In one lecture on food supply, for example, Congressman David Lewis of Maryland, who oversaw the parcel posts in Congress, proposed feeding the hungry through the mail.²¹⁶ Alfred McCann, a journalist devoted to coverage of the food industry, discussed the value, shortcomings, and potential of food labels for consumer protection.²¹⁷ Without public involvement, the Institute could not advance its plans for civic improvement. The Institute defended its experiments in public schools by inviting William Wirt, an educational superintendent from Indiana, to defend New York City’s adoption of the Gary Plan, a design for the repurpose of school as a place for work, study, and play.²¹⁸

As Recchiuti remarks, “Prescribing help for people who didn’t ask for it, or who wanted something else, could, in combination with the notion of science as technical expertise with ability to guide policy decision making, lead to undemocratic means and effective social control.”²¹⁹ By presenting lectures to the public on civic growth, the Institute could engage the people even as it maintained its trust in social scientists and engineers. But Howe seemed more interested in amassing a popular backing than in soliciting critical input. He wanted, for his

²¹⁴ Seventeenth Annual Report (1914), p. 4, Box 26 Folder 6, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL. *A Better and Happier New York* (New York: People’s Institute, 1914), Educational series, Columbia University.

²¹⁵ Frederic Howe, “Home Rule: Remedy for New York’s Civic Ills,” *New York Herald*, Nov. 3, 1912, Box 36, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²¹⁶ “Would Feed City by Parcel Post,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1913.

²¹⁷ “Live topics at Institute,” *New York Tribune*, Nov. 10, 1913.

²¹⁸ Eighteenth Annual Report (1915), p. 16, Box 26 Folder 7, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; Letter, Frederic Howe to William Wirt, Box 5 Folder 11, Director’s Office, P.I. NYPL.

²¹⁹ Recchiuti, *Civic Engagement*, p. 15.

reform projects, “intelligent widespread demand.”²²⁰ As Mattson assesses, Howe appreciated the forum “less for its democratic value and more for its use-value for reformers.”²²¹ Scientific planning therefore probably remained a relatively elitist enterprise at the Institute. For lack of assent, interest, or invitation, audience members were subdued in their participation; historian Thai Jones finds that, in general, immigrants under the Mitchel administration detested the “autocracy of experts which interfered egregiously and unnecessarily with the customs and privacies of the common people.”²²² The Institute, nevertheless, simply practiced the same pedagogy it always had, hosting lectures that implied compatibility between expertise and democracy.

By the same logic, the Institute’s support for scientific expertise did not need to conflict with its support for direct democracy either. The Institute advocated state passage of the initiative, referendum, and recall, which would give voters the right to propose and repeal legislation and to oust elected officials from office by petition.²²³ Howe endorsed these measures for the way they nurtured “a psychological conviction that a government is in effect the people themselves.”²²⁴ In the end, New York State, unable to circumvent deeply entrenched special interests, did not grant these powers. The Institute hosted a number of lectures in support of direct primaries and the popular election of senators, which were both formally adopted in

²²⁰ Frederic Howe, *The Survey* 31 (1913), p. 198.

²²¹ Though Smith had also used the Institute as a site to garner popular legitimacy for his reform agenda, the people to whom he gave guidance seemed more pleased with the benefits they derived in return. There is little to be found on how exactly the Institute’s audiences in particular felt about scientific planning under Howe’s leadership, though it is likely they, like other immigrants, rebuffed the paternalism. Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public*, p. 46.

²²² Thai Jones, *More Powerful than Dynamite: Radicals, Plutocrats, Progressives, and New York’s Year of Anarchy* (New York: Walker & Co, 2012), p. 299.

²²³ Sixteenth Annual Report (1913), p. 3, Box 26 Folder 6, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²²⁴ John Fairfield, *The Public and Its Possibilities: Triumphs and Tragedies in the American City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), p. 153.

1913.²²⁵ Later, the Institute also organized a successful campaign to move polling away from cellars, basements, and shops, where voter intimidation was common, to schools, which were more orderly and spacious.²²⁶ The progressive faith in the promise of democracy, in which the participation of more voters contributed to better governance, also propelled the Institute's advocacy of female suffrage.

Despite Smith's indifference to female participation in the organization's earlier years, the Institute became an important site for the development of feminist thought and activism under Howe's leadership. Female suffrage had appeared out of reach for the first decade of the twentieth century. Machine politics thrived off a smaller, more docile electorate, and Tammany leaders like Al Smith and Robert Wagner feared women, once enfranchised, would support civic reform and prohibition.²²⁷ Elite reformers, on the other hand, feared political disorder. When Democrats and Republicans at all levels of government still opposed giving women the vote, lecturers at the Institute were speaking in defense of female suffrage.

In February 1909, with Smith at the helm, the Institute hosted a meeting in support of female enfranchisement. Charles Zueblin said women's economic freedom was an inevitable component of a larger industrial revolution, and their increasing participation in industrial life necessitated their participation in public life as well. Harriot Stanton Blatch, the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton who brought working-class women into the suffrage movement, contended that England had benefited from granting woman the municipal vote. A German man, jumping to his feet, exclaimed, "Wouldn't women be more open to corruption in politics than

²²⁵ "Josiah Quincy's ideas," *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1909; H. Feldman, "The Direct Primary in New York State," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Aug 1917), p. 496.; "For New Constitution: Chief Justice Clark Sees Nothing Good in 'Antiquated Document,'" *New York Tribune*, Nov. 23, 1906.

²²⁶ "Urges the Use of Our Schools as Polling Places," *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1914; Twentieth Annual Report (1917), p. 62, Box 26 Folder 7, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²²⁷ Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, p. 802.

men, and wouldn't the present of a box of candy or an offer of marriage be likely to get her vote at the time of election?" A young woman in the audience shouted back, "Why shouldn't a woman accept an offer of marriage as easily as a man accepts a keg of beer?" One man asked sarcastically why female suffrage should not take the place of male suffrage, given that New York "has had [the latter] for 125 years and ha[d]n't done anything with it." Blatch politely dismissed any tendency to disparage men. Yet another audience member wondered, "If the mothers should spend so much time in politics, they wouldn't have time to train their youngsters not to be immoral; isn't that so?" Zueblin responded in the negative: politics was itself a moral education that would make women into better mothers. One man asked how women would hold office and take care of their homes and families at the same time. Blatch responded there were older women who had finished raising their children who could take these positions. Finally, a man who claimed to be a politician from Manchester suggested Blatch had misrepresented the effects of female suffrage in England, carrying on in academic fashion for quite some time before he finally settled down.²²⁸ In December 1909, the British suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst visited the Institute, providing a history of the conditions in England that had forced suffragettes to take militant methods and invigorating Americans with her radicalism.²²⁹

The movement was gaining momentum, thanks in part to remarkable parades put on by suffragettes. In 1912, Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party became the first national party to adopt women's suffrage into its platform. Returning from an international tour, Catherine Chapman Catt, founder of the New York City Woman Suffrage Party (WSP)—an umbrella organization encompassing nearly all of the city's suffrage groups—spoke at the Institute on the

²²⁸ "Suffragettes to Fore," *New York Tribune*, Feb. 2, 1909.

²²⁹ "Mrs. Pankhurst Bids Us Farewell," *New York Times*, Dec 1., 1909.

awakening of women in democracies around the world.²³⁰ After years of resistance, the state legislature gave in to the WSP's demands to defer the question of female suffrage to the electorate. In 1913, Robert Wagner began pushing the referendum bill through the State Senate with the disclaimer that he was "just as much opposed to suffrage as he had ever been," and Al Smith did the same in the Assembly.²³¹ The *Times* was "totally opposed" to female suffrage, which would "would tend to disorganize society."²³²

Although women's organizations often hosted lavish events to earn the sympathies of the elite, they necessarily performed most of their outreach in middle- and working-class neighborhoods, where the votes lay. Suffragettes sponsored rallies and other entertainment for the public to bring attention to their cause. But "most of all, suffragettes used persuasive oratory."²³³ Schools established by the WSP trained organizers in public speaking.²³⁴ In addition to distributing pamphlets and pushing suffrage in the ethnic press, campaigners flocked to religious houses, neighborhood organizations, and the streets to champion their struggle. The mass meeting was an invaluable tool for public figures to disseminate ideas on a large scale. The Institute was a natural sponsor for the promotion of female suffrage, Great Hall a natural venue.²³⁵

In February 1914, Marie Jenney Howe, wife of Frederic Howe, presided over what was dubbed "the first feminist mass meeting every held."²³⁶ Howe was a district leader in the WSP and founder of the Heterodoxy Club, a countercultural feminist group. At the Institute, twelve

²³⁰ "Welcome for Mrs. Catt," *New York Tribune*, Dec. 1, 1912.

²³¹ Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, p. 802.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 798.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Public Women, Public Words: A Documentary History of American Feminism: 1900 to 1960*, edited by Dawn Keetley and John Pettegrew (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 5.

²³⁶ "What is Feminism? Come and Find Out" Box 9 Folder 7, Cooper Union Activities, P.I. NYPL.

speakers offered their definitions of “feminism,” a term that had only recently entered common parlance. For these speakers, suffrage was only a single component of a more complete social revolution in which women would realize their economic independence, become civic participants, and have sexual freedom. Frances Perkins called it “revolution as a principle.” Max Eastman, editor for *The Masses* and founder of the Men’s League for Woman Suffrage, said feminism entailed “women [being] universally active and free and independent.” Will Irwin said feminism would disprove “all of the bunk talked about the home and fireside.”²³⁷ *Life* magazine poked fun at these “extreme feminists... whose present aim is to destroy what apparatus of civilization we have.” Given that activists were often unmarried or far removed from household affairs, the magazine asked, “why did they have mass-meetings and make ten-minute speeches to a lot of men about the impertinence of homes?”²³⁸ But speakers perceived the predominantly male composition of the audience as an asset.²³⁹ The support of men—and immigrant men of the new urban stock in particular—was not just desirable in a moral sense, but in a practical sense, for only they were eligible to vote in the upcoming referendum.

Crowds flocked to Great Hall the following week for a second meeting, in which six leading feminists—all women—presented their arguments. Rheta Childe Doore, editor-in-chief of the influential weekly newspaper *The Suffragist*, showed it was not a woman’s right to work that was under threat, as other leaders had suggested; rather, it was her right to work with equal pay for equal work and with equal chances for promotion. Rose Schneiderman, a Jewish immigrant who chaired the industrial wing of the WSP and had led the shirtwaist strike, agreed, saying “it behoove[d] [women] to organize the same as [men] for higher wages and better

²³⁷ “Talk on Feminism Stirs Great Crowd,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1914.

²³⁸ “Feminist Mass-Meeting.” *Life* 63 (1914): 405.

²³⁹ “Talk on Feminism Stirs Great Crowd,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1914.

conditions.” Lastly, Charlotte Perkins Gilman discussed a woman’s right to specialize in home industries.²⁴⁰

By 1915, women’s rights campaigners were actively preparing for the November referendum. At the Institute, Gilman and Judge Charles Guy argued women’s suffrage would help eliminate war.²⁴¹ In February, the Institute partnered with the WSP to sponsor a month-long series that covered the women’s movement as it pertained to war, wages, law and politics.²⁴² Catt, Gilman, Door, and Schneidermann all returned to speak. At the session on wages, Florence Kelley, a champion of workers’ rights, discussed the economic necessity of female suffrage.

The meeting on “Women and Politics” run by WSP leader Harriet Laidlaw was especially rowdy. Commissioner of Correction Katherine Davis, one of five speakers and the first woman to head a major municipal agency, pointed out the irony that she did not enjoy the vote despite having thousands of male prisoners and hundreds of male employees under her purview.²⁴³ A heckler took the occasion not to oppose female suffrage but to criticize Davis for poor prison conditions, which he had personally experienced; his fellow protester condemned the conditions of women’s prisons in particular. One questioner responded to a speaker’s proposition that American women, once enfranchised, could work alongside European women to prevent war by noting they had done little to avert it thus far: “Haven’t they been the teachers and the mothers? What ideals have they given their children? They have given them the ideals of soldiers and murderers.” A woman on the other side of the hall rejoined, “I should like to ask the gentleman: And did he not have a mother and did she have brains and an education and is she not

²⁴⁰ “Feminists Ask for Equal Chance,” *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1914.

²⁴¹ “Let Women Hold Public Offices, Says Justice Guy,” *New York Press*, Jan. 30, 1915, Box 37 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL; “Advocates a ‘World City,’” *New York Times*, Jan 6., 1915.

²⁴² Eighteenth Annual Report (1915), Box 26 Folder 7, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*; “Suffrage Feeds Finance,” *New York Tribune*, Feb. 8, 1915; “This Week’s Free Lectures,” *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1915.

as intelligent as he?” Yet another young man piped up, “Wouldn’t it be better, especially now that the suffragists want the men’s votes, if they would treat them less as if they had horns and try to flatter them a little?” The audience laughed at the remark, but Laidlaw treated it seriously, saying she would see to it that any campaigner who demonizes men “never stands on a suffrage platform. The suffragists believe more in men than any other women. That is the reason they wish to work with them... They believe that nowhere in the world can be found such splendid manhood as in America.” The audience, evidently satisfied, if not flattered, thundered with applause as the suffragists waved flags.²⁴⁴

The Institute’s advocacy on female suffrage was the ultimate commitment to popular politics: working-class men sought the extension of democratic rights as they were exercising their own. Tammany, despite lingering opposition, readied itself for what might come. In the summer of 1915, Boss Murphy asked Frances Perkins if she were one of “those woman suffragettes.” When she confirmed she was, he responded, “Well, I am not.” “But,” he qualified, “if anybody ever gives them the vote, I hope you will remember that you would make a good Democrat.”²⁴⁵

The 1915 statewide referendum failed by an overwhelming margin. In New York City, almost 60 percent of men had voted against the measure. Blatch immediately retreated to nativism and blamed the immigrant population. With the next referendum planned for 1917, women’s organizations doubled down on their efforts. Bombarding public officials, women’s organizations compiled a petition of over one million women who desired the vote and personally contacted every single registered voter. Social workers like Kelley and Jane Addams, who interacted daily with immigrant workers, tried to shed the movement’s native, middle-class

²⁴⁴ “Anti-Votes Claque Attacks Miss Davis,” *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1915.

²⁴⁵ Frances Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 26.

bias.²⁴⁶ Catt embraced a pro-war stance to show women were patriots whose demand for full enfranchisement was actually quite moderate.²⁴⁷ The suffragists won over the reform press. Tammany officials, warned that any opposition would be remembered and punished, completed its policy reversal and projected impartiality on the matter by the time of the referendum.²⁴⁸ In November 1917, New York became one of the earliest states to grant women the right to vote. The referendum passed by a margin as large as that which had doomed it two years earlier. In a startling turn from 1915, sixty of sixty-two assembly districts in New York City supported the measure. As sociologist Elinor Lerner calculates, “It was the City, with its immigrant, working-class population which carried the state for woman suffrage.” Religious and cultural conservatism precluded the support of most Irish and a number of Italian voters, but the intensity of Jewish support in the Lower East Side was extraordinary.²⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the Institute had, in 1916, installed Edward Sanderson as the new managing director. A clergyman aligned with the Social Gospel movement, Sanderson maintained the Institute’s focus on community affairs.²⁵⁰ Assisting the federal government in its efforts at immigrant acculturation, the Institute administered night classes, pushed for safer recreation, and organized artistic and cultural entertainment. In the lecture season leading up to the 1917 female suffrage referendum, the Institute had played its role in the suffrage debate, hosting two forums on the topic, one of which was in conjunction with the New York State Woman Suffrage Party (a separate entity from the WSP).²⁵¹ Nonetheless, by that point, it was mainly the war that

²⁴⁶ Elinor Lerner, “Immigrant and Working-Class Involvement in the New York City Woman Suffrage Movement, 1905-1917: A Study in Progressive Era Politics” (Ph.D. dissertation, U.C. Berkeley, 1981), p. 8.

²⁴⁷ Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, p. 998.

²⁴⁸ John Buenker, “The Urban Political Machine and Woman Suffrage: A Study in Political Adaptability,” *The Historian* 33 no. 2 (Feb. 1971): p. 269.

²⁴⁹ Lerner, “Immigrant and Working-Class Involvement in the New York City Woman Suffrage Movement,” p. 145.

²⁵⁰ Despite Sanderson’s alignment with Social Gospel Christianity, there were no noticeable changes to the Institute’s program that would seem to reflect his religious ideology.

²⁵¹ Twentieth Annual Report (1917), pp. 66-67, Box 26 Folder 7, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

dominated political discussion at the Institute. The war captured citizens' political attention. An English professor invited to speak at the Institute apologized that he could not furnish expertise on anything interesting related to the war; any subject he chose "would seem to Americans... so remote from the realities as to be hardly worth considering."²⁵²

Speakers covered the war comprehensively. They detailed the war's economic background and trade. They examined the war's relation to theories like internationalism and socialism as well as its import to various ethnic groups, like the European Jew, Poles, and Bohemians.²⁵³ But they were also keenly interested in maintaining U.S. neutrality and promoting peace. Lecturers discussed the war's heavy costs and proposed solutions for geopolitical reorganization. The Institute had, as early as 1904, shown its preference for pacifism by supporting U.S. participation in the Hague Peace Conference.²⁵⁴ In 1907, too, the Institute's audience had affirmed the working-class desire to abolish war in a convention of the National Peace Congress.²⁵⁵ Maintaining these tendencies, the Institute held a meeting in 1915 in partnership with the American League to Limit Armaments to support pacifism in the First World War.²⁵⁶

The Institute's leaders had begun to encounter increased surveillance from advisors in 1914. As Howe had written of lectures planned for the war, "We [originally] planned our course... to have the point of each nation represented on a different evening. Our trustees, however, objected to this plan, after a considerable amount of work had already been done upon

²⁵² Letter from S.K. Ratcliffe to Frederic Howe, Oct. 23, 1914, Box 5 Folder 1, Director's Office, P.I. NYPL.

²⁵³ Eighteenth Annual Report (1915), Box 26 Folder 7, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²⁵⁴ Charles Sprague Smith, Memo, December 18, 1904, P.I. NYPL in Fisher, "The People's Institute," p. 144.

²⁵⁵ *Proceedings of the National Arbitration and Peace Congress* (New York: The Congress, 1907); "Our First Peace Congress," *The Sun*, Mar. 24, 1907, Box 32 Folder 5, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL;

²⁵⁶ "For Secretary of Peace," Jan. 27, 1915, Box 37 Folder 1, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

it.”²⁵⁷ That trustees had not in the past heeded their given rationale of “avoiding partisan discussion” reflects the unique pressure the war exerted onto the Institute.²⁵⁸ After Sanderson became director, and the U.S. was contemplating entry into the war, the Institute’s forums only commanded greater attention and apprehension.

On February 12, 1917, the *Times* reported that several thousand men and women at the People’s Institute had passed a resolution calling on Congress to take all measures to avoid entry into the European war “at the eleventh hour.”²⁵⁹ The crowd at Great Hall insisted any action involving international war be put to direct referendum of the people. Over twenty forums across the city had introduced the same resolution, gaining near universal approval of their audiences.

The next day, Sanderson wrote in to the *Times* to clarify that the “vote must in no way be construed as expressing the opinion of the People’s Institute.” He “did not himself favor the resolution, but did favor giving the people an opportunity of expressing their attitude toward it,” as was asked of all forum leaders in Greater New York. Sanderson said the government often neglected the people’s voice and the Institute’s forums had “been for many years the medium through which that voice could be heard.”²⁶⁰ His composed rhetoric betrayed a more alarming truth: Sanderson prioritized the *registration* of public opinion over *allegiance* to it, marking a major departure from the stances of his predecessors. After the U.S. entered the war in April 1917, the Institute’s leaders, wary of the dangers bred by forums, wrote:

In our present national crisis a tremendous task and severe strain have been placed upon this Forum, as upon all institutions in which a sincerely free expression of public opinion is fundamental. Our democracy consists of many and varied elements with intensely conflicting economic interests, and ideals of justice. To find for these many idealisms their proper valuations and place in our national loyalty, to permit to each just the freedom of expression which the councils of democracy demand, and to weld the truth of each into

²⁵⁷ Letter from Secretary of Frederic Howe to Dr. J. Garner Smith, Dec. 22, 1914, Box 5 Folder 11, Director’s Office, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ “Cooper Union Peace Vote,” *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1917.

²⁶⁰ “The Cooper Union Vote,” *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1917.

a true national consciousness, presents to The People's Institute a task and an opportunity of service to the nation as great as any with which it has ever been confronted.²⁶¹

The statement prescribed no obvious answers, but it soon became evident they would repress political action at the Forum altogether. On two occasions, the trustees of Cooper Union declined permission for meetings deemed too “radical,” prompting one donor’s concern that “free speech ha[d] been abandoned at the People’s Institute.”²⁶² The Institute stopped hosting mass meetings on specific issues. Though it had already relinquished some of its legislative agenda to other reform groups, the Institute fully surrendered its activity as a pressure group.²⁶³ Forum chairmen also ceased the practice of taking referenda to forward to public officials. The Institute was unwilling to risk involvement in contestable political questions any longer. Though it still hosted the occasional forum on contemporary issues and sent letters to legislators from time to time, the subjects of the lectures shifted for the most part to philosophy, psychology, and humanism.²⁶⁴ Sanderson never explicitly addressed these changes, let alone attribute them to the war. Rather, he maintained the Institute was, as it had always been, “perfectly free.”²⁶⁵ The changes, to be sure, fell in line with the Institute’s longer-standing retreat from political activity since Howe’s arrival. But it was during the war that the withdrawal became fully apparent.

In November 1917, exactly seven months after the U.S. entered the war, Judge John Hylan, the Tammany Hall candidate and a protégé of Hearst, was elected mayor, defeating the incumbent Mitchel and the Socialist Party’s Morris Hillquit. Given Mitchel’s reputation among reformers as an honest, professional administrator, the return of Tammany Hall into the mayor’s

²⁶¹ “The People’s Forum and the People’s Church,” pp. 14-15. Twentieth Anniversary Yearbook (1918), Box 26 Folder 12, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²⁶² Letter from Edward Sanderson to Helen Sahler, Dec. 12, 1921, Box 6 Folder 5, Director’s Office, P.I. NYPL.

²⁶³ Eighteenth Annual Report (1915), p. 27, Box 26 Folder 7, Printed Material, P.I. NYPL.

²⁶⁴ Letter from Edward Sanderson to J.T. Clark, March 16, 1917, Box 5 Folder 7, Director’s Office, P.I. NYPL.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

office seemed to many good cause to abandon faith in popular government.²⁶⁶ The elite newspapers criticized administration, reporting on his appointments of machine Democrats and his ties to Hearst. Hylan, upon entering office, said, “We have had all the reform that we want in this city for some time to come,” which might be read, as historian Mike Wallace suggests, as a more respectable version of Tammany’s damnation of reform chanted in Van Wyck’s 1897 election.²⁶⁷

Yet it is also true that Hylan and Van Wyck were fundamentally different in character. For all the objection he claimed to reform, Hylan won on a platform very much shaped by it. In his bid for re-election, Mitchel assumed a nationalist position on the war denouncing the Germans and Irish. As mayor, he had devoted insufficient resources to municipal services and repelled constituents with his government-by-experts.²⁶⁸ No reform mayor had ever won re-election against Tammany, and Mitchel was no exception. But reform’s inability to maintain office for long did not mean Tammany was immune to its influence. Hylan, in his campaign, co-opted Hillquist’s socialist platform. Assuming stances immigrant had maintained at the Institute for two decades, Hylan denounced gas corporations and promised “public ownership and operation of all traction systems, including marginal railways and docks, gas, electricity, and the telephone, as well as terminal markets, storehouses, and refrigerator plants.”²⁶⁹ It was this pledge that won over Hearst’s endorsement and ultimately the people’s vote. Hylan was, as historian Mason Williams writes, “himself a kind of progressive, reflecting especially the municipal populism of his sponsor, Hearst.”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Elmer Graper, “The New York City Election,” *The American Political Science Review* 16 no. 1 (Feb. 1922), p. 79;

²⁶⁷ “Mayor Rejects Volunteer Aid,” *Good Government* 35 no. 1 (1918), p. 25.; Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, p. 996.

²⁶⁸ Jones, *More Powerful than Dynamite*, pp. 299-300.

²⁶⁹ Wallace, *Greater Gotham*, p. 996.

²⁷⁰ Mason Williams, *City of Ambition: Franklin Roosevelt, Fiorella La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), p. 38.

Hylan followed through on his agenda upon entering office. He began construction of the socialist-backed Bronx Terminal Market to improve food distribution and supported a state rent control law to protect displaced tenants.²⁷¹ He worked obsessively to protect subway passengers from the abuse of transit companies. Wartime inflation had lowered the real value of the nickel subway fare, and the growth in mileage led to soaring subway costs for the IRT and the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation (BMT), the successor to the BRT. Both companies were approaching bankruptcy and demanded raises in the ticket price; other cities had increased and even doubled their car fares.²⁷² But Hylan fought vigorously to prevent any such increase in New York. At a time of surging expenses, it was because of Hylan that a ride on the subway remained, as historian Clifton Hood has described it, a “welcome bargain” for New Yorkers.²⁷³

The Tammany mayor, faithful to the public mood, began to finally bring a longtime goal of the Institute to fruition. Blocking attempts to extend relief to transit companies, Hylan insisted the subway ought to be “planned, built, and operated to accommodate the transportation needs of the people... and not solely for the financial advantage of the operating companies of their officials.”²⁷⁴ Where Van Wyck had abandoned his campaign promises on the subway matter, Hylan upheld them. With Hylan’s support, the state legislature created a transit commission that permitted placement of the rail system under city control. Created in 1923, the New York City Board of Transportation had full authority to build and operate its own subway. It soon broke ground on the Independent Subway System to compete with the IRT and BMT. Hylan’s actions set into motion the complete assumption of control by the public sector over the New York City

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Graper, “The New York City Election,” p. 79.

²⁷³ Some have partially attributed Hylan’s vigor to being fired from his position as a train engineer for the BRT early on in his career. Clifton Hood, *722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 182.

²⁷⁴ The City Record: Official Journal, vol. 5, parts 9-10, 1922, p. 6467, in Hood, *722 Miles*, p. 203.

subway nearly two decades later. In an action called “unification,” the Board of Transportation would in 1940, under Mayor Fiorella La Guardia, take over the assets of the IRT and BMT, bringing all subway lines at last under complete municipal ownership.

When Governor O’Dell first refused a perpetual subway franchise in 1900 in response to the Institute’s mass meeting, Smith said, “It would be idle as well as impossible to attempt to define the share of the People’s Institute in achieving this result that commends itself to all citizens alike.”²⁷⁵ From 1897 to 1917, political outcomes were at times in accord with the votes and positions put forth at the Institute’s meetings, and at times they were not. The reform movement in New York was fragmented; the Institute was only one of a multifarious network of civic groups pushing independent agendas to address the city’s problems at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁷⁶ But the Institute boasted a membership of urban, working-class immigrants, which by virtue of its large size, defiant voice, and symbolic and electoral importance could effectively pressure government officials. The political action conducted at the Institute resulted in a constituency that not only doubled in size but whose interests were better represented in city and state government, perhaps most surprisingly by Tammany Hall. When the necessity of popular support so dictated, Tammany appeared willing to reform its policies.

The Institute’s forums opened audiences up to knowledge and to leaders they might not otherwise have encountered. They discovered at the Institute an accessible form of organized political education and engagement. Marcus Ravage, a Jewish immigrant introduced to lectures by his fellow garment workers, recounted:

I began to buy newspapers and watch for the notices... There were scores of lectures every week, I found, and I went to as many as I could... I remember going once to a meeting at Cooper Union to protest against the use of the militia in breaking a strike somewhere in the West, and then retiring with a crowd of others to the anarchist reading-room on Eldridge Street to hear an informal discussion on ‘Hamlet versus Don

²⁷⁵ Smith, *Working with the People*, p. 56.

²⁷⁶ Peter Filene, “An Obituary for the Progressive Movement,” *American Quarterly* 22 no. 1 (Spring 1970): pp. 20-34.

Quixote. There was a peculiar, intoxicating joy in just sitting there and drinking in the words of the speakers, which to us were echoes from a higher world than ours... Our poor, cramped souls were yearning to be inspired and uplifted. Never in all my experience since, though I have been in collies and learned societies, have I seen such earnest, responsive audiences as were those collarless men and hatless girls of the sweat-shops.²⁷⁷

At a time when many institutional opponents of the Democratic machine decided upon nativist treatment of the country's newcomers, reformers at the Institute tried an alternative approach they judged superior on both moral and strategic grounds. The lectures helped the elite to recognize immigrants' popular clout as well as their capacity for meaningful contribution within civic life. Public officials frequently wrote directors of the Institute hoping to address the people, seeking their approval but also realizing they would be—and ought to be—held accountable for their words and actions.²⁷⁸ As Woodrow Wilson remarked of his early appearance in Great Hall,

One of the valuable lessons of my life was due to the fact that at a comparatively early age in my experience as a public speaker I had the privilege of speaking in Cooper Union in New York... I want to tell you this, that in the questions that are asked there after the speech is over, the most penetrating questions that I have ever had addressed to me... came from the plain fellows... They asked questions which went to the heart of the business and put me to my mettle to answer them.²⁷⁹

With the war on the horizon, humanitarianism gave way to more militant national campaigns to Americanize immigrants. The federal government called for the rapid acquisition and exclusive use of English as well as adherence to Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms. The “100 Percent Americanism” movement demanded universal conformity through absolute identification with the nation.²⁸⁰ Government agencies and corporate sponsors forced immigrant workers through theatrical displays of loyalty. The crusade culminated in the passage of the Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, which restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Yet, many years before the official movement began, working-class

²⁷⁷ Ravage, *An American in the Making*, pp. 147-148.

²⁷⁸ See General Correspondence, Directors' Office, P.I. NYPL.

²⁷⁹ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (New York: Doubleday, 1913), p. 98-99.

²⁸⁰ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), p. 204.

immigrants at the Institute were excitedly becoming Americans under far less offensive circumstances. When District Attorney Jerome addressed the Institute in 1909, the *Times* observed:

[Smith] said it was a great occasion, a history making event, as it was the realization of democracy. He said every political party must write into its platform ‘government with the people,’ and that was what the meeting... signalized. Waxing enthusiastic, he said that every one must demand that parties listen to the people, and then he shouted: ‘Let all rise! Let all rise! All rise! Don’t keep your seats. Rise and make that demand!’ The crowd was good natured, and rather reluctantly and wonderingly it rose, just to please the somewhat overwrought speaker. Jerome was presented and again applause, more demonstrative than before, greeted him.²⁸¹

Inside Great Hall, participants showed little interest in contrived performances of cultural or political allegiance. They flocked to the Institute not to quell others’ anxieties but to satisfy a genuine impulse for civic engagement. Yet their participation did incidentally amount to a form of “Americanization” in its own right. Absorbing ideas, challenging speakers, and voicing demands, New York City’s working-class immigrants nurtured a commitment to participatory democracy day by day and constructed their political identities. With volition and enthusiasm, they took charge of their own Americanization.²⁸²

²⁸¹ “Jerome a Victor in Cooper Union Fight,” *New York Tribune*, May 27, 1909.

²⁸² Over 550 organizations throughout the country replicated the free open forum style of the People’s Institute, the most famous being Ford Hall Forum in Boston. “People’s Institute Opens Next Week: Forum’s Total Audience for 25 Years Number 2,500,000,” *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 1922; Arthur Meyers, *Democracy in the Making: The Open Forum Lecture Movement* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012), p. 73.

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