

A Microcosm of the Progressive Era: Upton Sinclair's Helicon Hall

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Abstract: The Progressive Era of the United States manifested a myriad of distinctive socio-political tendencies, including a penchant for scientific management, democratic politics, racial exclusion, and the rise of intellectual discourse. Upton Sinclair, a muckraking journalist and activist, exemplified the Progressive zeitgeist and is best known for his exposé of the meat-packing industry, *The Jungle*. Less well-known is Upton Sinclair's 1906 social experiment—a cooperative colony named Helicon Hall. Helicon Hall can be seen as a microcosm of the Progressive Era broadly, despite its limited sample size. Generally, Helicon Hall exhibited the same socio-political values as Progressive Era society, diverging in terms of a few specific policies, particularly with regard to women. There is a lack of literature about Helicon Hall, seeing as it was a short-lived experiment. Even so, examining the society of Helicon Hall reveals much about the values of the Progressive Era broadly, as well as contemporary intellectuals' utopian tendencies.

Keywords: Upton Sinclair, Helicon Hall, Utopia, Progressive Era

1. Introduction

On June 14th, 1906, Upton Sinclair, freshly propelled to fame by his muckraking exposé of the meatpacking industry, *The Jungle*, proclaimed that he, once again, “ha[d] a problem to solve.” To the readership of *The Independent*, he implored, “Is a man to be denied the privilege of parenthood just because he happens to possess an intellect? ...Shall [he] have to marry [his] housekeepe[r]?” Ever a man of action, Sinclair had a plan—“a home colony.” [1]. Against the backdrop of the burgeoning reform movements that defined the Progressive era (1896-1917), Sinclair's open letter reflected many core tenets of Progressive reform. Directed at members of the middle class who, faced with familial burdens, could not devote time to “intellectual” jobs such as writing, Sinclair's open letter also raised the “servant problem,” the middle-class intellectual distrust of working-class laborers [1]. To remedy the problems he observed, Sinclair proposed a cooperative colony where principles of scientific management would be applied to domestic responsibilities such as cooking and childcare. After extensive planning, in October 1906, merely four months after the open letter, Sinclair, his family, and around 50 other colonists moved into Helicon Hall, formerly a boarding school located in Englewood, New Jersey.

A comparison of Sinclair's plans for Helicon Hall, outlined in his 1906 open letter, and their execution reveals that although Sinclair intended Helicon Hall to be an application of Progressive scientific management to empower middle-class intellectuals, its real innovation was the creation of

a radical society with a vibrant culture of intellectual discourse. Such society embodied the Progressive conception of democracy and, despite its racial and religious exclusion, genuinely and vigorously sought out an ideal world—a utopia. This paper explores the execution of Progressive ideals in Sinclair’s Helicon Hall, including scientific management, simultaneous democratic and exclusionary politics, and intellectual discourse.

2. Scientific Management at Helicon Hall

Limited by material realities, Helicon Hall fell short of Sinclair’s Progressive ambitions for a subversive scientific remedy to the twin burdens of middle-class intellectual and familial responsibilities. As Sinclair outlined in his open letter, he intended to start a cooperative colony to solve a concrete problem in his “private affairs”—the “servant problem” of a man “possessed of a small family and a small income,” who “wishe[d] to be free to turn his attention to intellectual pursuits.” [1]. The fact that Sinclair’s own family life inspired his reformism reflected how many contemporary Progressive reform movements originated from empirical observation and reformers’ own lived experiences. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union, directly responding to domestic abuse by drunken men, exemplified such a tendency [2]. Moreover, Sinclair enthusiastically appealed to readers of his open letter by characterizing his cooperative home to be a “rational and scientific” application of the “machine process to...domestic affairs.” [1]. Sinclair’s suggestion that Helicon Hall could be as efficient as a “machine” reflected the Progressive era’s near-obsession with efficiency, which reformers practically equated to moral good, and his plan to hire experts to oversee the colony mirrored Progressive reverence for expert wisdom [3]. Nonetheless, as historian Lawrence Kaplan explained, Helicon Hall’s commitment to scientific efficiency, though not for lack of trying, grew “increasingly diffuse.” [4]. The organizers’ inexperience in communal planning and their inability to hire experts combined to disarm the operation [4]. Even Sinclair himself could not focus on his “intellectual pursuits” due to his involvement in Helicon Hall’s logistical committees [1,4]. Thus, Helicon Hall largely did not realize Sinclair’s ambitions for scientific management.

Though Helicon Hall’s limited execution of Sinclair’s system of cooperative childcare did not significantly empower mothers, it transformed children’s lives. Abolishing single-family childcare, Sinclair’s open letter featured extensive plans for “two separate establishments” for infants and children, “both...scientifically constructed,” overseen by a “board of women directors” and operated by “trained nurses and kindergarten teachers.” [1]. However, Sinclair himself recalled in his 1962 autobiography that this ambitious vision was executed by merely “one full-time employee [of the] children’s department.” [1]. The rest of the time, mothers took turns caring for the children “at an agreed rate of compensation.” [5]. According to Edith Summers Kelley, Sinclair’s secretary, in a posthumously published memoir written after Helicon Hall’s end, this arrangement gave mothers time to “eat her meals in peace and quiet.” [6]. Such meager improvements were insubstantial in empowering mothers’ intellectual pursuits, yet in turn, revolutionized children’s lives. Children, according to Sinclair’s autobiography, now “[lived]...social[ly] and...respect[ed] the rights of others,” even democratically discussing their problems in a “children’s parliament.” [5]. Such alternative education appealed to women, such as Undena Eberlain, a colonist whose daughters would grow up to also participate in co-operative colonies; she professed in a letter to her sister that she “could hardly bear to come home” after visiting the colony [7]. Notably, however, Eberlain’s enthusiasm, as she states herself, was “on Lisbeth, [her daughter’s] account.” [7]. This confession revealed that Eberlain’s embracing of cooperative childcare primarily derived from maternalistic concerns rather than her own self-interest, echoing the spirit of women reformers of the Progressive era. Even as women increasingly penetrated the political sphere and worked outside the home, maternalism engendered much of women’s reform in the Settlement, Temperance, and suffrage movements, capitalizing on uniquely maternal sensibilities to create change for the domestic sphere [8].

3. Helicon Hall's Progressive Politics

Sinclair's vision for democratic governance at Helicon Hall and its practical execution embodied the Progressive Era's democratic governmental reforms, even exceeding Progressive democratic principles in its enfranchisement of women. A subversive political development of the Progressive Era was the government's championing of popular participation and direct representation, which manifested in internal governmental reform mechanisms such as the initiative, referendum, and recall [9]. Sinclair began his open letter by invoking popular participation—at Helicon Hall, “where each would fail by himself,” a number of people would work together [1]. In practice, Helicon Hall's political system was markedly redolent of Progressive democratic developments. The colony's “board of directors” would be elected via a secret ballot, and the initiative, recall, and referendum were applied to committee decisions [4]. In addition, as decided in a July 18th meeting about the colony at the Berkeley Lyceum, covered by the *New York Times*, women would vote at Helicon Hall if they paid the same fees as men.” [10]. Empirically, Kelley described the day to day operations of the colony to be “a good deal like running the government of the United States.” [6]. In 1906, women in America remained deprived of the vote—the fact Kelley, as a woman, felt as if she had a part in running a government was significant and a democratic facet of Helicon Hall that stood ahead of its time.

Despite its democratic successes, Helicon Hall also manifested the Progressive era's eugenic anti-Black and antisemitic tendencies. Historians often point to Progressive reformers' simultaneous championing of democracy and extensive engagement in eugenics as the essential Progressive hypocrisy. Progressive reformers, particularly of labor, proclaimed the pseudo-scientific inferiority of any person not of “Anglo-Saxon” descent, and in addition to their long-standing prejudice against Black Americans, accused groups perceived as foreign (such as Jewish people) of “bastardiz[ing] American civilization.” [11]. Perniciously, these attitudes were never overtly delineated in Sinclair's open letter or even in any of his planning meetings. In fact, D.C. Serber, a Jewish man who had “served on four [planning] committees” and even repeatedly “examin[ed] sites for the proposed colony,” would later receive a letter from organizers of Helicon Hall declaring “there was no room for [him].” [12]. In an article published in the *New York Times* on November 12th, 1906, Serber exposed the ambiguously furtive response from the colony, which attributed his removal to an unmet standard of “congenial[ity].” [12]. Serber simultaneously revealed that “a member of the colony...plainly told [him] that Hebrews will not be admitted.” [12]. In handling this affair, Edwin Bjorkman, a Swedish American colonist, published an article in the *New York Times*, two days after Serber's, once again invoking the concept of “congeniality,” qualifying Helicon Hall's selection of colonists as based on “wholly...compatibility,” as opposed to “race or creed.” [13]. The standard of “congeniality” seemed to be a deliberately evasive strategy to preserve the colony's powers of exclusion [4]. Ironically, Bjorkman simultaneously affirmed Progressive eugenics while denying its role in the selection of colonists, declaring that if Serber “had been a Christian of purest Anglo-Saxon stock, it would have made no difference.” [13]. On the other hand, Helicon Hall's exclusion of Black people via a “color provision” was far more overt [13]. Ultimately, the colony's cautious navigation of Serber's accusations illustrated a simultaneous affirmation of Progressive eugenics and a shameful consciousness of its hypocrisy.

4. Intellectual Discourse at Helicon Hall

Accounts from colonists revealed that the spirited political discourse at Helicon Hall, albeit sometimes elitist, made it an intellectual haven. Thus, Helicon Hall's true value was not its limited application of scientific management to domestic burdens, but rather, what Sinclair proclaimed in his open letter to be an assemblage of a group of genuine intellectuals hoping to “practice plain living

and high thinking.” [1]. Michael Williams, a colonist who would go on from Helicon Hall to found *the Commonweal*, a Catholic social justice magazine, attributed the conversations at the colony to the “advanced” “chemical makeup” of the colonists, revealing that the intellectual spirit also had an exclusive, elitist dimension [7]. However, their discourse was also genuine—Williams passionately remembers how the “flimsy house” was constantly “effervescing in monologue, sizzling in conversation, detonating in debate, fuming in argument, flashing in expressions of opinion and exploding in many theories.” [7]. Such vivid imagery contrasted with his characterization of the colony as “flimsy,” revealing that though Williams recognized Helicon Hall’s shortcomings, its stimulating intellectual atmosphere was redeeming. Kelley, similarly, reminisced about the four-sided fireplace at Helicon Hall, divided into “philosophy, philology, philanthropy, and philander,” and the dinners where she sat “at the elbow of an aspiring young writer or beside an artist...getting ready to startle the world,” attesting to the energetic, intellectual haven that Helicon Hall became [6]. Ultimately, it was this capacity of Helicon Hall that sustained the colonists’ utopian aspirations.

Helicon Hall’s utopian mission exemplified the essential Progressive belief in progress and responsibility toward American society. Kelley repeatedly emphasized that the intellectuals at Helicon Hall felt “weighing heavily upon their shoulders, the responsibility” to “prove something to themselves and to the world”—to provide a model for better living and social organization [6]. The colonists’ identification of such a mission illustrated that Helicon Hall, at its best, was an earnest, hopeful attempt at achieving their conception of the ideal world and influencing their contemporaries. This hope to enlighten other Americans never fully came to fruition—Sinclair frequently clashed with journalists because of their refusal to earnestly engage with Helicon Hall, reducing its genuine attempts at reform to satirical headlines such as the “Helicon Hall Has Taken To Bloomers.” [14]. Later, in a 1928 article published in *the Nation*, titled “My Private Utopia,” Sinclair responded by characterizing newspapers as “predatory,” “fill[ing people’s] minds with filth and garbage.” [15]. The vitriol with which Sinclair attacked the media revealed his deep frustration with the media’s defanging and discrediting of his utopia, which he felt, sincerely, could prove to the world the validity of cooperative living, inspire change, and thus fulfill his duty to social justice. Such was the essential spirit of Progressive reform—as Woodrow Wilson articulated in his 1912 campaign speech “What is Progress?” “All [Progressives] ask[ed was] recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing,” capable of improvement by human effort [16]. At heart, Progressive reformers, as historian Don S. Kirschner explained, “saw man as the product of social forces...capable of creative self-fulfillment, and deserving of the opportunity to realize it.” [17]. Through this radical vision, the Progressive reformist tradition overturned social Darwinism and indelibly renewed American society with an ethics of care, recognizing a radical civic responsibility towards other Americans and towards the betterment of society.

5. Conclusion

March 16th, 1907—Helicon Hall, the “flimsy house” of Englewood, burned down in a fire. Today, the causes of the fire remain undetermined, ephemeral suspicions of arson dismissed by the yellow media that plagued Helicon Hall throughout its existence, as well as the court of history. The aftermath awaiting the colonists after the fire was extinguished, in turn, extinguished their vast hope—though most of the colonists emerged unhurt, belongings and manuscripts of life’s work were burned to ash. Kelley recalled that as she walked away from Helicon Hall, “she could not help mourning the fig tree she just planted, which had once been “so full of hope and promise.” [6]. Decades later, Helicon Hall’s imprint on Kelley endured—she confessed that “those days when we were all young together” became even “more precious in the memory.” [6] Though Sinclair would insist in his autobiography that, even at the end of his life, he wanted to rebuild the colony, ultimately, no such attempt succeeded [5]. Perhaps this was simply because the colony never quite realized its

principles of scientific management or because Sinclair, deeply entangled in the weeds of its daily operations, once again forwent his “intellectual pursuits.” [1].

Helicon Hall’s imperfect realization of Sinclair’s original plans in his open letter illustrated that no matter how enterprising those initial aspirations were, they served merely as a rough draft of history. Even as Helicon Hall cultivated a lively, democratic haven for intellectuals, the colonists’ hopes to prove the benefits of cooperative living, to serve as a city upon a hill, were largely dismissed by their contemporaries during its five fleeting months of utopia. Furthermore, Helicon Hall’s hypocritical mistreatment of Jewish and Black people mirrored the shortcomings of Progressive reform broadly. Still, the utopian aspirations of Helicon Hall and the spirit of the Progressive reformers stand as testaments to Americans’ continuous and evolving insistence on demanding a better world. After the fire, Upton Sinclair and many of the colonists would continue to write for social justice. Progressive reformers’ significant rethinking of American society enshrined the liberalism which is the cornerstone of America today. Their immovable faith in progress that mankind must work to achieve our conceptions of utopia lives on.

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