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Abstract

The Scientific Philanthropy in the Nineteenth Century and the Role of Josephine Shaw Lowell

This thesis deals with the response implemented by private organizations to the problem of urban poverty that accompanied the rapid economic and social transformations in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

In those years, industrial expansion was accompanied by the increase of urbanization, internal migration, with massive displacement from the countryside to the city, international migration, especially from Europe, by periodic economic crises and greater visibility of the labour movement with the rise of industrial unions. This context was characterized by the introduction of new models of philanthropic action, aiming at responding to the problems of large segments of the population, often without any guaranteed living wage. These models represented the only answer to the pressing and extended social problem of poverty and were articulated in innovative forms, capable of generating a growing demand for scientific knowledge of the phenomenon.

In particular, we focus on an innovative meaning of philanthropy proposed by social workers: philanthropy which, until then, had had a spontaneous and charitable character, inspired by a moral-religious sentiment, became gradually more and more scientific, trying to meet criteria of effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, we analyze the development of the “Charity Organization Society” which led to a rationalization of the charity and the development and institutionalization of the social work.

In those years informed by the spirit of reform and characterized by the increasing participation of women working as philanthropists, the figure of Josephine Shaw Lowell is particularly interesting for her prominent role played within the COS. Lowell, besides being a prominent social worker, also influenced the debate on poverty, giving a significant contribution to the emergence of the issue of the marginalized and the importance of legislation in order to offer a systematic and more specific framework and tackle the issue of urban poverty.