

Note from the Editor

As a graduate student in the mid-1980s, I intently read the 1976 reprint of Morton White's 1949 book, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism*—a wonderful book that sparked serious attention to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era as fertile periods in intellectual history. Beyond its intrinsic merits, White's book impressed me because I was in revolt against my own Platonist and Idealist tendencies and especially against the impulse to concoct social systems and political perpetual-motion machines that I supposed would benefit humanity if people tried to implement them. White's basic point—that American intellectuals moved away from formalism and abstraction toward a pragmatist, social science, and historicist outlook—remains a commonplace, even if many writers have revised this story around the edges and many others have deplored rather than praised its consequences.

While not questioning the basic trajectory, the articles in this issue renew questions about the wisdom of too quickly discarding formalism. This is especially the case with John Hepp's study of the international law movement. As developed by high-minded conservatives such as James Brown Scott, Elihu Root, and Robert Lansing, the international law movement depended on a quaint, nineteenth-century notion that universal principles could be culled from messy reality, codified, and then written into the operations of constructive institutions such as the World Court or the League of Nations. From a strict, historicist perspective, this is nonsense, but as Hepp implies, sociological jurisprudence has no answer to the international state of nature. Even as many Americans reverted in the early twenty-first century to a faith in unilateral power ratified by self-proclaimed goodness, countries around the world have fitfully adopted the idea—contrived in part by stuffy American lawyers a century ago—that by embedding international law in a network of institutions, they can help turn this convenient fiction into a reality.

Rob Schorman's study of innovative advertisers Claude Hopkins and Earnest Calkins draws attention to competing modernisms behind consumer culture. Hopkins's approach, as Schorman recounts, is more obviously rooted in Victorian notions of "fixed and immutable" human nature. Even when making appeals based on status, glamour, and exoticism, Hopkins emphasized a "scientific" campaign based on systematic market research, in essence, the model-building impulse within modernism. Calkins, a person thrown onto his own mental resources on account of his deafness, tended toward intuition, feeling, and art—another modernist trajectory. American business and economic thought, of course, has oscillated between these poles, sometimes erratically, while retaining a large hankering after the nineteenth-century formalist abstraction of Economic Man.

Kate Sampsell Willmann's essay attempts the difficult task of showing how Progressive Era intellectual currents appeared in Lewis Hine's early photography, given that photography is a notoriously murky medium to analyze intellectually. Imbued with the progressive-education mindset of John Dewey and the Ethical Culture movement, an enthusiastic reader of the William James of *Talks to Teachers* and "The Moral Equivalent of War," Hine embraced the pragmatist celebration of openness to experience, multiple perspectives, and generous empathy. He took to heart the pragmatist reluctance to reduce the "unique individual" to a typology. In Sampsell Willmann's account, even at the start of his photographic career Hine contrasted with Jacob Riis and his Victorian tendency toward excessive typologizing, and also with Alfred Stieglitz and his inclination to lose sight of people by aestheticizing their images. With all its flaws, however, Stieglitz's aesthetic approach to experience—his art-for-art's-sake outlook—does imply an external formal standard, or at least the possibility of it. Without intensity, imagination, and talent, Hine's empathetic approach could never have risen above mere message or politics.

Alan Lessoff

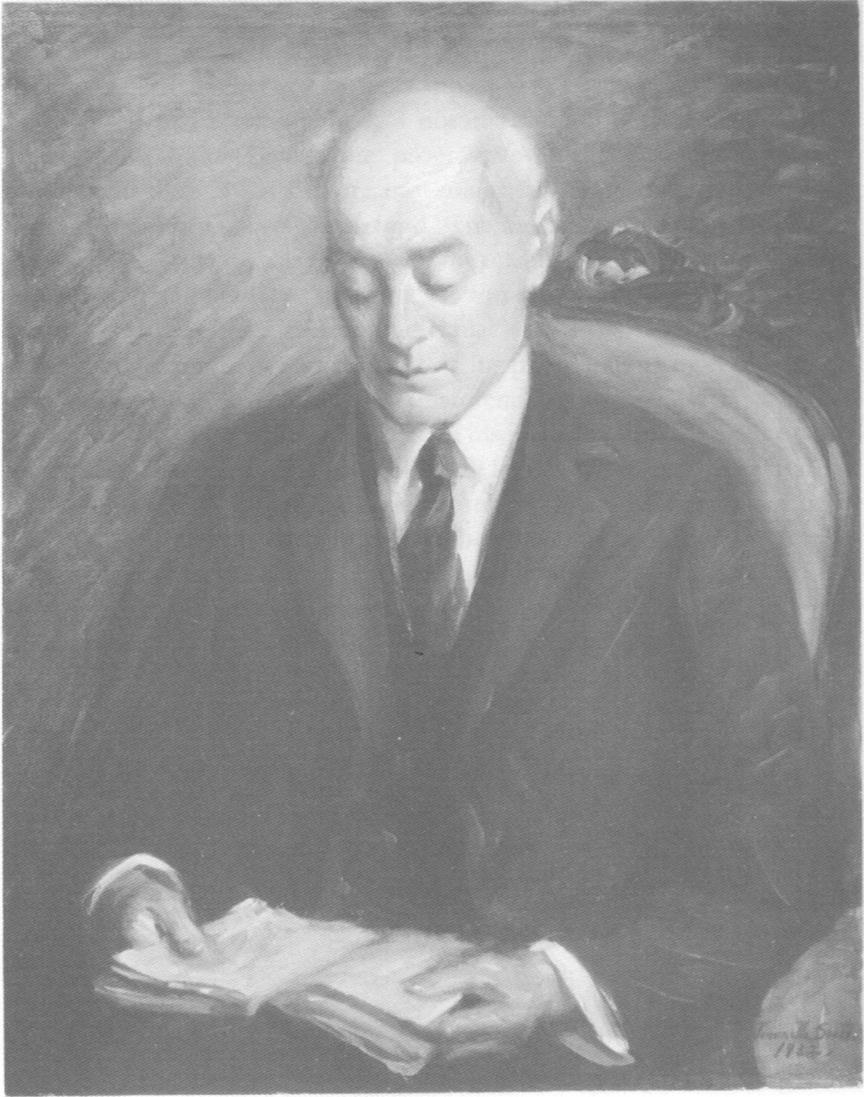


Figure 1: *L'homme qui lit* by Jeannette Scott. James Brown Scott was the member of the family that his sister painted and sketched most often. This version, painted in 1932, is in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which graciously granted permission for its reproduction.