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**An historical analysis of occupational therapy and social activism: From settlement houses to reductionism to disability rights and occupational justice**  
**Subtitle: Lessons learned from the profession's first century to inform our future, enable well-being, and influence social policy**

Rita Fleming-Castaldy

*University of Scranton, Scranton, PA, USA*

**Introduction:** Social activism and the therapeutic use of occupation is rooted in the settlement houses of the late 1800s/early 1900s. Since 1917, exemplary occupational therapy (OT) leaders have advanced government policies and social changes that enable health, well-being, and participation. However, practitioners have historically been largely apolitical. The adoption of disability rights and occupational justice perspectives is congruent with OT's activist heritage.

**Objectives:**

To discuss the impact of historical events and shifting paradigms that hindered or advanced occupational justice.

To honor leaders who confronted socio-political barriers to empower marginalized people.

To provide pragmatic guidelines for practice that is consistent with OT's activist heritage.

To facilitate a contemporary understanding of why history matters.

**Approach:** An inductive qualitative content analysis of 51 graduate historical research projects and an extensive review of international peer reviewed journals and historical archives were completed. Global exemplars of events and people that shaped the profession and provide insights to inform our future were identified.

**Practice Implications:** The impact of social activism, reductionism, and disability rights on OT practice were major themes that emerged from the content analysis and literature. Understanding the profession's evolution from national social activism to a global conceptualization of OT without borders can embolden practitioners to confront entrenched socio-political barriers and current international trends which polarize and marginalize people.

**Conclusion:** History shows that when socio-political systems marginalize people, occupational injustice occurs. Practitioners share a collective ethical responsibility to learn from OT's history and actively fight for sociopolitical changes and legislative initiatives that enable participation.