

Mapping the Young Metropolis: The Chicago School of Sociology 1915-1940

Between 1915 and 1940, a small faculty in the University of Chicago Department of Sociology, working with dozens of talented graduate students, intensively studied the city of Chicago. They aspired to use the approaches of social science in developing a new field of research, and they took the city as their laboratory.

Chicago was the ideal place for such an effort: in the last half of the nineteenth century it had grown from a population of 30,000 in 1850, to 1,700,000 in 1900, probably faster than any city in history. More than one-third of the population had been born abroad, in Germany, Poland, Ireland, Italy, and dozens of other countries. It had a panoply of social problems, such as prostitution, drunkenness, hoboes, and boys' gangs.

The Department of Sociology faculty sent students out into Chicago's "real world" to collect information. They employed all sorts of research methods—they refined existing ones, such as censuses, surveys and mapping, and they invented new ones, such as the personal life history.

They described and analyzed what they had seen. The Chicago sociology faculty wrote books, such as *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Graduate students in sociology wrote dissertations, many of which became books published by the University of Chicago Press. Notable among them are *The Ghetto*, *The Hobo*, *The Gang*, and *The Gold Coast and the Slum*. Many of the books became sociological classics. Prior to this work, sociology was for the most part a combination of history and philosophy, an armchair discipline. Scholars of the Chicago School transformed it into an empirical discipline.

Significantly, the University of Chicago sociologists did not refer to themselves as a "school." The term was applied to them later, when others recognized the impact of their accomplishments as a whole.

Mapping the Young Metropolis was curated by Harvey Choldin. Special thanks to Dan Meyer, Joe Scott, and to the staff in Special Collections for their support in making this project possible.

Foundational Books and Essays

The kick-off statement of the Chicago school was Robert Park's 1915 essay, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment," in which Park lays out a program for scientific research. He presents a general argument, but he implies that the investigation should be carried out in Chicago. In 1925, Ernest Burgess published "Growth of the City:

Introduction to a Research Project," which also became a landmark in urban studies. Burgess had been Park's student, but when he wrote this essay he was a faculty member. Then, in 1938, Louis Wirth published "Urbanism as a Way of Life," which may be seen as a capstone to the Chicago school. Like Burgess, Wirth had come to the department as a student, but after he got his Ph.D., and after he taught briefly at Tulane, he was brought back to become a faculty member.

Like these essays, there is a group of books that anchor the Chicago School. British sociologist, Martin Bulmer, who wrote *The Chicago School of Sociology*, identifies the first two major empirical studies. ". . . *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published in 1918-1920, marks the ascent of Chicago to a position of national and international leadership." Bulmer notes that "the next major piece of empirical research to appear (was) *The Negro in Chicago* (1922)."

Park and Burgess co-authored a textbook, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, which became popular in colleges and universities across the nation. Students referred to it as "the green bible."

The Hobo and The Ghetto

Each of these projects grew out of its author's biography. Before he became a student of sociology, Nels Anderson had traveled the country as a hobo. Then, in graduate school he studied the kind of men he had known when he was on the rails and on the road. In his research he made extensive use of the life history method. *The Hobo* was the first monograph published in the University of Chicago Sociological Series, a cooperative venture between the University's Local Community Research Committee and the University of Chicago Press.

Born in Germany, Louis Wirth came to the United States in 1911, at the age of fourteen. After completing high school in Omaha, Nebraska, Wirth came to the University of Chicago for his undergraduate and graduate education. A Jewish immigrant himself, he studied Chicago's Jewish immigrant community and used it as the basis for his dissertation, "The Ghetto." He received his Ph.D. in 1926, and the book was published in 1928 in the same series as Nels Anderson's.

After receiving his Ph.D., Wirth taught for a year at Tulane University. The University of Chicago appointed him to its Department of Sociology faculty in 1928, and he had an illustrious career in Chicago as a productive teacher and scholar. He served as president of the American Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association.

The Gold Coast and the Slum

The Gold Coast and the Slum is the quintessential example of a dissertation project that became a classic book. Graduate student Harvey Zorbaugh undertook to study a somewhat shabby rooming house district a few blocks north of the Loop, what he came to call the world of furnished rooms. As he got deeper into his research, he discovered that this district was sandwiched between two radically different communities, the wealthy mansions to the east and the poverty-stricken immigrant slum to the west.

Vice and Gangs

Professors and students focused on the city's problems. In his dissertation/book, *Vice in Chicago*, Walter Reckless studied fraud, prostitution, and organized crime.

Gangs are a persistent problem in today's Chicago. University of Chicago sociologists have been studying them since the mid-1920s when they were called boys' gangs. Frederic Thrasher's dissertation/book, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*, was the first systematic study. One by one Thrasher located his gangs by neighborhood and ethnicity.

Another notable dissertation/book was *The Taxi-Dance Hall* by Paul G. Cressey. Aided by a team of assistants Cressey created an ethnography of this popular local institution. He wrote that the taxi-dance hall became a "social world," "morally isolated" from the wider society.

Noting their propensity to study the city's underworld, one contemporary sociologist has written that the Chicago scholars specialized in "Sociology Noir."

Life History Method

Professor W. I. Thomas and his Polish research partner, Florian Znaniecki, introduced the life history as a research tool in their monumental study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Life histories were created by interviewing a subject or asking the subject to write an autobiographical account. Members of the Chicago School continued to use this technique in a wide variety of contexts for decades. Students in sociology classes were often required to collect life histories. Life histories were precursors to what are now called oral histories.

The Local Community

Robert Park asserted that the city represented a new type of community and, due to its large size, was comprised of many smaller communities. The sociology

students devoted much of their research effort to the exploration of these smaller communities.

Ernest Burgess spent decades looking for a statistical basis for these local communities. The material at hand was statistics for city blocks that came from the decennial U.S. Census. The census aggregated those statistics to City Wards. Wards were not useful sociological units; municipal government could re-draw ward boundaries from time to time and furthermore, wards did not correspond with people's communities.

Burgess cooperated with the U.S Census Bureau as they created Census Tracts, approximating neighborhoods. Using these new units, Burgess and the students explored the city looking for the boundaries of local areas. Eventually they divided Chicago into 75 Community Areas, each with its own name. Over the years one of those areas was divided into two and O'Hare International Airport was added to the city so now there are 77 Community Areas. These areas have been absorbed into the city's traditions, so that now they are used in real estate marketing, city administration, journalism, as well as in social research.

Demography, the study of population, was emerging as a new science in the decade of the 1920s. Some population facts came from the decennial U.S. Census and others from Chicago's Board of Health. Chicago school sociologists used elementary population statistics such as birth and death rates as tools with which to describe and analyze local communities.

The Nitty-gritty of Sociological Research

Sociological research was a laborious process. None of the technology we take for granted was available to these intrepid scholars. Proposals and reports were written on typewriters with carbon paper for the extra copies. Questionnaires were typed on stencils and copied on mimeograph machines. Sometimes they were printed using the offset process, which required perfect typing. Respondents, young and old, filled out answers in paper.

Once the surveys were collected their answers had to be counted by hand. Sometimes counting was done with small slips of paper. Percentages were calculated manually. Chicago school sociologists rarely used advanced statistics, but occasionally they did. Note the pages showing manual calculations of regression equations.

Students and advanced researchers today should be thankful for powerful computers that do in seconds that which took hours and days to accomplish!

Mapping Chicago

Burgess's professional archive in the University of Chicago Library is filled with maps, mostly of Chicago. They range from hand-drawn student products to professional products drawn and lettered by draftsmen. The student maps are in colored pencil, crayon and even stickers. The draftsmen's maps are inked in, sometimes shaded with little dots and crosshatching with Zip-a-Tone, now obsolete.

Typically, the maps plotted some social phenomenon, depending upon what data were available, across the city's Community Areas. Suicide, homicide, family income, educational attainment, homeownership, you name it. The sociologists looked for patterns. Did the distribution of income, for example, conform to the concentric circles pattern of urban development proposed by Burgess?

In every course I gave I am sure there were one or two students who made maps. I think the maps of juvenile delinquency were the first ones undertaken. They were followed by maps showing the distribution of motion picture houses. Then came maps showing the distribution of patrons of the public dance halls. . .

We were very impressed with the great differences between the various neighborhoods in the city, and one of the earliest goals was to try to find a pattern to this patchwork of differences, and to 'make sense of it.'

—Ernest W. Burgess, 1964