THE MIXED LEGACY OF THE CHICAGO SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY

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This article examines the legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology. Because the Chicago department so dominated sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, it created the mold or template on which new departments, or the expansion of older ones, were modeled in the 1930s and in the post-World War II period. The legacy of this situation is mixed: On the one hand, the Chicago department made sociology a legitimate discipline in a hostile academic environment, whereas, on the other hand, it helped create a discipline so diversified in substantive specialties, so atheoretical, and so concerned with narrow research and quantitative methods that serious problems of intellectual and organizational integration confront contemporary American sociology.

BEFORE CHICAGO'S "GOLDEN ERA"

The founding of the University of Chicago dramatically changed the academic system in America. While the honor of the first research-oriented system university belongs to Johns Hopkins, or perhaps Clark University, the creation of the University of Chicago with Rockefeller money in 1892 placed enormous pressure on other colleges and universities to compete with this new and aggressive university. As Albion Small (1916, p. 764) recalls:

> In a word, all other universities were at first thrown upon the defensive.... The mythical belief spread at once that this upstart institution had the intention, and the resources back of this intention, to do for the older institutions what the Standard Oil system had done for many of its rivals.... It is doubtful if higher

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> education in the United States has ever received as much a stimulus from a single event as came to it from the founding of the University of Chicago.

In response to this new competition, many public and private universities created new, or expanded old, graduate programs, while redefining their institutional goals in the direction of increased research. The end result was the emergence of fifty or so elite and highly competitive research-oriented universities. This elite system consisted of revamped private colleges, such as the Ivy League, expanded flagship campuses of major state university systems, rededicated or newly created specialized engineering and scientific universities, and dedication of new state and private universities. Around this elite core of fifty institutions, another one hundred peripheral private and state universities emerged, each of which has sought entrance to the elite core through the expansion of graduate education and research.

It is during this period of transition from teaching-oriented colleges and universities to research-oriented institutions and from a relatively small to enormous system of higher education that sociology emerged as an academic discipline in America. The timing of sociology's emergence is of particular importance, because sociology was founded at just the time that the higher education system was expanding and shifting to a research emphasis. Indeed, as an indicator of this expansion, the higher education system in America went from a few hundred four-year colleges in the 1880s to over 2,000 in the 1980s. As a result of this rate of growth, there were opportunities that, previously, would not have been available for a nascent discipline. Yet sociology was often viewed with suspicion and hostility by more established disciplines that correctly viewed sociology as a potential competitor for resources. Moreover, it did not help for sociology to be carved out of the leftovers of the other social sciences—the evolutionary institutional and philosophical portions of economics as it went supertechnical, the mentalistic portions of psychology as it became increasingly behavioristic and experimental, the generalizing portions of history as it concentrated on

historiographies and interpretation, the urban ethnographic portions of anthropology as it studied "primitives," and the power and class aspects of political science as it emphasized voting behavior, government, and international relations. Other disciplines were not grateful for sociology "taking these residuals" off their hands, for as L. L. Bernard (1928, p. 284) noted:

> The older social sciences and the classics had never been especially friendly and they were perhaps somewhat critical of the sociological pedigree. They even twitted the sociologists with their hybrid name, derived from both the Greek and Latin.

As Bernard (1928, p. 284) goes on to note, sociology became vulnerable from many sides, particularly because it had emerged as a "rather spontaneous response to the needs of the times and lacked organization and standardization." As a consequence, it was attacked for being sloppy economics by the emerging economics establishment, for being the "bastard child" of philosophy and history by snooty philosophers, for being "reformist propaganda" by hard scientists, and for being "abstract speculation" by reformers.

Thus as sociology emerged as an academic discipline in the 1890s and early 1900s, it did so in a somewhat hostile environment. As a result, it was the last of the social sciences to develop a national association—the American Sociology Society being formed in 1905. And even then, considerable thought was given to making sociology a section of either the American Economics or Political Science Associations.

During this early and precarious phase of professional development, American sociology was dominated by the department at the University of Chicago. The first separate department of sociology was created at Chicago in 1892, although the University of Kansas had established a History and Sociology Department in 1889. We should not forget, however, sociology courses had been taught at a number of universities and colleges since Sumner's inaugural course at Yale in the 1870s (Small, 1916). Yet this sprinkling of courses could not give sociology organizational coherence; and so, the early affiliation of sociology with the

University of Chicago was to be decisive in shaping its subsequent development. Much of the present profile of sociology in the United States, then, is the legacy of the Chicago School as it sought to make sociology respectable in a hostile environment. To appreciate fully this legacy, it is useful to review the intellectual and organizational nature of sociology before its "Golden Era" between World Wars I and II.

At the end of the first decade in this century (Bernard, 1945), sociology was taught in only two hundred or so departments, of which a mere twenty-six were actual departments of sociology in 1909. Moreover, at this time, less than one thousand courses were taught in all universities and colleges in the United States, with one hundred of those being taught at the University of Chicago alone. Indeed, the list of universities teaching more than ten courses was confined to Brown (10), Columbia (26), Indiana (12), Ohio State (14), Syracuse (11), Chicago (100!), Kansas (12), Michigan (10), Minnesota (15), Missouri (19), Nebraska (23), North Dakota (11), and Yale (19). Outside the university, the newly formed American Sociological Society had less than two hundred members, although on the eve of World War I this number was up to eight hundred. Thus, at an organizational level, sociology was not well developed; and it is clear that Chicago was far ahead of other departments in the development of its program.

Intellectually, early American sociology revealed a surprising level of intellectual coherence—a level never reached again in the wake of subsequent Chicago domination and in the aftermath of the post-World War II growth and diversification of the field. This coherence was achieved by theoretical commitment to Comtean positivism, as executed by Spencer (1874-1896) in his *Principles of Sociology*. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, and Simmel were not prominent in early American sociology; rather it was Spencer, mixed with German organicism and American mentalism, that are most prominent. As my analysis (Turner and Turner, n.d.) of early texts on sociology revealed, sociology books in this early period usually began with a long discussion of sociology as a science in Comtean terms, then invoked Spencerian

laws about evolution, reviewed patterns of social differentiation within a Spencerian framework, and closed with a curious discussion of mental processes in society (a kind of macrosocial psychology). Methodologically, emphasis was on second-hand data sources, primarily those collected by ethnographers and historians, as these illustrated fundamental social processes.

In its early years, then, American sociology was theoretical, historical-ethnographic, evolutionary, and scientific (at least, it was thought to be a science). As Roscoe Hinkle (1980, p. 207) has noted:

> It was, indeed, general theory that was believed to confer academic respectability on the discipline to prevent the field from "degenerating" into mere practical amelioration of social problems. . . . General theory . . . sought to discover the first principles, and the laws of the origin, structure, and change of human association, human society, or social phenomena generically and irrespective of variant, particular, idiosyncratic, or unique forms. . . .

While the Chicago School was not atheoretical or antiscientific, it was to foster a very different view of sociology: first-hand data collection was to be emphasized; research on the particular case or setting was to be stressed; induction over deduction was to be promoted, although much deductive theorizing can be found in Chicago School sociology; and social psychology was to replace the macroevolutionism and organicism of Spencer. Chicago was not alone in dismantling the early coherence in American sociology, but was by far the biggest player. And in creating a new kind of sociology in its Golden Era between World Wars I and II, the Chicago School helped create the environment for not only the growth and diversification of the field, but also the profound integrative problems that plague modern sociology.

CHICAGO'S "GOLDEN ERA"

To convey the extent to which Chicago sociology dominated during its Golden Era, a few simple observations can be offered

(Bulmer, 1984; Kurtz, 1984). First, at its peak in 1925, one-third of all graduate students in American sociology were enrolled at Chicago; and as these radiated out to other universities, they carried the Chicago vision of what sociology could and should be. And since these students were either on the ground floor of a department's initial founding, or its growth and expansion, Chicago-style sociology had a disproportionate influence in subsequent years, even as other departments came to rival Chicago. Second, the official publication of the American Sociological Society was the department's journal, the *American Journal of Sociology*, published by the University of Chicago Press. The result of this situation was that Chicago faculty and graduate students had disproportionate access to the discipline's most prestigious and widely read journal. And third, as late as 1971 (and even more so earlier), one-half of all presidents of the old American Sociological Society and its replacement, the American Sociological Association, were either Chicago faculty or former students of the department. Thus there can be no doubt about domination of the field by the Chicago department, but the real issue is: What were the consequences of this hegemony?

One consequence is that the Chicago department's innovative organizational structure became the model for other departments as these were founded, or expanded, in the period between World Wars I and II. What were some of these features? In brief, they included the following: Chicago was the first Sociology Department to secure large-scale extramural research grants; it was the first to emphasize graduate over undergraduate training and to use extramural research funds to support graduate students; it was the first to encourage team as well as interdisciplinary empirical research; it was the first actively to involve a professional nonacademic staff in the research process; it was the first to purchase expensive hardware for data processing; it was the first to have intensive graduate student seminars at which research results and research methods were emphasized; it created its own journal (the *American Journal of Sociology)* and made extensive use of its university press as an outlet for research findings; it founded both a general Sociology Club and a Society for Social

Research for the open discussion of research findings and as a forum for guest scholars from diverse disciplines; it established a summer institute for former students; and it published (through the Society for Social Research) a newsletter and bulletin reporting on its activities.

These innovations were truly revolutionary for their time. In a field in which the dominant mode of inquiry had been the lone scholar working with materials from libraries and archives, Chicago created an infrastructure for collaborative and interdisciplinary empirical research. The organizational innovations made by the Chicago Sociology Department, along with its sister departments in psychology and political science, provided a model for other universities and departments to emulate; and they were what allowed Chicago to gain its influence on the profile and direction of sociology in America.

These organizational innovations both reflected, and encouraged, equally dramatic intellectual changes in American sociology. One major change revolved around methodology. First-hand data were given considerably more emphasis than historical and archival research. Initially, field research involving a combination of interviews, observations, personal documents, census tract data, and even newspaper accounts were emphasized, since "social surveys" were considered unscientific (at this time, they were conducted primarily by ameliorative groups who used the numbers, somewhat creatively, for their humanitarian agenda). In Robert Park's and Ernest Burgess's (1924, pp. 43-60) eyes, such surveys were unscientific, and so, they stressed first-hand, ethnographic observations of populations (usually subcultures and communities within Chicago). There is, of course, an incredible irony here, because such field methods are now considered unscientific (indeed, the practitioners often preach against scientific sociology and positivism), whereas survey research and all the statistical treatment that it encourages is now considered scientific. Nonetheless, in the early period between the Wars, scientific sociology was seen to be best served by field research.

Later, as Franklin Giddings's students from Columbia began to assume prominence (Bulmer, 1984; Turner and Turner, n.d.),

more quantitative approaches came to dominate. Of special note is the importance of the Chicago School in initiating this quantitative movement that is commonly attributed to Paul Lazarfeld's influence at Columbia in the 1940s. In fact, Chicago had initiated quantitative research in the early 1920s, and at a rapid rate thereafter once it had sufficiently disassociated itself from the ameliorative and evaluative social survey movement. Burgess had, for example, founded quantitative census tract analysis; and others had begun to use structured interviews and even questionnaires. But it was the arrival of Giddings's student, William F. Ogburn, that moved the department in the late 1920s toward more sophisticated statistical analysis (Bulmer, 1984). Along with others in various departments at the University of Chicago, the seeds of modern quantitative sociology were sown—reliance on structured interviews and questionnaires, scaling techniques, and statistical analysis of numerical variables. Thus Chicago's Golden Era in research was as much quantitative as qualitative; and, in fact, in terms of ultimate impact on the field, the quantitative emphasis at Chicago has been more significant and enduring than the famous field studies of this period (indeed, these are hardly ever read or cited today, except in a kind of nostalgic sense by those hostile to quantitative sociology).

Another major change ushered in by the organizational and methodological thrust of the Chicago department was a dramatic shift in the subject matter of sociology. There was a clear movement toward more micro forms of sociological analysis. For example, Spencer's grand macroevolutionary model was downsized into an urban ecology model (e.g., Wirth, 1938; Park, 1925), where the unit of analysis shifted from the total society to urban neighborhoods, zones, and sectors within a city. More fundamentally, the mentalistic portions of early texts were translated into an action, or social psychological, frame of reference. Research increasingly concentrated on how people defined, assessed, evaluated, and thought about situations. Attitude scales personified this new social psychology, but one sees it everywhere in the research of this period. This new social psychology was, of course, highly compatible with the increasing emphasis on first-

hand research, whether through interviews/observations or questions on attitudes. For if one looks carefully at the research of this period it can be seen that it revolved around analyzing natural subgroups, or statistically drawn samples, with respect to attitudes, definitions, values, and other cognitive states of individuals. True, traces of the more macro emphasis can be found, especially in the social/human ecology perspective or in analysis of change (Ogburn's famous work is the most obvious example), but the net thrust of the substantive research program was on social psychological questions. If one doubts this conclusion, consider the fact that two of the most important substantive topics in contemporary sociology—class and organizational analysis—were hardly studied by the Chicago School that instead concentrated on subjective orientations of actors in different social settings.

Thus when Talcott Parsons opened *The Structure of Social Action* in 1937 with the famous phrase, "Who now reads Spencer?" he was hardly telling people what they did not already know. In fact, it was a decade earlier that social action and social psychology had replaced Spencer's evolutionism and macro-level analysis as the preferred styles of sociological inquiry. There were, of course, exceptions to this conclusion, such as Pitirim Sorokin's work; but even here, Sorokin was a holdover from the older European tradition that was just beginning to influence sociological theory.

Related to these methodological and substantive changes was a corresponding shift in theory. Except for the urban ecology approach, theory became increasingly social psychological or micro. The appeal of the philosophy of G. H. Mead (1938, 1934) was but one indicator of this social psychological thrust. More significantly, perhaps, was the accompanying emphasis on developing "theories of" just about any empirical topic—gangs, delinquency, crime, family, urban succession, ethnic groups, and so on. Such theories reflected the emphasis on data-relevant and data-driven conceptualizations, signaling a distrust of theory that was either too macro or abstract. While Merton (1957) was later to enshrine this type of work as "theories of the middle range," it was at Chicago that this kind of theorizing was initiated and institutionalized in American sociology.

Thus while we often retrospectively and somewhat romantically see the legacy of the Chicago School as the development of Meadian interactionism, urban ethnographies, and urban ecology, I think that the real legacy was (1) the creation of a model for research in sociology, involving external funding and graduate student labor; (2) the definition of a "big time" department, revolving around research shops, data-processing hardware, colloquium series, newsletters, and control of professional journals; (3) the emphasis on quantitative research, involving the use of questionnaires, scaling techniques, and machine-processing techniques (although these were obviously limited in the 1930s); (4) the emphasis on social psychology, mixing Meadian theoretical concepts, social action frameworks, survey research, and attitude scales; and (5) the concern with "theories of" specialized substantive topics, consisting of empirical generalizations from survey data collected in American society (as opposed to the macro comparative-ethnographic-historical thrust of early American sociology). Because Chicago was so dominant, these points of emphasis in the Chicago program were emulated by other departments or imposed by the hordes of Chicago Ph.D.s radiating out over the country to found new departments or to guide existing departments during the postwar years of growth in American sociology.

THE POSTWAR ERA AND THE CONTINUING LEGACY OF THE CHICAGO SCHOOL

The emphasis of the Chicago School on first-hand research and on narrow "theories of" substantive topics created a theoretical vacuum, at least in regard to general theory. Over time, this vacuum generated problems of conceptual integration that Parsonian action theory (a misnomer, since it is a functional approach) sought to fill. Indeed, as Parsons's theory unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s, it came increasingly to resemble Spencerian

sociology—a rather ironic twist in light of Parsons's (1937) pronouncement in the opening sentence of *The Structure of Social Action.* And like Spencerian theory, it was hoped that Parsonian action theory could reintegrate a field that was fast splintering specialized subfields and antagonistic intellectual camps. Thus even the approach that was antithetical to the more delimited empirical and theoretical thrust of the Chicago School was, indirectly at least, the result of the empirical and theoretical diversification of sociology caused by Chicago hegemony during its Golden Era.

In the end, as Parsonian theory declined, this diversification of sociology into an ever-increasing number of more specialized fields accelerated. Beneath the surface of this brief period of Parsonian theoretical prominence, then, was the organizational, methodological, and conceptual thrust so evident in the Chicago School. Chicago was no longer the only player in this postwar period, nor was it even the dominant force, but the postwar trends were built upon the base first created at Chicago in the 1930s—a base emphasizing narrow research, low-level theory, and substantive specialization.

Organizationally, research-oriented departments were modeled after Chicago, especially the emphasis on funded research on a narrow empirical topic that is examined with survey research and quantitative methods. At the professional level of organization, the American Sociological Society and its successor, the American Sociological Association, grew and differentiated into ever more sections, thereby encouraging an intellectual partitioning of the discipline along various substantive specialties. Moreover, the Association's journals increasingly emphasized quantitative analysis over alternative methods and theoretical concerns (Turner, 1988; Shanas, 1945). And theory, itself, became ever more diversified and lodged into often hostile camps, paradigms, and orientations (Turner, 1986). The end result is a large, highly differentiated, and poorly integrated profession within which professionals tend to go their own way and "do their own thing" (Turner and Turner, n.d.).

Is Chicago responsible for this situation? Obviously, it would

be incorrect to assume that the answer is "yes" to such a question. But Chicago exerted, no doubt, a disproportionate influence on (1) the emphasis on first-hand empirical research, (2) the stress on quantitative analysis of data, (3) the distrust of grand and general theory, and (4) the resulting concern for narrow theories that do not generalize greatly beyond the data. Ironically, the members of the Chicago faculty itself were somewhat less inclined to emphasize 1 through 4 above than postwar students from Chicago, but by the late 1950s, these tenets were well entrenched in sociology's perception of "good research" and had become the guiding force during sociology's period of enormous growth in the 1960s and early 1970s (for example, the membership of ASA went from less than 7,000 in 1960 to over 14,000 in 1974; and the number of bachelor degrees awarded in sociology went from about 7,000 in 1960 to almost 36,000 in 1973).

CONCLUSION

What, then, can we conclude from this brief review of Chicago's legacy? One way to answer such a question is to recognize that sociology could have become a very different kind of discipline than it is today. For example, if sociology had followed its early mentors, it would be decidedly more macro, historical, and theoretical. Or, to suggest another scenario, if sociology had gone the path of economics, it would evidence a few general theoretical principles that guide all debate, discourse, research, and teaching. Thus the course that sociology did take was not inevitable. But for the present and foreseeable future, we are condemned to a large number of disconnected specialty fields on substantive topics, a low level of intellectual integration with theory, a partial level of integration with slavish conformity to the "hot" quantitative method, a low degree of professional control or standardization by an umbrella professional organization that has few resources, and a great deal of ambiguity over sociology's mission, whether as science, philosophy, critique and commentary, amelioration, or practice.

This situation did not just emerge, it was created by organizational and intellectual forces; and chief among these forces is the domination of Chicago sociology in the 1920s and early 1930s. For the Golden Age of the Chicago School helped create a fragmented field by virtue of its eclectic and unsystematic theoretical stance, its emphasis on research over theory, its eventual encouragement of quantitative over ethnographic and historical research, its stress on first-hand as opposed to second-hand data, and its development of organizational innovations revolving around funded survey research and teams of student workers. We should never forget, however, that Chicago made sociology respectable in difficult times, but it did so at a cost that may hurt sociology's capacity to generate much intellectual respect today and in the future.

Thus the legacy of the Chicago School is, at best, mixed. The negative legacy has, no doubt, been overemphasized in this article, partly as a corrective to the "insiders" views presented in other articles in this volume. The critical conclusion to this exercise is to recognize that American sociology must try to recapture some of the vision of its first advocates and, in the process, become more theoretical, more willing to use all forms of data collection and analysis, and more committed to integrating the field professionally and intellectually. Unless these events transpire, sociology will remain a weak discipline—a situation that would be a tragedy in light of the efforts of the Chicago School to institutionalize sociology.

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