When Robert E. Park Was (Re)Writing "The City": Biography, the Social Survey, and the Science of Sociology

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Sociological production is a situated and embodied activity carried out by individuals inserted in actual social relations. Considering that this feature has an influence upon the content of scholarly literature and that it can be revealed in the scientific text itself, I propound a new interpretation of the writing process of Robert E. Park's "The City," the famous paper he published initially in 1915. Customarily depicted as a manifesto for an autonomous urban sociology, I argue on the contrary that its general economy has to be linked to Park's biographical background. When he affiliated with the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago, Park was brought to teach a course on the social survey. "The City" was to be the academic expression of his point of view on the topic. Park's biographical encounters with some active promoters of the social survey approach are evidenced and their influence on his 1915 essay is carefully analyzed, showing notably that curious intellectual omissions in "The City" can be traced back to these previous encounters. Park's latter texts, and the 1925 revised version of "The City" in particular, are shown to provide the interwar sociologists with a peculiar narrative about the history of sociology: Park's predecessors are deliberately confined in a pre-scientific stage of the discipline and Park's original essay is presented as a seminal research program destined to be later fulfilled by the newly established urban sociologists.

Introduction

The article that Robert E. Park published in the March 1915 issue of The American Journal of Sociology (hereafter referred to as AJS) under the title "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment" is usually presented as the founding text of urban sociology in general and of the famous Chicago School in particular (Shils, 1948; Hatt and Reiss, 1951; Sennett, 1969; Remy, 1989; Flanagan, 1999; Savage et al., 2003). If there is a constant theme in the many studies which have been produced since the 1970s on work associated with the Chicago sociological tradition, it is the idea that this first article of Park's on the city must be read as the exposition of a research program of which the work carried out latterly at Chicago is only in reality the culmination. It was without doubt Everett Hughes who stated this for the first time in his introduction to the posthumous publication of Park's collected papers:

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About the time he came to the University of Chicago, Park wrote and published a long article entitled, 'The City: Some Suggestions for the Study of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment.' The proposals in it became the research program of Park himself, of his students, and of many colleagues in other fields as well as in sociology; a program realized in part in *The Hobo, The Gold Coast and the Slum, The Ghetto, The Gang* and other studies of city types and city areas. The suggestions have not been exhausted in some thirty-five years of active work by an ever-increasing army of students of cities and city life (Hughes, 1952: 5–6).

The following essay aims to show that contrary to generally accepted belief the author’s original intention in writing “The City” was not so much to present a program of research on the city as to make a radical critique of the social survey movement, one of the dominant sociological practices of the time. The notion that Park wanted to distance himself from this current sociological stream has already been commented on by authors such as Matthews (1977), Bulmer (1984), Converse (1987), Lal (1990), Breslau (1990), Gaziano (1996), and more recently Chapoulie (2001), who have all demonstrated the ambiguous nature of the relations between Park and this movement. However, even though the evidence for this ambiguity comes from Park’s later texts (those published after the First World War, particularly those dating from 1925 onwards, when Park’s reputation and academic authority had become well-established), no one has posed the question of whether this attitude had any influence on the writing of his earlier work in general and on “The City” in particular. In order to answer this question I suggest breaking with the idea of Park as a leading figure in his field (Hughes, 1969; Coser, 1971) and admitting the fact that in 1914–1915 he was effectively only a marginal figure in American sociology. Only then will it become possible to understand the original background to the production of “The City.” Such an understanding has been lost because “The City” has been overwhelmingly interpreted according to the context of the dominating interwar Chicago sociology. In other words the Park’s text has been read according to what it engendered, i.e. “The Chicago School of Urban Sociology” considered as a landmark in the history of American sociology. Such a penetrating study as Gaziano’s (1996) focuses on the changes Park brought to the revised version of “The City” but is silent on the writing of the 1915 version itself. What I will do here on the contrary is to read “The City” with the aim of identifying the influences and the motives that shaped its original writing—the main reason being the absence of such a study and absolutely not the will to debunk Park’s work.

Such a reading postulates that sociological writing may reveal at the same time both the general social context in which it is produced and the particular social and biographical trajectory of an author (Laslett, 1991). Any learned production takes both a social as well as an intellectual stance. That is to say, it possesses both a cognitive and a practical dimension precisely because it positions its author in a bundle of concrete social relations with other producers of knowledge (Breslau, 1990). One may then consider a publication as the material inscription of this position taking and discern in it the cartography of these relations as the author himself maps them. In this perspective, the writing process is teleological as far as it is oriented towards “significant others”—competitors, colleagues, editors, friends, and readers, some being explicitly acknowledged and others being intentionally omitted.

Applied to Park’s text on the city, this approach leads me to propound the following interpretation: I consider it as the expression of its author’s position on the question of the social survey much more than on the city as sociological object. In taking up his new responsibilities in Chicago, Park was in effect brought in to give a course on the social survey and “The City” was to be the academic expression of it. But Park’s social and biographical trajectory was to lead him to produce a text that was out of phase with other productions of the same nature published on the same question at that time. It is this trajectory that makes