The Neglect of the Historical Sociology of the City: or Why Urban Sociology Shouldn’t Start with the Chicago School

A Sociology OF the City versus a Sociology IN the City

Urban studies, and urban sociology in particular, too often brackets or entirely ignores the historical eras prior to the onset of full-blown industrial capitalism and ultimately lacks a historical sociology of the city. This memo argues for the recapture and integration of urban historical sociology into urban research and pedagogy, and in particular the field of sociology. A historical sociology of the city aims first at constructing the analytic object of the city before investigating the particularities of a given city. Collectively, the studies of the Chicago School sociologists represent a rich and broad sociology in the city of Chicago. While many have criticized the transposability and export of Chicago-centric theory-building and the generalizability of their accounts (Hannerz, 2003) I would argue that a more salient critique is the school’s failure to relate, compare, and situate their community studies within the broader universe of the city across space and time. It makes little sense to begin with a sociology in the city, particularly a newborn American one at the turn of the 20th century, before establishing what a city is and has been. Beginning the study of urban sociology on the premise of sociology of the city not only provides a broader historical and geographical context in which to situate sociologies in the city not to mention the foundations of the Chicago department and American disciplinary tradition itself, but also provides three theoretical and methodological correctives to the Chicago School tradition.

1. The Comparative Imperative

The hallmark of the historical sociology of the city is its deployment of comparative methods that serve as an analytic knife for discerning urban variations (both internal and external) and definitional filter for crystalizing the city’s elemental features. The Chicago School’s insular studies within the confines of a single city were not merely an arbitrary or practical limit. It was rather a product of the wholesale import of positivistic principles embedded in the ecological paradigm at the department’s inception. For Park, the city was not simply an object of study, but “a laboratory or clinic in which human nature and social processes may be conveniently and profitably studied,” (1925:62) in which universalized principals conceived as internally dynamic might be discovered and transferable from any one particular city (Chicago) to another. McKenzie held a similar biotic logic in his classical statement of the city’s social organization, in which social and spatial stratification of the city’s “natural areas” were explained entirely through internal processes within the city through the botanic analogies of invasion, succession, concentration, centralization, and competition (1925). In their models, socio-spatial segregation was considered an internal process of the neighborhood, each serving as “a selective or magnetic force attracting to itself appropriate population elements and repelling incongruous units, thus making for biological and cultural subdivision of a city’s population” (Burgess and Park, 1925; 65). This theoretical premise is reflected and reproduced through the Chicago School’s ethnographic method of bounded single-case studies; focusing on the “molecular” organization of individual neighborhoods (Anderson, 1923; Reckless, 1925; Zorbaugh, 1929; Wirth, 1928) or a singular sub-culture, ethnicity, or class (Thrasher, 1927; Cressey, 1932; Frazier, 1932).
Rather than transposing concepts from the natural sciences to explain urban growth and social order, Weber, Mumford, and Braudel construct their theories through comparisons across space and time. More specifically, all deploy a particular method of historical comparison; what Summers and Scocpol delineate as “macro-causal historical analysis” (1980; 181-189), which proceeds through a strategic analysis of parallels and contrasts to determine causal processes across cases. Weber succinctly sums up this comparative epistemology:

A comparative study (of the city) would not aim at finding “analogies” and “parallels” as is done by those engrossed in the currently fashionable enterprise of constructing general schemes of development. The aim should, rather, be precisely the opposite: to identify and define the individuality of each development, the characteristics, which made the one conclude in a manner so different from that of the other. This done, one can then determine the causes which led to these differences. (1966 [1913]:385)

For Weber, the focus was neither stagist nor comparativist for developing analogies and parallels between vastly different cities. It was an analytical concern focused on uniqueness of a type of city that differentiates it from another. Mumford and Braudel similarly constructed their typologies, periodicities, and urban definitions through this method of comparison to discern the relations between urban processes generating or sustaining specific patterns, through which the uniqueness of the city is understood not as a particular city, but as a particular type of city. Mumford best exemplifies this urban typological construction. Mumford defines the urban not simply as the agglomeration of population, but as concentrations of state power, commerce, and cultural and intellectual activity, which stamped the character of urban life. Mumford didn’t consider his city-types stages corresponding to the outlines of a generalized history, but rather as ideal-types that represented different moments of the “civilizing process.” Plutonic Athens, Dantecan Florence, Shakespearean London and Emersonian London represented the metropolis. Alexandria in third century BC, Rome in second century AD, Paris in 18th century and NY in early twentieth represented megalopolis (1968). What is distinctive about the metropolis and megalopolis is their organization of markets, relative concentration of political power, and distinctive cultural stamps of urban experience. Through this particular comparative method, a historical sociology of the city moves beyond the Chicago School’s tendency, as well as the tendency of most urban historians (see Tilly, 1996: 710), to take city limits as boundaries for the analysis of ostensibly self-contained urban processes.

2. A Relational Urbanology

A historical sociology of the city renders the urban through the simultaneous relations and connections to hinterlands, networks of cities, and multiple geographical scales. While the Chicago School sociologists did not work through concrete comparisons of cities to define their theories of urbanization and the urban social order, McKenzie did put forward a rudimentary interurban typology in which he outlines four “ecological classifications of communities” (Burgess and Park, 1925: 66-67): (1) a primary service community (agricultural, fishing, mining town, etc) serving as a first step
in the distributive process of basic commodities, (2) commercial community, serving the secondary function in the distributive process of communities, (3) the industrial town, serving as a locus for the manufacturing of commodities, and (4) towns lacking a specific economic base that draws its sustenance from other parts of the world (recreational sports, political and educational centers, communities of defense, penal or charitable colonies).

In contradistinction to this interurban typology that paradoxically reaffirms an insular ontology of a sociology in the city, Weber, Braudel, and Mumford conceptualize a relational sociology of the city in three dimensions: inter-urban (urban/urban), extra-urban (urban/rural), and multi-scalar (urban/national/global) relations as co-constitutive and definitive of intra-urban economies, social order, politics, and everyday life. Braudel, writing in a world-systems framework, best demonstrates this shared concern among the three thinkers. In his final volume of *Civilization and Capitalism*, Braudel articulates a relational global history of capitalism in the period 1400-1800 in terms of the geographic re-centering of economic flows from city-states to nation-states (1979). Putting forward a methodological principle common among scholars of global city networks of the 1980s onward, Braudel insists a decade earlier, “Above all, a great city should never be judged in itself: it is located within the whole mass of urban systems, both animating them and being in turn determined by them. . . at once instruments and articulations of their beneficiaries” (18). For Braudel, the distinctive mark of the urban is its market and economic function, but as it is defined through its position in a city system.

While each chapter in the volume moves from one urban protagonist to the next - from Venice to Antwerp, Genoa to Amsterdam, and finally to London – the urban biopics are rendered only through a relational interplay of urban economic networks. For instance, Braudel begins tracing the first European world-economy in the period 1000-1200, which displayed not one, but two poles of attraction between the settlements of the North Sea Baltic and the Mediterranean. He demonstrates that commercial contact did not end the duality, but rather reinforced it as the system reproduced itself through “super-cities” linking these regional economies, the first being Venice. Rather than attributing the rise or invention of capitalism in Venice (Cox, 1987; Wallerstein; 2011 [1979])

3. Urbs and Civitas

The first wave of Chicago School thinkers took the position that the city is a “natural habitat of civilized man” in the sense that it represents a “cultural area” with particular cultural types (Burgess and Park, 1925; 1-46). As a natural structure Park suggested the city obeyed laws of its own and there “is a limit to the arbitrary
modifications which it is possible to make: 1. In its physical structure and 2. In its moral order” (4). The second wave moves away from the internal bioligism of Park and Burgess with ethnographies that brought people back into the picture with interest in face-to-face relations. Wirth, in particular adds a historical dimension with his analysis of the ghetto (1928), as well as an interest in everyday life through his distinction between urbanism and the urban, in his seminal essay Urbanism as a Way of Life (1938). Although Wirth notes the role of “social institutions” as a constitutive feature of urbanism, he is surprisingly just as silent on the role of the state and politics as his Chicago predecessors.

Weber, Mumford, and Braudel on the other hand clearly differentiate between civitas, city as association, and urbs, the city as place. Furthermore, political institutions and the role of the state was a primary variable of distinction between city types and key force of urbanization in their histories. This ontological differentiation is at the heart of distinction between historical sociology of the city and the human ecological approach to the city, as well as urban history of cities. This political interpretation of urban development is rooted even prior to Weber, in Fustel de Coulanges, who distinguishes between civitas, religious and political association of families and tribes, and urbs, a place of assembly, the dwelling place, and above all the sanctuary of the tribe (1980 [1864]: 126ff.). From this institutional departure, Fustel explains the differences in cities (ie Egyptians vs. Mesopotamia, Greece vs. Rome) planning, history, form and function through the analysis of political and religious institutions. Weber (1913), who frequently cites Fustel in this regard, both broadens his scope and focus, centering his comparative history on distinctions of “community” and “citizenship” two concepts that remain at the core of urban sociology to this day.

Weber’s point of departure is found in city government and community, which he defines as “a total systematic unit of inter-human life distinguished not by a single institution but by an order of institutions” (58). Weber builds a historical typology of the city through examining the forces and institutions of the civic community by way of their bearing upon government, the charter, city law, courts, parties, and pressure groups – all elements absent in the Chicago School’s explanation of urban development which would shortly follow across the Atlantic. According to Weber cityness was not something delineated by any particular physical attributes alone (urbs), specifically a fortification and a market, but rather its forms of social relations – an autonomous court, related forms of association, and an autonomous administration by authorities in election in which burghers participated. Therefore, the key distinction between the occidental and oriental city for Weber was its citizenship. For Weber “The additional concepts required for analysis of the city are political” (80). Similarly, Mumford distinguishes each of his city types upon their political pillars, and Braudel, writing during the resurgence of Marxian histories of the city, draws out his model of the global order in terms of both economic and political power, elaborating how the cities at the center of the world system reorganized not only the world economy but the political order as well. Therefore, bringing Weber into the core cannon of urban sociology, is not merely for erudition, rather he provides the foundation for considering citizenship and community as central to the urban, and through the urban, to sociology more generally.
Closing Remarks

Anchoring the history of urban sociology in the Chicago School is not without justification. It is indeed historically the first coherent school of thought on the subject, not only in the discipline of sociology, or in the US, but of urban studies more generally and provided a rich set of empirical findings regarding the dynamics of socio-spatial organization in the city. It has also become the launching point of reference and critique within nearly every academic book since written on the urban. However, I think there are several benefits of beginning with the tradition of historical sociology, in both understanding the history of urbanization, theorizing its development, and reconsidering the intellectual history of urban studies.

First, while the global historical sociologies in the longue durée of Weber, Mumford, and Braudel encompass the studies of the Chicago School, the opposite does not hold. Only by beginning with the historical sociologies of the city does one come to recognize the peculiarity of the capitalist cities of the 19th century, and its distinct features and processes. Second, in reading the historical sociologies of the city, one quickly realizes the limits and constraints of urban sociologies parochial bias to the developed cities of the global north and its conflation of urbanization with capitalist development, from the Chicago School up through the political economic and Marxian approaches of the early 21st century. These shortcomings become more clearly apparent when rendering the urban within the longue durée and globally relational approaches of these earlier thinkers.

Finally, in anchoring the instruction of urban sociology in the professionalized and parochialized roots of the Chicago School’s studies in the city, we not only ignore the larger context of urban knowledge in which it is situated, but also construct a revisionist history. The tale is recounted time and time again, wherein urban studies was saved through a series of conceptual correctives to the Chicago School’s shortcomings from the Marxian and political economic approaches that have come to define the new urban sociology (Gottdiener and Feagin, 1988; Gottdeiner and Hutchison1996; Zukin, 1980). Perhaps we only tell ourselves this story because such critiques are so easy to make, but likely it is because it is a story we’ve been telling ourselves for over a generation.

Castell’s Urban Question (1968), which launched the new paradigm of urban sociology in the 1970s, runs rife with critiques of the urban ideologies of Chicago’s human ecology, city planners, Simmel, Tonies, Durkheim, and Lefebvre, but nowhere to be found is Weber (all the more surprising with the inclusion of such classical thinkers) nor his more recent contemporaries Mumford and Braudel. I do not think it is so important to argue over the novelty of the “new urban sociology” as Saunders does in his rebuttal (1986), in which he notes Weber and Mumford as unmentioned forbearers – but the effect or, perhaps less strongly, the fact of this ignorance, intentional or otherwise. This only further highlights the need for bringing in the historical sociology of the city to the teaching and scholarship of urban sociology. As this memo has pointed to, the four theoretical and methodological prescriptions demonstrated through the tradition of historical sociology anticipate those only recently re-asserted in urban studies (and still under-practiced in sociology) for the study of “global cities” (Sassen, 1990; 1994), “planetary urbanism” (Brenner and Schmid, 2014), and cities in a “network society” (Castells, 1996), but do so through a deeply historical lens of which these newly minted works sorely lack.
**Works Cited**


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1 The lack of a historical sociology of the city in urban courses can be seen in the syllabi of urban sociology courses at both the graduate and undergraduate level, which typically begin at the discipline’s American professional origins of the Chicago School. Here at Berkeley, the Global Metropolitan Studies required course begins in Haussman’s Paris, which similarly served as the departure for my urban history and theory course at Central European University’s Anthropology program. In sociology, the urban studies curricula in my undergrad at Bard and in the undergrad sequence I TA’d at UCB began with the Chicago School. The only course I’ve ever taken that covered the period pre-19th-century period was not surprisingly in the history department, but this course also lacked the infusion of historical sociology. Even within the discipline of history, Engin Isin notes that it is largely comprised of insular descriptive histories of particular cities in particular times. However, the historical sociology of the city, concerned with the construction of analytical categories through comparisons in the longue durée to arrive at the idea of the city itself (2003: 312-325), has been largely neglected in urban studies (also see Tilly, 1996).

2 Skocpol and Summer’s contrast the macro-causal approach to “parallel comparative history,” which juxtaposes historical cases to persuade the reader that a given theory applies to a series of relevant historical trajectories, and a “contrast of contexts” approach” that seeks to demonstrate the unique features of particular cases working-out of putatively general social processes.

3 Although Summers and Scopol characterize Weber as a “prime practitioner” of “contrast-oriented” comparisons (1980:175, fn3), his treatise on the “city” deploys both J.S. Mill’s “method of agreement” and “method of difference” in combination, the defining feature of “macro-causal” comparisons.
McKenzie’s typology and interurban analysis is frequently overlooked by contemporary critics who simply characterize the Chicago School triumvirate as lacking a theory of inter-urban hierarchy and regional relations (Hannerz, 1983; Isin, 2003), when in fact McKenzie’s parameters of inter-urban classification justifies and reflects the school’s intra-urban theory of internally driven spatial differentiation. Smith (1996) draws parallels between McKenzie and later Marxist urbanists, noting the McKenzie writes “Under the dominance of the greater market, it is the movement of capital that determines the movement of people rather than the reverse” (1926, p137) and that “regional prosperity or depression is determined largely by forces which operate in parts of the world which the region itself has little or no control” (138). However, Smith goes too far in asserting McKenzie “identified himself with a view that would later be labeled a world-system theorist.” His evidence is thinly picked quotes, rather than frameworks, drawn primarily from his collection of work *The Ecology of Institutions*, which lacks an “urban theory” of development.

Although Braudel clearly draws on Wallerstein’s framework, he is not cited until p.54 and only in the footnotes here, after full discussion of world-system and world-economy – later he takes on Wallerstein only briefly. Working through the analytic unit of the city, a scale undertheorized in Wallerstein’s trilogy, Braudel notes important differences from Wallerstein’s conception of the world system including periodicity (marking the first world-economy 1000-1300 AD, where “super-cities” linked regional economies vs. Wallerstein’s fixation on the 16th century origins), structure (recognizing the prominence of the “regional” economy), and determinants (seeing the economic as an “order among orders” in which the economy never stands outside to other spheres of activity – culture, society, politics – which are constantly reacting with economy to either help or hinder its development. Braudel demonstrates this last point mapping out cultural, social, and political characteristics on top of the economic relations, noting that there is no one-to-one overlay. These spatial overlays of varying networks of non-economic relations are similar to the added planes of Bourdieu’s axis of capital distributions.

For instance the real innovations of banking and formations of large firms emerged in Tuscany, gold coins born in Genoa, Cheques and holding companies, double entry book-keeping and insurance all originating in Florence. None of capitalism’s central innovations originated in Venice itself.

Engel’s *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845), represents another classical work of relational urban theory ignored by the Chicago School, which begins defining Manchester in relation to the trading center of London and historical development of surrounding cottage industries and industrial towns as could Marx’s writings in the *Grundrisse* (1858), where he constructs a distinction between the “ruralization of the urban” and “urbanization of the rural” to define the difference between pre- and post-industrial urbanization.

Weber’s emphasis on an order of institutions vs. a single institution is taking aim at the handful of existing and conflicting institutional theories of the city, Glotz (familial), Maine (legal), Pirene (economic), Fustel (religious).

Although state institutions and civic groups frequently appear in the urban ethnographies of the Chicago’s School’s second wave of scholars (ie Anderson, Wirth, and Sutherland), they are never integrated into a theory of urbanization, urban history, or neighborhood effects.

Although the memo highlights only the limits which are overcome by a historical sociology of the city, the argument is in no way to do away with the Chicago School or even that it should not dominate, but rather to make the case in beginning our studies of the urban from the perspective of historical sociologies of the city.
Of course these thinkers, by no means offer a panacea to the westernized and capitalist bias of theorization. Weber’s orientalism is a far cry from the call for de-westernizing urban theory today and Braudel who examines non-capitalist cities, and certainly the variations between merchant, market, and monopoly capitalisms, does so mainly with an eye to either their connection to the capitalist world system.