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Parsing the Chicago School legacy

Towards a critical human ecology

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Article

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Abstract
Although the Chicago School of Sociology serves as a shared reference point for scholars from across the subfields of urban studies, it is rarely engaged in any depth. The prevailing sense, it seems, is that there is little to be gained by seriously engaging with the work itself or critiques of it. Against this, I argue that sustained reflection on the Chicago School is productive for both liberal and critical urban studies scholarship. I thus parse the School's legacy while arguing for creative, critical engagement with its manifold lineages. After reviewing criticisms and amendments from critical race theory, postcolonial studies and Marxism, I propose a revised understanding of the Chicago School that jettisons its naturalistic metaphors while retaining the basic precepts of its epistemology. This results in an approach that uses similar methods and modes of explanation as the Chicago School within an epistemology attuned to power relations. I discuss inspiring examples of authors who have made efforts in this direction and outline avenues for future work.

Keywords
Chicago School of Sociology, critical urban theory, complexity theory

Students and scholars within urban studies tend to see the Chicago School of sociology[1] as a vestige of the past. Criticized by both positivist and critical scholars, the Chicago School today represents what urban studies has moved away from. And yet, it refuses to disappear. First, the Chicago School continues to inform the *lingua franca* of urban studies and remains prominent in curricula. Even when students do not study the classic texts, they hear and read about them. Some of the School's signature contributions such as Burgess' concentric zone model, Wirth's conceptualization of urbanism as a way of life, Park's human ecology and classic ethnographies such as *The Gold Coast and The Slum* (Zorbaugh, 1929) and *Taxi-Dance Hall* (Cressey, 1932) serve as shared points of reference for urban scholars irrespective of their thematic specializations or epistemological orientations.

Second, the Chicago School serves as a *foil* for critical scholarship. For instance, Jennifer Robinson counterposes her vision of comparative urbanism to Wirth's purported universalism; Neil Brenner,

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echoing earlier critiques of Manuel Castells and David Harvey, presents his approach to planetary urbanization as a way to transcend the Chicago School's embrace of the city as the key site and analytical unit of urban studies; Aldon Morris's elevation of W.E.B. Du Bois as a canonical sociologist hinges in part on his critique of Robert Park's sociology. Although critical scholars are currently leading the charge, in the 1960s and 1970s, positivists were at the forefront, targeting the Chicago School for its failure to systematically test hypotheses (Dimitriadis, 2006).

Third, the Chicago School has been experiencing periodic *resurgences*. Robert Sampson frames his influential work as an extension of the Chicago School lineage (e.g. Sampson, 2012, 2019); Jones and Rodgers (2016, 2023) hold up its ethnographies as models for a global and comparative urban anthropology that goes beyond inventorying local particularities; Andrew Abbott (1997, 2017) argues that a return to the Chicago School's 'contextual paradigm' provides a way out of the crisis inflicted by sociology's 'variables paradigm'; Forrest et al. (2020) consider Robert Park's continued influence in China and revisit his work to formulate a research agenda on Chinese urbanization and everyday life. Proponents of 'urban science' – a field founded by importing natural science theories and computational methods into research on urbanization – also build on the Chicago legacy. Luis Bettencourt (2022), for instance, begins his history of the science of cities with the Chicago School.

Given its enduring relevance, it is remarkable that the Chicago School is rarely discussed in any detail within the interdisciplinary field of urban studies. This stands in marked contrast to sociology, where a stream of archival research and critical reflection has written and rewritten the discipline's history (e.g. Blackman, 2023; Bulmer, 1984; Deegan, 1988; Harvey, 1987; Morris, 2015; Smith, 1988). But among urban scholars, the prevailing sense is one of familiarity – that there is little is to be gained by revisiting the work of the Chicago School or the criticisms it has sustained. Against this, I argue that sustained reflection on the work of the Chicago School sociologists and their critics is fruitful for at least three reasons.

First, a detailed reading of the Chicago School can help to identify both the past mistakes that urban studies should learn from as well as enduring insights that future research can build on. As there is much that is flawed or antiquated, it is easy for today's urban scholars to proclaim they have moved beyond the orthodoxy. For instance, much evidence can be found in support of Robinson's critique that the Chicago School was overzealous in its pursuit of universal theory or Brenner's critique that it naively assumed bounded and self-contained cities (Brenner, 2013; Robinson, 2006). But a more generous and constructive reading is possible, one that does not preclude criticism but helps to more precisely locate where differences and innovations lie. Even when scholars reject rather than revise the School's legacy, a more generous and comprehensive reading of its works would raise the bar for critique.

Second, greater appreciation of the Chicago School's heterogeneity[2] and pluriform lineages may inspire work that creatively builds on the classical works rather than simply negating them. This requires parsing the Chicago legacy. Although some of the School's foundational work indeed obscures the workings of capitalism (Castells, 1977), suffers from 'spatial fundamentalism' (Roy, 2016), perpetrates 'methodological cityism' (Wachsmuth, 2014), or exhibits 'embedded racism' (Montalva Barda, 2024), such critiques do not apply to all Chicago sociologists equally. More importantly, there are many authors who have sought to preserve some of the key elements of human ecology while addressing its blind spots. Below I discuss work in the Chicago tradition that has incorporated political economy, developed a sophisticated understanding of the role of space and place as mediators of social processes, considers relations beyond the city and highlights the causes and consequences of racial inequality. By denouncing or ignoring the Chicago School in its entirety, this latter work also risks slipping into obscurity. Although the principals of the Chicago School were often blinded by their privileged positions, sociology at Chicago included subterranean currents that prefigure today's critical approaches. For instance, Deegan (1988) documents how the

settlement house movement spearheaded by Jane Addams made significant methodological and empirical contributions to the Chicago School. While Addams and her colleagues were marginalized by the men of the Chicago School, they show how its approach can be applied in more democratic and emancipatory ways. In another re-reading of the intellectual history of urban research, Oswin (2022) acknowledges the heteronormative and patriarchal underpinnings of the Chicago School but identifies how it offered new openings for research on homosexuality and spawned work prefiguring today's queer approaches. Similarly, Blackman (2023) and Ren (2017) suggest that Chicago sociology offered opportunities to respectively African-American and Chinese scholars, even as they suffered from the School's racism. Even if these currents remained underdeveloped during the School's heyday, careful reconstructive work can bring them out and elaborate on them. These accounts suggest a different way of seeing the Chicago School: not only as a vehicle for reproducing established interests and ideas but as a heterogeneous and at times contested field that invites careful review and selective engagement. Acknowledging the School's multiple lineages allows for a more cumulative urban studies that builds on rather than negates what came before.

Third, the Chicago School's conceptualization of the city as a self-organizing, complex system is finding new life within computational social science. Key to complex systems theory is the idea that systemic logics cannot be read off from the properties of the system's constituents, but must be studied as the outgrowth of interactions. The fundamental insight that places and spatial patterns have emergent qualities is central to the Chicago School as well as attempts by computational social scientists to model urban life. However, few complexity scholars will be aware that the Chicago School prefigured their ideas (but see Bettencourt, 2022); even fewer acknowledge the critiques of viewing the city as a self-organizing system. Since many of the criticisms of the Chicago School apply *mutatis mutandis* to this emerging body of work in computational social science, engaging with these old debates can help to push back against the unreflexive application of natural science metaphors and methods to urban studies. As with the critical scholarship, the point is not to argue against computational social science or the conceptualization of cities as complex systems, but to revisit canonical work – in this case critiques of the Chicago School – to stimulate epistemological reflexivity.

My aim in this article is to parse the legacy of the Chicago School and to argue for creative, critical engagement with its manifold lineages. I address three critical responses to the Chicago School from, respectively, anti-racist, post-colonial and Marxist scholars. The resulting overview is far from comprehensive; for instance, it omits important work by queer and feminist scholars (Deegan, 1988; Oswin, 2022). It does, however, address some of the main criticisms of the Chicago School by bringing out the central issue of power relations. The Chicago School's central shortcoming, as I elaborate below, is that it naturalizes power relations, leading it to misread or ignore, *inter alia*, relations of gender, race and class. My review of the literature discusses not just critiques of the Chicago School but efforts to selectively and creatively rework the ecological approach in more critical directions. A revised understanding of the Chicago School, I propose, would jettison its naturalistic metaphors while retaining the basic precepts of its epistemology. This results in an approach that uses similar methods as the Chicago School (ethnography, mapping, statistical analysis) and its modes of explanation (combining contextualization with the identification of mechanisms of self-organization and emergence), but one that is much more attuned to relations of power and which considers systemic logics beyond the city. I discuss authors in different epistemological traditions who have made efforts along these lines and outline avenues for future engagement with the Chicago School.

Key tenets of the Chicago School

Summing up the Chicago School of Sociology in a few paragraphs is an impossible task given the volume and diversity of its work; my overview will necessarily be selective. Although I

acknowledge some key commonalities among the Chicago sociologists, my main goal here is to *parse* the Chicago tradition: to highlight differences to identify what is problematic while retaining useful insights for future work. I proceed by identifying how key figures in the Chicago School improved on the work of its founder, Robert E. Park. I focus on three scholars – Frederic Thrasher (1927), Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth – who each exceeded Park in specific ways, respectively exemplifying three methods advanced by the Chicago School: ethnography, statistical modelling and analytical abstraction.

The Chicago School of Sociology consolidated in earnest under the leadership Robert E. Park, a former journalist who had studied sociology in Germany and worked as a public relations official for Booker T. Washington before assuming his position at the University of Chicago. Park's approach was influenced by his journalistic background and inspired by the rapidly growing city around him: in contrast to the prestigious universities on the East Coast that celebrated bookish contemplation, Park advocated direct engagement. To know the city, he famously stated, one must get 'the seat of your pants dirty in real research' (cited in Desmond, 2014: 550). The privileging of engagement over contemplation resonated with industrial capitalists, including most prominently John D. Rockefeller, who financed much of the research at the young university (Smith, 1988).

Although Park followed his intuitions and curiosity, he set out to develop a conceptual framework that would provide coherence to an array of research subprojects. Inspired by plant ecology as well as Social Darwinism, Park developed an approach he labelled 'human ecology'. He viewed the city not as a consciously designed artefact but as an organism that expanded and evolved through self-organization (Park, 1925). The city, according to Park, is a mosaic of segregated neighbourhoods, each containing groups that seek to preserve their cultural and social integrity through institutions such as newspapers and clubs. The human ecologist, then, studies how these different groups compete to mark their place, writing the 'natural history' of the 'natural areas' that together make up the city. Other key figures in the Chicago School adopted this perspective to various degrees.

The Chicago School famously produced numerous *ethnographies* of different places and groups within the city, including classics such as Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* and Cressey's *Taxi Dance-Hall*. Although Park mentored the School's ethnographers, they followed his approach selectively. Frederic Thrasher's *The Gang* is illustrative. While building on Park's human ecology, Thrasher discarded some of its questionable precepts while adding a creative and robust account of his own; *The Gang* develops an explicitly processual, relational and spatial approach, prefiguring major currents in contemporary social science (Abbott, 2002). Thrasher argues that gangs arise at the urban interstices, in neighbourhoods in transition or on the fault lines between neighbourhoods where parental oversight and community controls are absent. Building on Burgess' diagram, he identifies different interstitial or disorganized zones and provides vivid narratives of the gangs that emerge and dwell in them. Compared to Park as well as many common sense and criminological accounts, Thrasher's understanding of gangs avoids essentialism and cultural determinism; antagonism and difference do not arise from the collision of ethno-racial groups and their primordial traits but through the symbolic dynamics of conflict. Thrasher's book is thus notable not only for its methods but for its ontology, which reverses the causality assumed by Park's human ecology: rather than group differences generating conflicts, conflicts generate group differences. Prefiguring the work of later generations of Chicago sociologists such as Erving Goffman and Howard Becker (Fine, 1995), Thrasher's book and other Chicago ethnographies emphasize the role of history, situations and contexts in shaping symbolic interaction. Thrasher exemplifies appreciation of emergence. The gangs are shaped but not overdetermined by background factors; they arise through iterative interactions.

The Chicago School also pioneered *statistical modelling*, as exemplified by the work of Ernest Burgess. Burgess was interested in the spatial sorting of groups into zones with different identities

and levels of prestige. Although his diagram (Burgess, 1925) is often read as an attempt to depict the city's socio-spatial order, it is meant as an analytical tool to capture transformation: the caption below the diagram reads 'the growth of the city' while the chapter as a whole is primarily concerned with relation between urban expansion and neighbourhood change. It is understandable that Burgess and Park are often mentioned in the same breath: they edited *The City*, wrote *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* and supervised graduate students together. Beyond this, Burgess's work on the risks of recidivism and neighbourhood change uncritically makes use of racialized indicators (Harcourt, 2015) while Burgess and Park together marginalized the contributions of female scholars such as Jane Addams (Deegan, 1988). Burgess also shared Park's conviction that it was possible to divide the city into 'natural areas', producing the taxonomy of 'community areas' that still define Chicago's administrative set-up (Venkatesh, 2001). Nevertheless, there are important differences between the two men. Whereas Park's Social Darwinism assumes that ethno-racial groups define urban order, Burgess focuses on individual households and status groups; where Park describes city life, Burgess pursues analytical abstraction; where Park provides no comprehensive account of how changes in cities and neighbourhoods interrelate, this is at the centre of Burgess' project; and where Park casually identified 'natural areas', Burgess aimed to develop methods to rigorously classify neighbourhoods. Although Burgess embraced methodological pluralism to uncover different dimensions and layers of social reality (Harvey, 1987), his signature contribution is to use statistical techniques and analytical models to examine the changing make-up of cities, laying a foundation for later work mapping and explaining the unequal distribution of racial and social groups or spatial variations in for instance crime and social cohesion.

Another important contribution of the Chicago School was to engage in *analytical abstraction* and theorizing. Two contributions stand out here: Burgess' concentric zone model and Wirth's characterization of urbanism as a way of life. Before Burgess, representations of cities were variants of maps – schematic representations of particular places designed to bring out what was deemed relevant. Burgess' concentric zone model showed that urban models can also be construed differently: by abstracting away from local particularities, researchers can isolate particular mechanisms and infer the patterns they generate – a strategy that later generations of complexity researchers would pursue through agent-based models or ABMs (e.g. Schelling, 1971). Wirth's article on urbanism as a way of life (1938) similarly does not seek to comprehensively describe any particular city but instead posits ideal types à la Weber to bring out the essential qualities of social life in cities, construing from a set of three characteristics (size, density, heterogeneity) a theory of quintessentially urban social relations (formal, transitory, segmented, superficial). Substantively, both Burgess and Wirth moved away from Park's rendition of human ecology: neither Burgess' zones nor Wirth's urbanites represent groups seeking to preserve their integrity. More importantly, both pioneered efforts at analytical abstraction, seeking to develop general accounts by abstracting away from local particularities (Burgess) or through deductive reasoning (Wirth).

Here, then, is my selective summary of the Chicago School. It began with Park's attempt to develop a theory of human cohabitation from plant ecology that centred on ethno-racial groups and their primordial traits. For Park, the city is fascinating as it is always in motion, creating a diversity and sharpness of experience lacking in folk societies. In Park's conception, the city is a place where traditional social controls wane and human instincts get free rein. Although their work continued to be informed by Park, his followers largely – though not entirely – jettisoned their mentor's Social Darwinism. It is in this sense that we need to parse the Chicago legacy: by selectively drawing on Park's agenda and framework, his followers advanced the social sciences in the early twentieth century, and generated insights that – if critically read and reinterpreted – remain relevant today. They further made major methodological advances as they elaborated different methods, including

ethnography, statistical modelling and analytical abstraction.

When I suggest parsing the Chicago legacy, I also mean separating Park's ontology from the broader School's epistemology. The ontology of human ecology, at least in Park's original formulation, sees the city as an organism in which groups compete as different species. The Chicago School's epistemology was developed on the basis of this ontology but also went beyond it. It features the privileging of context in explaining social life and a concern with places as emergent and evolving structures (e.g. Sampson, 2002). The Chicago sociologists combined methods and analytical strategies to observe general patterns in the uneven distribution of phenomena, to furnish rich descriptions and to identify – through close-up observation, statistical modelling, or deductive reasoning – the underlying causal mechanisms.

The critique from critical race theory

Many sociologists have long considered the heyday of the Chicago School as a critical stage in the development of their discipline. Although the Chicago sociologists were not canonized as foundational thinkers – a status reserved for giants such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim – they were appreciated for their pioneering efforts to establish sociology in the United States. Nevertheless, this reading of the discipline's history has been strained by sustained anti-racist criticism and the reappraisal of work by Black scholars, notably W.E.B. Du Bois.

The series of critiques, starting as early as Oliver C. Cox (1944), have effectively debunked Park's work on race relations as based on racist prejudice and casual impression rather than careful observation and analytical rigour. The celebration of Park's work as pioneering and foundational to American sociology moreover erases the substantial work of Black and female scholars who had already developed more sophisticated approaches in the same field, sometimes in the very same city (Deegan, 1988). Anderson and Massey (2001) argue that the hallmarks of the Chicago School – commitment to empirical research, combination of different methods, concern with mechanisms and patterns of social and spatial stratification – were prefigured by Du Bois. The publication of Morris' *The Scholar Denied* in 2015 was a watershed, combining profound critique of the premises of Park's work on race relations and a detailed historical account of the machinations of academic politics. Morris' archival research reveals that Park actively sabotaged Du Bois' career and smeared his reputation. Scientific racism as well as animosity and scheming thus shaped the emerging discipline of sociology in the United States, privileging Park's theories of the race cycle at the expense of Du Bois' theoretically sophisticated and empirically substantiated sociology of race relations.

What may first have appeared as mere slights of hand or reflections of the broader racist environment appear in new light following Morris' *The Scholar Denied*. Park's work not only reflected the racist beliefs common among White people in his time and place; his theories were articulated against more emancipatory and sophisticated understandings of race relations such as those developed by Du Bois (Ojeh, 2024). Many of the achievements attributed to the Chicago School of Sociology had already been advanced by Du Bois, whose community studies of Philadelphia and Atlanta predated those of the Chicago School and were more sophisticated in their combination of methods and theorization of findings (Du Bois, 2007 [1899]).[3]

Although this work knocks Park from his pedestal and convincingly shows that Du Bois was a foundational American sociologist, the question where this leaves the Chicago School's work on the city is more difficult to answer. On the one hand, the work of the Chicago School clearly carries the mark of its founder. The Chicago sociologists regularly cast Black Americans in a negative light – as a source of urban problems. One of the clearest expressions of the naturalization of ethno-racial hierarchy was the tendency to see the influx of Black Americans as both a cause and consequence of neighbourhood decline. The idea that the arrival – 'invasion' in Chicago School parlance – of Black Americans reduces neighbourhood quality and depresses property values was not only taken for granted but built into models of neighbourhood change and informed urban policy. Most

notoriously, Homer Hoyt's model, an adaptation of Burgess, informed redlining policies. By withholding mortgages from Black neighbourhoods deemed unsafe for investment, the model contributed to the decline it predicted (Rothstein, 2017).

On the other hand, generations of scholars have reworked the ideas of the Chicago School to account for the perpetuation and deepening of ethnoracial inequality. While they have largely abandoned Park's accounts of the race cycle and assimilation, they have found inspiration in studies on the interrelation between neighbourhood dynamics and social stratification. For instance, E. Franklin Frazier, one of the first African-American sociologists to work within the paradigm of the Chicago School, showed how African-American family life differed across neighbourhoods of different status. Frazier's *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932) is a remarkable book in that it discusses deeply racist characterizations of Black people before presenting its own explanation that the 'demoralization' of Black family life resulted from exposure to the oppressive circumstances that followed enslaved Africans and their descendants. For him, as for other Black scholars at Chicago, there was no sharp line dividing the ecological analysis of the Chicago School and Du Bois' analysis of racial stratification (cf. Hunter, 2013). Drawing on Du Bois' analysis of how slavery tainted Black family life, Frazier mobilizes the emerging discipline of sociology to counter the racist common sense of his day, showing how a rising Black middle-class managed to find its place in the city, achieving homeownership, economic security and stable marriages (Frazier, 1932: 117–146).[4]

Tracing this lineage paints a more ambiguous picture of Park and the Chicago School. Blackman (2023: 288) argues that Frazier and Charles Johnson, another prominent African-American sociologist at Chicago, 'held an indebtedness to Park … which was both contradictory and opportunistic'. Park mentored Frazier and Johnson, provided them with opportunities and came to their defence when the FBI came after them (Blackman, 2023). We see a similarly contradictory indebtedness in the work of St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, two other Black sociologists working on Chicago. They dedicated their classic *Black Metropolis* to Park, honouring him as a source of intellectual inspiration and professional support. At the same time, these Black scholars were held back by Park's race relations theory which centred on 'assimilation' and made African-Americans responsible for failing to live up to the 'white ideological notion of progress' (Blackman, 2023: 300). As Meghji (2024) notes, both Frazier and St Clair Drake turned to Du Bois for a sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of race and 'the global color line'. While these scholars abandoned the Chicago School's foundational assumptions about race, they retained some of its key tenets, including the focus on the neighbourhood as a unit of social life and analysis as well as the use of varied methods to highlight different dimensions and drivers of segregation and stratification.

William J. Wilson, another African-American social scientist who used Chicago as a site and lens for the study of racism and inequality, situates his work on the Black ghetto in the lineage of the Chicago School, arguing that the perspective Park and Burgess developed has only required 'subtle changes' (Wilson, 1996: 17) to account for the perpetuation and deepening of racial inequality. For Wilson, as for other sociologists who reinterpreted the Chicago tradition before him, social pathologies are not an expression of innate group characteristics. Wilson notes that, despite pervasive racism, many Black areas were economically healthy in the 1960s and 1970s, only to decline thereafter. He locates the explanation in processes of global economic restructuring as well as local processes of residential sorting that together hollowed out Black neighbourhoods, setting the scene for social disorganization and criminality (Wilson, 1987). Echoing Du Bois' Victorian descriptions of vice in Philadelphia, Wilson emphasizes that the ghetto's cultural mores should not be celebrated as a form of resistance; rather, they contribute to perpetuating an environment where success in education or the labour market is discouraged. Like Du Bois, Wilson insists that social scientists must acknowledge such social realities so that they can be addressed, even if it means painting an unflattering picture.

A final example of the complicated lineages springing from the first generation of Chicago

sociologists is the work of Elijah Anderson. Inspired by 'second-generation' Chicago sociologists such as Gerald Suttles and Howard Becker who had revived the department's interest in ethnography (Fine, 1995), Anderson's dissertation examined the social structure and norms of the ghetto through a close-up study of a single bar and liquor store, which he referred to as Jelly's corner. Anderson situates his work in the tradition of Chicago school ethnography and human ecology (Anderson, 2004) as passed down to him, particularly through Suttles (Anderson, 2003). But he also engages with W.E.B. Du Bois, pointing to *The Philadelphia Negro* as a pioneering study in race relations and urban studies and following Du Bois in his own studies of Philadelphia (Anderson, 2025). Both traditions inform Anderson's level-headed style of ethnography based on long-term participant observation in a particular locale. It takes the knowledge and beliefs of its subjects seriously, addresses major issues of public interest and is written in plain language without any hint of conceptual or theoretical pretentiousness. Incidentally, Anderson is the recipient of both the Robert E. Park Book Award and the W.E.B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award.[5]

Whereas Park viewed the city as a place where biologically driven ethno-racial dynamics play out, many scholars have since employed the human ecology approach for the exact opposite reason: to show how social environments rather than innate characteristics contribute to racial inequalities. Du Bois and the revised Chicago School here have complementary emphases and strengths: whereas Du Bois set out to examine evolving race relations, the Chicago School's interest is in advancing an approach that privileges urban dynamics. Both Du Bois and the Chicago School value detailed description, plain language, a concern with history and context and the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Well-founded criticisms of Park should therefore not deter scholars from exploring the potential of spatially sensitive approaches to highlight mechanisms and patterns of racial inequality. Rather than simply replacing the Chicago sociologists with Du Bois, another possibility is to selectively build on and combine ideas and approaches from the two overlapping literatures.

The post-colonial critique

One of the most powerful contemporary critiques of the Chicago School comes from postcolonial scholars who argue that the Chicago sociologists were mistaken to infer universal theories of urbanism from their research in the particular context of Chicago at the turn of the century (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2016). As postcolonialism has gained ground in urban studies, the Chicago School has been discounted and held up as an example of what urban studies should *not* be. The Chicago sociologists are presented as early representatives of a type of universalism that misrecognizes difference, leaving no room for cities or scholars outside of the Global North to meaningfully contribute to urban theory. They are further seen as spatial fundamentalists (Roy, 2016: 206) whose fixation on spatial form obscures the workings of capitalism, colonialism and racism.

Building on Hannerz (1980), Jennifer Robinson – focusing on Park's ecological approach, Burgess' concentric zone model and especially Louis Wirth's classic article on urbanism as a way of life (Wirth, 1938) – criticizes the Chicago School's overzealousness in deriving general urban and social theory from their studies of Chicago. Robinson suggests that Wirth's account is 'parochial' as well as 'static and categorizing' (Robinson, 2006: 6, 25) and that his 'hope for a unified body of general theoretical knowledge about urban sociology rest[s] … on a social world assumed to be cleansed of a range of social and psychological processes that were consigned to the categories of the primitive and traditional' (Robinson, 2006: 27).

Before addressing these critiques, note that Burgess' diagram and Wirth's ideal type are but a part of the Chicago School's pluriform epistemology that emphasized the need to alternate between analytical modelling and rich descriptions of urban life. That said, the Chicago School sociologists – particularly Wirth and Burgess – sought insights that apply beyond their particular time and place.

How did they do this? Wirth (1938: 3, emphasis added) is explicit about his method in 'Urbanism as a Way of Life': he contrasts 'the urban-industrial and rural-folk society as *ideal types* of communities'. Similarly, Burgess presents his famous diagram as 'an *ideal construction*' that does not fit Chicago or any other city (Burgess, 1925: 50, emphasis added). Although the diagram is modelled on Chicago, it mainly seeks – as its caption ('the growth of the city') and the chapter as a whole suggest – to emphasize *dynamism*: the radial expansion from the city centre, the sorting of city into different zones and the processes of organization and disorganization that occur as the zones expand. Both Wirth and Burgess sought to present ideal types to analytically isolate the impact of specific features of spatial form (Wirth) or to emphasize the effect of sorting mechanisms (Burgess).

How we read Wirth and Burgess shapes our appraisal. Both Hannerz and Robinson see their writings on urbanism and the growth of the city as attempts to provide definitive, universal accounts. Such a reading is plausible as many of Burgess and Wirth's formulations reflect the disposition to generalize from the specific context of Chicago. But if we read Burgess and Wirth as seeking to construe *ideal types*, assessments become more favourable. For instance, Robinson (2006: 27) notes that Wirth's account of urbanism is 'cleansed' of processes and relations associated with rural-folk societies. But this omission is not necessarily an oversight: the very purpose of construing ideal types is to omit much of the complexity to bring out what is analytically of interest, in this case what is quintessentially urban. Similarly, Hannerz (1980: 71) identifies a 'strain toward an overly generalized conception of the typical urbanite' and faults Wirth for not incorporating intimate and stable bonds into his conception of cities.[6] A different reading would see Wirth's account not as an attempt to grasp the anthropological complexity of cities but as a tentative exploration of what might be distinct about urbanism as an analytical category.

If these ideal types are read constructively, they invite rather than foreclose comparative analysis in urban studies. This is how some of the authors who inspired Robinson and Hannerz read the Chicago School. While Robinson (2006) and Hannerz (1980: 119–162) present the work of the Manchester School of Anthropology as an underappreciated body of work that could serve as an alternative to the Chicago School, at least some of the Manchester anthropologists did not see the two approaches as incompatible. For instance, Mitchell's overview of theoretical orientations in African urban studies (approvingly cited by both Hannerz and Robinson) notes that his 'approach here has been heavily influenced by Wirth's classic essay' (1966: 60). In his exploration of African urban studies, Mitchell lists key characteristics – what he calls 'external determinants' – of 'cities everywhere', including several identified by Wirth such as density, heterogeneity, economic differentiation and 'demographic disproportion' (Mitchell, 1966: 49–50). Although his focus is on African urban studies, Mitchell situates his exploration within a larger urban studies framework where Wirth is a key reference. Nor does he simply copy Wirth, as Mitchell identifies features that may be peculiar to African cities. Perhaps more importantly, he uses the early literature on African cities to develop new understandings of cities more generally. Mitchell argues against understanding differences in social relations only in terms of 'processive change' and counsels thinking in terms of 'situational change' (Mitchell, 1966: 44). Whereas 'processive change' refers to the development of societies as a whole (the spectre of modernism), 'situational change' occurs when people or social relations travel from one context to another (in this case, the village and the city). Mitchell uses this distinction to argue that tribal and kinship relations do not disappear but take on different meanings depending on where people are situated. As he explores how place-specific ecological conditions shape social relations and experiences, Mitchell's account is in line with Wirth's and helps him to argue against modernization theory's assumption of linear transformation.

The work of Janet Abu-Lughod, a key reference in postcolonial urban studies, suggests how the Chicago School's models of urban life and dynamics can be creatively reinterpreted. Hailed as the 'mother of the Cairo school of urban studies' by

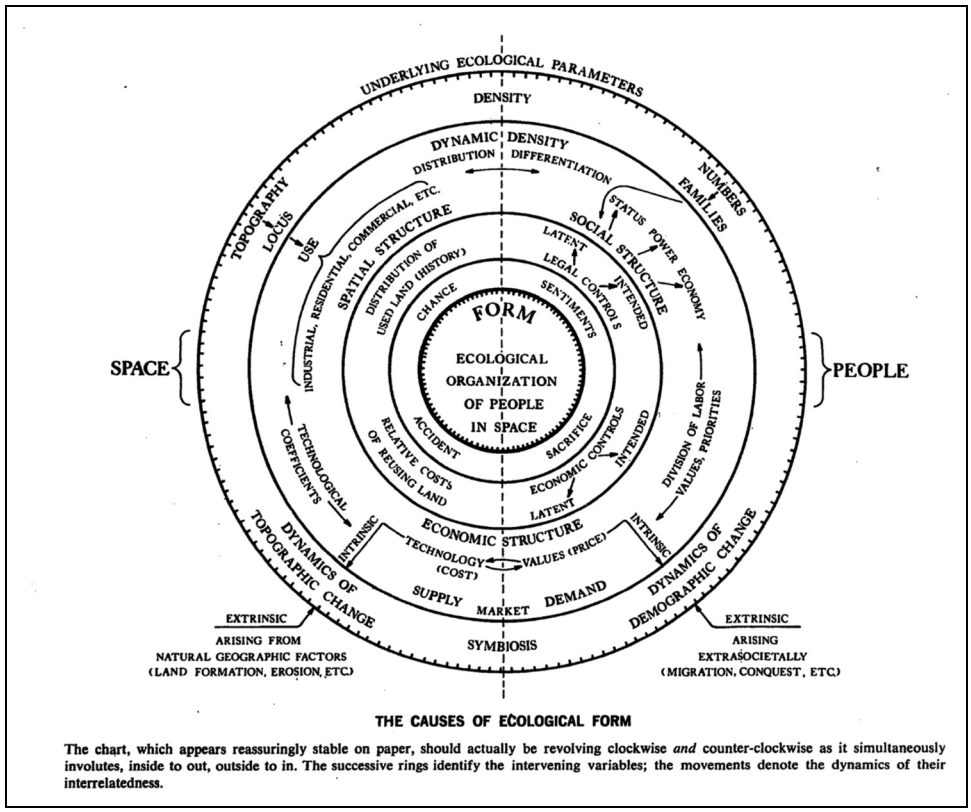
Nezar AlSayyad (2014), Abu-Lughod has advanced extensive critiques of universalism, essentialism and developmentalism in over four decades of work spanning North Africa and the United States. Her monumental study of Cairo uses ethnography, historical analysis and social area analysis to understand how spatial divisions and formations evolved in Cairo (Abu-Lughod, 1971). While she used the concepts and methods of human ecology, including statistical techniques (Abu-Lughod, 1969), her study is a model of careful historical research alive to the particularities of the city and its neighbourhoods, at no point reading its evolution as a linear process. Abu-Lughod's questioning of many of the models and assumptions of the Chicago School anticipates later critiques:

> Many ecological patterns different from the one proposed by the Chicago ecologists were discovered. Classical ecologists thought that loss of primary and kinship relations, and the growth of urban anonymity, voluntary associations and secondary relationships were the direct result of size, density and heterogeneity, but later ecologists demonstrate that this was an overly simplified view. (Abu-Lughod, 1966: 4)

While substantively identical to the criticisms of Hannerz, Robinson and many contemporary urban scholars, Abu-Lughod positions her argument as an *internal* critique. She retains many of the core elements of the ecological approach but contributes to what she calls 'the new ecology'. 'The major implication of current thought in social ecology', she wrote in 1966, 'is that there is no one "city type", no one form of "urbanity"' (Abu-Lughod, 1966: 5). Nevertheless, she proceeds to identify general models of different types of urban formations, further suggesting that the successors of the first generation of human ecologists were alive to the role of the economy, politics and the state. From the first to later generations, the focus shifts from extracting and isolating mechanisms to examining how ecological patterns emerge in interaction with changes in political economy.

Although Robinson and Abu-Lughod are both committed to comparative urban studies, they differ in their emphases. Abu-Lughod uses comparison to bring out different pathways and highlight qualitative differences; her approach emphasizes – more than current incarnations of comparative urbanism – that research should be designed to better understand the role of conditions and processes operating across geographical levels. She thus grounds comparison in an analytical framework that recognizes structures and processes operating beyond locales (Peck, 2014). For example, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities* (Abu-Lughod, 1999) charts the unique trajectories of these cities while explaining how the national context and a globalizing economy affects them all. As a further illustration, Abu-Lughod's diagram of the causes of ecological form (Figure 1) provides a graphic example of what revised ecological thinking might entail. Abu-Lughod riffs on Burgess' diagram, adding complexity while still aspiring to develop approaches that help grasp and compare different local contexts. She retains the Chicago School's interest in developing general models and typologies but repurposes its approach to acknowledge and explain variation.[7]

There is no doubt that the Chicago School fell short in analysing cities outside of the United States or even Chicago. In this sense, the charge of 'parochialism' is justified. There is also no question that urban theory should draw from a much wider range of cities, seeing them not just as variations of a general theme but as sites for theorization in their own right (Roy, 2016). While extrapolating findings from Chicago – or any other city or set of cities – to develop universal urban theory is bound to fail, we need not see the Chicago School's work as an attempt to furnish definitive understandings. We could also see it as an overly confident first step in seeking to extract a general understanding of cities and urbanism from particular cases. Whereas Hannerz and Robinson present the Chicago School's models of urban life and dynamics as totalizing attempts to understand cities everywhere, Mitchell and Abu-Lughod show that more generous readings are both possible and productive, adding variation and nuance to the concepts and ideas of the Chicago School through their studies of



THE CAUSES OF ECOLOGICAL FORM

The chart, which appears reassuringly stable on paper, should actually be revolving clockwise *and* counter-clockwise as it simultaneously involutes, inside to out, outside to in. The successive rings identify the intervening variables; the movements denote the dynamics of their interrelatedness.

Figure 1. The causes of ecological form. *Source:* Abu-Lughod (1966: 4).

sub-Saharan, North African and North American cities. Whereas Hannerz and Robinson suggest that the Chicago School uses its home city to generalize and abstract in ways that fail to acknowledge urban realities elsewhere, Abu-Lughod and Mitchell creatively repurpose the human ecology approach to account for general patterns as well as different pathways. Viewed in this way, the shortcomings of the Chicago School encourage creative and critical reworking.

The Marxist critique

For Marxists, understanding cities and urbanization begins by acknowledging the overriding significance of capitalism in shaping socio-spatial formations. The Chicago School often serves as a counterpoint to these critical accounts. Harvey has long identified the Chicago School with bourgeois science, arguing that the academic division of labour that apportions a specific subfield to urban studies obscures the broader processes and conditions producing space (Harvey, 1978). Manuel Castells' *The Urban Question* (1977) similarly suggests that any social science that takes the city as its focus of analysis is bound to fall victim to spatial fetishism by mistaking the places where social processes manifest for their causes. A more recent wave of criticism associates the Chicago School sociologists with 'cityism' – the belief that the city is a bounded and self-contained entity with unique properties that distinguish it from its surroundings and other types of spatial settlement (Brenner, 2013; Wachsmuth, 2014). Updating Castells' critique, Brenner has developed his neo-Marxist account of planetary urbanization as a critical response to

mainstream understandings of urban studies that unreflexively consider the city as their unproblematic unit of analysis.

Again, it is important to parse the legacy of the Chicago School to see what remains valuable and which shortcomings must be addressed. While the Chicago sociologists did not develop an elaborate research programme on the broader dynamics of urbanization, neither did they always assume that the city is a bounded and self-contained entity (Jones and Rodgers, 2023). This is especially true for Wirth who is at pains to argue that there is no strict separation between the city and its outside. In a formulation that could have come out of Brenner's critique of statistical analysis to identify the proportion of people living in cities, Wirth states that the 'degree to which the contemporary world may be said to be "urban" is not fully or accurately measured by the proportion of the total population living in cities' (1938: 2); he adds that the 'characterization of a community as urban on the basis of size alone is obviously arbitrary' (Writh, 1938: 4). Prefiguring the founding premise of work on planetary urbanization, Wirth states that 'we are not likely to arrive at any adequate conception of urbanism as a mode of life' if we continue to 'identify urbanism with the physical entity of the city, viewing it merely as rigidly delimited in space, and proceed as if urban attributes abruptly ceased to be manifested beyond an arbitrary boundary line…' (Writh, 1938: 4).[8] Rather than suggesting a clear boundary between the city and its outside, such passages suggest a research agenda that explores how spatial forms correlate with forms of sociality in different kinds of places (Abu-Lughod, 1966; Jacobs, 1961; Lofland, 1971; Whyte, 1980).

As with the postcolonial critique, it is important to specify where differences lie: the originality of the Marxist approach lies not in positing that urbanism extends beyond cities but in identifying capitalist dynamics as the driving force of urbanization. As Zukin (2011: 10) argues, the key insight of the Marxist approach is that space is *produced*. Whereas Chicago's culturalist approach examined forms of sociality and subcultures emerging in cities and neighbourhoods, historical materialism focuses on the very drivers of urbanization, highlighting the role of spatial arrangements in mediating class relations and in facilitating the accumulation of capital.

What, then, is the value of the Chicago School's account of the relationship between spatial form and sociality? Interestingly, Castells has backtracked on some of his earlier criticisms. In *The City and the Grassroots* (1983), he lamented works such as his own *The Urban Question* (1977) on the grounds that they were overly formulaic and produced trivial results. His approach in *The City and the Grassroots* is much closer to that of the Chicago School, both epistemologically and substantively, in that it foregrounds fieldwork as a means of theory development and examines processes of community formation and self-organization.[9] *The City and the Grassroots* conceives of cities as loci for social struggles that involve not only capitalist relations but also ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. It explores how social movements make sense of their neighbourhoods and cities in light of their broader political horizons, highlighting their power to reimagine and reshape social life from the bottom up and through lateral connections. Although he notes that his interest in conflict and transformation is in tension with the 'integrationist' perspective of the Chicago School (Castells, 1983: 292), he shares with the Chicago sociologists an interest how people actively make places and carve out their niche in the city.

The Chicago School here helps us to see cities and neighbourhoods as incubators of identities, lifestyles, groups and relations (Nicholls, 2008, 2009; Uitermark et al., 2012) as well as nodes within larger networks of flows (Massey, 2012). Seen in this way, the Chicago School points to 'the centrality of agglomeration as an organizing dynamic' (Sassen, 2008: 114). For Sassen as for Nicholls, agglomeration – not only of economic activity but of politics and culture – define cities and make them strategic sites for exploring broader dynamics. Although the Chicago sociologists do not provide all the tools necessary to understand how connections form within and across cities, Sassen (2010) suggests that as cities regain importance as sites of globalization, we need to recover the detailed mapping of space as pioneered by the Chicago

School. For example, the concentration of activists in specific places enables them to develop strategic capacities and pool resources, allowing social movements to organize protests and build networks that extend far beyond the city (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016).

A broader question raised by the neo-Marxist critique concerns the place of ethnography in analyses that stress capitalism or neoliberalism. As critics have often argued, neo-Marxist analyses risk advancing totalizing accounts that consider geographical heterogeneity as mere variations on the same theme or downplay the role of flesh-and-bone or institutional actors to interpret and shape their worlds in ways that go beyond resisting commodification and exploitation (e.g. Oswin, 2018). Loïc Wacquant's work on stigmatized neighbourhoods in France and the United States arguably provides a powerful example of how ethnography and political economy can be combined: Wacquant takes from his mentor Bourdieu an interest in the state and structural distributions of capital but adopts from his other mentor, Julius Wilson, an interest in ethnography and neighbourhood research to study how residents draw social boundaries (Wacquant, 2008). Wacquant's theoretical construction of the concept of advanced marginality similarly bridges Bourdieu's interest in structural distributions of capital and the Chicago School's interest in construing ideal types of socio-spatial formations. Although he rejects the theoretical premises of the Chicago School's first generation, some of Wacquant's work – notably the first edition of *Body & Soul* (2004) – fits neatly in the Chicago tradition of studying urban subcultures through participant observation. As some of the scholars criticized by Wacquant (2002) have pointed out, ethnography á la the Chicago School provides a way to understand communities and movements on their own terms and to appreciate how they perceive their environments, draw social boundaries and carve out their places in the city (Anderson, 2002; Duneier, 2002). Zukin (1989, 2020) similarly incorporates close-up analysis of urban culture in her accounts of the changing political economy of cities.

There is little question that the Chicago School failed to appreciate the political economic forces driving urbanization and shaping cities. The Chicago sociologists naturalized market relations, with Homer Hoyt's historical and applied work on real-estate markets and housing policy providing a particularly disturbing example (Rothstein, 2017). The key insight that space is produced by and constitutive of capitalism has generated research transcending the Chicago School in crucial ways. And yet, key insights from Chicago scholarship continue to be relevant; some have even regained importance (Sassen, 2010). General analyses of urbanization and neoliberalization require grounding in local contexts (Fairbanks, 2012). As new subcultures emerge and areas change, ethnography is crucial to highlight how people and communities make sense of their social worlds and try to shape them. An abiding lesson from the best Chicago School ethnographies is to be open-minded and curious about the many different kinds of people inhabiting the city. While this may sound trivial, strong theoretical agendas come with the risk that scholars will fit complex realities into preconceived frameworks, pre-empting opportunities to learn about and from city residents (Anderson, 2002). The more agnostic approach of many Chicago School sociologists works against such projection and can generate unexpected insights while giving visibility and voice to the groups being studied (Anderson, 2002; Castells, 1983).

Beyond ecological metaphors

If a single thread runs through the manifold critiques of the Chicago School, it is that its proponents naturalize power relations. Drawing its metaphors from plant ecology, Park and his followers made it seem as if people naturally find their place in the city. Conceiving of the city as 'an organism' rather than 'an artefact' is to view it as the outgrowth of bottom-up processes of selection and evolution (Park, 1928: x). Park posits that cities grow 'uncontrolled and undesigned' (Park, 1928). There is no sense of how powerful interests shape the city; nor is there appreciation of how human groups and their positions are construed through symbolic struggle. This conception of social life was refuted from the outset by contemporaries such as Jane

Addams, W.E.B. Du Bois and Herbert Mead as well as by generations of Marxist, feminist and post-colonial critics.

And yet, biological metaphors of the city are resurfacing in scholarship. The Chicago School is being resurrected through complexity approaches that view the city as arising from bottom-up interactions. 'Complex' here does not refer to anthropological complexity in the sense of ambiguity or contingency, but to a system whose macro-order grows out of micro-interactions. The main proponents of seeing cities as complex systems are scholars from the natural sciences who seek to use their skills in computational modelling and digital data processing to better understand and predict urban processes. As Park before them, they look to the natural sciences to render the social sciences more rigorous, with the difference that they command advanced methods that can go beyond suggestive metaphors.

Complexity scholars have proposed a 'new science of cities' that seeks to identify the laws underlying city growth and urban form (Bettencourt, 2022; Bettencourt et al., 2007; West, 2017). To identify such laws, they conceive of cities as complex systems akin to brains, ant hills, or ecosystems. Such complex systems serve as distribution networks for resources (e.g. energy, ideas, food, money), develop through evolutionary mechanisms and feature emergence; their overall structures result not from planning or design but grow from the bottom-up. Seen as complex systems, cities can be modelled through computational methods (e.g. agent-based models),[10] slotted into formulas that predict levels of for example innovation or crime and mapped through data culled from mobile devices, digital platforms and digitized government registries. Whereas the Chicago sociologists tried to listen to the 'heartbeat of the city' (Jones and Rodgers, 2023: 37) through careful ethnographic observation, computational social scientists amass digital data to chart the rhythms of the city and sense its 'pulse' (Batty, 2010; Miranda et al., 2016). As it stands, there is a disconnect between urban studies and urban science (Derudder and Van Meeteren, 2019), with the former embracing critique, conceptual innovation and reflexivity and the latter emphasizing rigour and quantification. While this divergence can advance subfields in their own terms, it also leads to blind spots while undermining conversations across epistemological divides.

The field of urban science would benefit from taking seriously critiques of the Chicago School and organic metaphors. This would lead to greater reflexivity and allow incorporating computational methods into more critical or heterodox epistemologies (Törnberg and Uitermark, 2021, 2025). For instance, the Marxist critique suggests that digital data should be seen not only as traces of social behaviour but as the products of the private companies and governments that set up digital platforms and tracking systems. The anti-racist critique suggests that the categories routinely used in segregation research need to be critically examined, that researchers cannot simply assume there are different groups with set preferences (as in the tradition of the Schelling model) but must study the contested formation of both groups and preferences. More generally, as complexity researchers are predisposed to view cities as an outgrowth of unplanned bottom-up processes, they face the challenge of considering the broader power structures in which such processes play out as well as the outsized role of dominant actors.

Several authors writing in the tradition of the Chicago School, notably Robert Sampson and Mario L. Small, have demonstrated how a focus on place-based social structures helps to better understand how inequalities materialize. This work grows out of a commitment to rework the Chicago School. Robert Sampson, an 'unrepentant descendant of the Chicago School' (2002: 47), posits that there are 'many nuggets of insight worth preserving from our intellectual predecessors and that the goal should be to transcend tradition rather than to view it as something to flee altogether' (2012: 31). While Sampson retains the neighbourhood as his central unit of analysis, he also considers macro-level structures and micro-level preferences and strategies (see Figure 2). Viewing the neighbourhood as a mediator brings us closer to a critical human ecology, that is, an approach studies how structural inequalities are reproduced or challenged in places and across space.

Research by Wang, Phillips, Small and Sampson provides one example (Wang et al.,

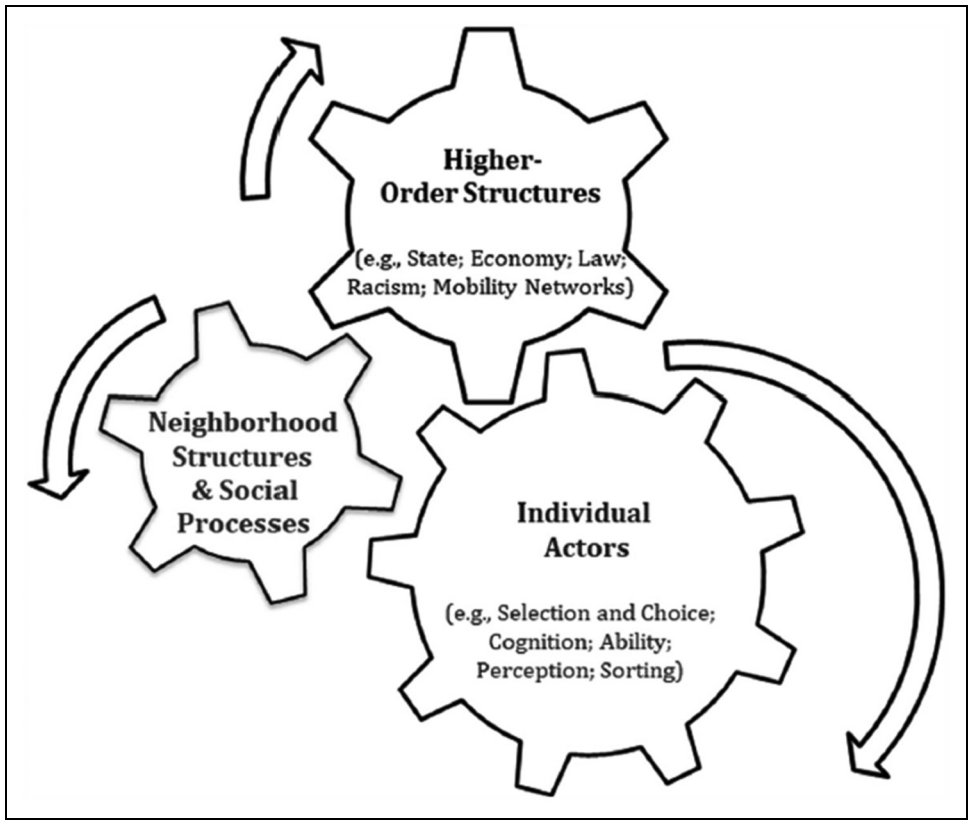


Figure 2. Integrating 'top down' and 'bottom up': an analytical conception of neighbourhood effects. *Source:* Sampson (2019: 9).

2018; cf. Phillips et al., 2021). They use geotagged posts to examine the everyday mobility of Twitter users across neighbourhoods and finds that class and especially race predict whether residents of non-white and poor areas venture into middle-class areas. Although they use the same kind of data as computational social scientists, Wang et al. foreground the significance of racial and class inequalities in shaping interactions. This research builds on the Chicago tradition by considering the sorting of different groups into neighbourhoods and addressing questions of social integration while being attuned to the inequalities that shape people's networks (see also Boy and Uitermark, 2024).

Another important strand of research is focused on how uneven geographies reflect and mediate racial and class inequalities. For example, Small and colleagues (2021) show that 'alternative financial institutions' – often a euphemism for predatory lenders – are heavily present in neighbourhoods with high proportions of African-Americans, contributing to inequalities in access to credit and wealth. Another example concerns work on environmental injustice (Bullard, 1990). For instance, Sampson's work shows that the spatial distribution of polluted soil reflects Chicago's history of neighbourhood inequality – the use and disposal of lead by factories concentrated in historically Black and deprived areas – and in turn feeds into structural inequalities by reducing the health, well-being and cognitive capacities of people residing in these areas (Sampson, 2019, 2022). Whereas the Chicago School has been criticized for its spatial

fetishism or fundamentalism, in these lines of research, the neighbourhood appears not as the ultimate cause of inequalities but as an important site where inequalities are mediated.

Conclusion

Criticisms of the Chicago School in much recent scholarship seem to provide ample reason to relegate ecological analysis to the dustbin of history. One way to respond to the obvious flaws is to discard the Chicago legacy altogether and to seek alternative foundations for urban studies. Morris suggests discarding Park in favour of Du Bois; Brenner substitutes the Chicago School with Lefebvre; Robinson rediscovers the Manchester School of Anthropology. There is indeed much to be said for crafting different canons that serve not only as a foil but as a foundation for critical urban scholarship. Nevertheless, I suggest that there is also much to be gained from closer engagement with the Chicago School. My goal is not to rehabilitate Park, Burgess, Wirth, or any other Chicago sociologist but to emphasize the School's heterogeneity and its manifold lineages to parse its legacy. Although the Chicago School presents some obvious omissions and flaws, some of its fundamental precepts and approaches are worth preserving while its many lineages provide inspiring examples of how the original research agenda can be elaborated in original ways.

In terms of precepts, the Chicago School remains relevant not so much for the dated and occasionally flawed answers it provides but for the questions it asks and the methods it suggests. The Chicago School asks what is distinctive about urbanism as a way of life, how social and cultural groups form in and make cities, how neighbourhood and city change interrelate and how spatial and social stratification are mutually constitutive. Although the range of questions posed by urban scholars has expanded, these interests remain at the core of the field.

As for methods, the Chicago School advanced deep ethnography, analytical abstraction and spatial statistics. Especially when used in combination – as the Chicago sociologists and W.E.B. Du Bois proposed – these methods are effective in highlighting the interplay between the particular and the universal. They also serve as a corrective against overly abstract or formulaic accounts by systematically anchoring findings in time and place. The use of maps and plain language are important in that they signify commitment to accurate description (cf. Duneier, 2011) and help readers find their way into remote and alien social worlds. The original impetus of the Chicago School to pursue curiosity and document changing subcultures, characters and places in the city is still what attracts many students and scholars to urban studies. As the field of urban studies – through the ever more finely grained division of academic labour – embraces radical critique, conceptual sophistication, or advanced statistical and computational techniques, the Chicago legacy remains an example of what a basic approach to urban research might look like. 'Basic' is not to say 'simple'. Work by scholars such as Janet Abu-Lughod, Saskia Sassen, Robert Sampson and Mario Small show that a creative revisiting of the Chicago School can furnish the foundation for work on the role of place and space as sites and mediators of broader cultural, economic and political processes.

Whereas the Chicago School all but ignored the origins and workings of systemic logics in favour of an ontology that emphasizes emergence and self-organization, we need to avoid erring in the opposite direction by suggesting – as Castells did in *The Urban Question* before recanting in *The Urban Grassroots* – that places and the relations forged there are epiphenomenal. The value of urban studies arises precisely from the fact that we cannot understand the drivers or effects of systemic logics without examining how they play out in space. Perhaps the most important insight of the Chicago School is that cities and neighbourhoods have emergent properties: what happens in places is not fully determined by the properties of the people residing there but an outgrowth of interactions. These processes of emergence are precisely what make neighbourhoods cities so generative and complex. Places are meeting points for different systemic logics that people (and other sentient creatures) creatively interpret and remake. It is precisely

the unpredictable and underdetermined nature of cities that makes them so interesting to study. Saskia Sassen's work (e.g. Sassen, 2013, 2014) exemplifies how an understanding of cities as complex, incomplete and in-the-making does not preclude a sustained focus on systemic inequalities.

While discarding the Chicago School altogether is more likely to impoverish than to enrich urban studies, there is a need to read its works in context, critically and creatively. Deeper engagement may lead to both incremental improvements to the original agenda as well as to better alternatives and more profound critiques. An important reason critics of the Chicago School from David Harvey and Manuel Castells to Neil Brenner and Jennifer Robinson were able to develop such powerful alternative frameworks is that they were well-versed in the approach they criticized; they knew precisely what they wanted to move beyond. Especially since the Chicago legacy represents the mainstream in urban studies – it is perhaps the only school of thought that is self-consciously liberal (Smith, 1988) – it can serve as an interlocutor to more critical approaches.

I have argued that the cardinal problem of the Chicago School is that Park's ontology – viewing the city as a naturally developing organism – blinds it to power relations. This problem resurfaces in contemporary work that views the city as a complex system with emergent properties. Conceiving of cities as the unplanned result of distributed interactions will naturalize inequalities and is ill-suited to examine how capitalism, racism, sexism and other organizing principles of inequality operate within cities. It is for this reason that I suggest abandoning Park's ontology while further elaborating the Chicago School's epistemological approach. Although the idea of natural order is written deeply into human ecology, there is no necessary reason why this should be so – a more social and critical understand is fully compatible with a focus on space and place as mediators of social processes. Incidentally, the word 'eco' derives from the Greek word for 'home', suggesting that ecology can be a study of how people make their places and spaces. A revised human ecology (Abu-Lughod, 1966; Sampson, 2002) would study how broader social structures shape and are mediated by cities and neighbourhoods, how people fashion their everyday environments and how vested interests seek to remake cities – an ecological approach that is both more critical and human (Molotch, 1967) than that pursued by the first generation of Chicago sociologists.

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Notes

1. I use 'Chicago School' as shorthand for the generation of sociologists at the University of Chicago who worked with and under Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess from the 1910s to the 1930s. Some authors identify a second generation consisting of students of the first generation, including Erving Goffman and Howard Becker (e.g. Fine, 1995), while others speak of a 'new Chicago School' (Clark, 2008). To avoid confusion, I specify, where relevant, the lineages from the first generation.
2. The use of the 'Chicago School' label is important here, as it risks concealing considerable differences between authors, currents, and generations. Shalin

(2025) notes that the label was first introduced in the 1930s but only gained currency in the 1950s and 1960s. Even then, "its precise referent remained a point of contention" (Shalin, 2025: 56).

3. Du Bois' studies of Atlanta are not all fully accessible. For an overview, see: https://findingaids.auctr.edu/repositories/3/archival_objects/88385 (accessed August 30, 2024).
4. In the preface to Frazier's book, Burgess (1932: xi) concludes that '[t]he rates of crime, delinquency, illegitimacy, poverty, and vice would seem from this study to be not a matter so much of race as of geography'. Although the passage suggests critical distance from racist explanations, it also reveals the spatial determinism that typified the Chicago School mainstream. Racism as a historically evolved structure of power relations is present in Frazier but ignored by Burgess.
5. The same holds for Harvey Molotch, another re-interpreter of the Chicago School.
6. Rather than simple oversight, this may have been a conscious choice following from Wirth's ambition to posit an ideal type of the urban way of life. As Hannerz and Robinson point out, Wirth was a keen observer of communal relations and rose to fame through his study of the ghetto. This suggests that Wirth was aware of communal relations and that he must have consciously decided not to include them in his definition of urbanism. I speculate that his study of the ghetto informed his characterization of urbanism as he witnessed both communal relations forming within the ghetto and the pressures of the city that ultimately undermined them. If so, Wirth's ideal type requires different lines of critique. One would be that some kinds of communal relations are indeed specific to cities and must be part of any definition of urbanism as a way of life. A lot of work on cities has suggested that they are not only shredders of traditional and folk ways but *also* generators of communities, identities, and differences. Wirth did not include these dynamics into his account of urbanism as a way of life but wasn't blind to them either; he noted that the city 'not only tolerated but rewarded differences" (10), "produces a highly differentiated population' (17), and was the site for the creation of 'fictional kinship groups' (23). The problem, then, is not that Wirth's account is exaggerated (Hannerz, 1980: 74) or simplistic (Robinson, 2006: 8) as all ideal-types by definition are, but that his ideal type of urbanism as a way of life does not account for the creation of new forms and combinations of communal relations as a defining feature of cities.
7. Michael Dear's diagram of post-modern urban form also fits here (Dear, 2002: 24). Although Dear seeks to refute the Chicago School, his diagram is construed in the same way as Burgess': it takes a single city – in this case Los Angeles – and analytically abstracts its spatial order to arrive at a more general model that can be applied elsewhere. As with Burgess, the attempt is bound to fail. Nevertheless, such failure can arguably be productive: if the model does not apply, it suggests overlooked processes or patterns, necessitating revision. (This leaves aside the question whether the diagram approximates the spatial pattern of the city on which it was modelled; see Sampson, 2002).
8. As many contemporary Marxists have turned to Lefebvre for an alternative account of urbanization, note that Castells' original critique also implicated Lefebvre. Castells (1977) argued that Lefebvre's references to the 'urban revolution' and people's 'right to the city' painted an overly romantic account that, like its bourgeois counterparts, failed to grasp broader capitalist dynamics. While critical urban scholars have been alive to the capitalist dynamics emphasized by Castells, they consistently reframe these broader dynamics in the grammar of urbanization. In this sense, Lefebvre and the Chicago School are not worlds apart – both prioritize space in their analyses of social relations and focus on forms of sociality associated with different urban environments.
9. Whereas Althusser was the main inspiration for *The Urban Question*, Castells' approach in *The Urban Grassroots* relies on Alain Touraine. Like Touraine, Castells elucidates the place of social movements within changing social structures. But Castells also wants to take the concerns of social movement activists seriously and emphasizes that his account is developed in dialogue with activists. In this sense, his approach echoes the subaltern current within the Chicago School represented by Jane Addams who, like Castells, pioneered methods of mapping and diagnosing social processes in dialogue with those most immediately affected by them.
10. The most famous of such ABMs is Schelling's segregation model which shows that, all else being equal, even slight variations in preferences for the residential make-up of a neighbourhood will result in pronounced patterns of segregation (Schelling, 1971). While these models are useful as thought experiments, they are easily misread as

approximations of reality. Schelling's model does not begin to explain segregation as it brackets anything to do with power, such as how social groups are construed, how resources are unequally distributed, or how corporate and state actors shape residential markets. In this sense, there is an uncanny resemblance between ABMs and Park's ecological model, where the social order is the unplanned outgrowth of micro-level interactions. Although the designers of ABMs cannot be faulted for their models being misinterpreted, the result of their shared efforts – the emergent result of their individual actions if you will – is that they consistently draw attention to the unintended effects of innocuous individual preferences and actions while bracketing out the impacts of policies and power relations.

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