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Author response

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Justus Uitermark[1]

Abstract

Despite their differences, all my interlocutors agree on one thing: urban scholars need to engage with the Chicago School. If the question is not whether urban scholars should engage the Chicago sociologists, the question is how to do so. How should we relate to the heroes and demons of our field? And what if our heroes are also our demons?

Keywords

Chicago School of Sociology, urban theory, critical human ecology

I want to thank my interlocutors for engaging my essay. Individually, they make valuable contributions to understanding the Chicago School and its continued relevance; together, they illustrate that divergent interpretations of the past both reflect and inform differing contemporary research agendas.

Despite their differences, all agree on one thing: *urban scholars need to engage with the Chicago School.* If the question is not *whether* urban scholars should engage the Chicago sociologists, the question is *how* to do so. It is this question that I have been struggling with in my teaching and research. How should we relate to the heroes and demons of our field? And what if our heroes are also our demons?

My essay was an attempt to come to terms with urban studies' rich and troubled history. I neither wanted to present the Chicago School as a canon of scholarship to be revered, nor as an archaic body of work that we have moved beyond. Instead, my strategy was to parse the Chicago legacy to identify what we should take forward and what we should leave behind (Uitermark, 2026).

This meant engaging with the Chicago School's various lineages as well as the criticisms that have been levelled against them: no matter how far these sociologists are in time and – for me more so than for my interlocutors –in space,[1] we enter into a relationship with them. Any engagement is of course also political: where we direct our energies, which authors deserve generous readings, the flaws we are willing to excuse, the qualities we now seek to highlight.

My strategy of parsing the Chicago School legacy is of course not the only legitimate way to engage with the history of our discipline. Loughran critiques the Chicago School with a broader brush than my

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own; Silver (2026) delves deeper into the works of individual scholars to reveal greater nuance. I respond to Loughran and Silver first, before turning to the commentaries by Prickett (2026), Ren (2026), Sampson (2026a), and Randolph (2026) – each proposing a different way to engage with the Chicago School's legacy. I close by reflecting on 'parsing' as a way to engage with the past.

Appraising park

Dan Silver's response shows that Robert E. Park's thinking on cities and sociology is more complex and layered than my essay suggests. Without denying that there are problematic aspects in Park's work, Silver argues that there is much we can learn from Park.

Park's oeuvre is indeed more than an exercise in Social Darwinism. In fact, the original version of 'The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the City', published in 1915 in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Park, 1915), was not even a contribution to human ecology. The text was enthusiastic, but also *ad hoc* and sprawling, lacking an overarching idea of what a city is or how it should be understood. While its revised version in *The City* (Park, 1925) remained inchoate and *ad hoc*, it tentatively framed its many questions within the framework of human ecology, as inspired by Oswald Spengler. Only later did Park go all-in on ecology, emphasising both the biological foundations of human societies and privileging biotic metaphors in describing social life (Park, 1936).

This brief, selective summary underscores Silver's point: there are many ideas and interests animating Park's questions, reflecting his 'restless and probing mind' (Abbott, cited in Silver). Nevertheless, I think that Silver is too charitable when he writes that Park's use of biotic concepts reflected a 'complex engagement with pragmatist evolutionary theory'. Even if we disregard what Loughran describes as Park's 'entire body of retrograde thought on matters of race, class, and gender', Park pushes biotic metaphors well beyond any point of analytic usefulness. But we should *not* ignore this retrograde thought as it looms over Park's work. Aldon Morris (2015) shows that Park held deeply racist beliefs that shaped his theories and observations, including those documented in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Park and Burgess, 1924). More generally, Park's work reflected rather than examined class inequality, racism and sexism.

In the end, for me, the answer to the question whether we should delve deeper into Park to extract nuances and complexities hinges on what we expect to get back in return. Whereas Silver sees potential cues to explore, I doubt there is much to be gained. All the elements of Park's thought that are thoughtfully discussed by Silver are also present in other writers – both before and during Park's time. Even if Park's ideas are more varied and complex than I acknowledged, his signature theoretical contributions were tainted by Social Darwinism. It is this variant of human ecology that we should leave behind.

Critiquing the Chicago school

Loughran presents a radically different reading of the Chicago School (Loughran, 2026). Whereas Silver emphasises the complexities of Park's thinking, Loughran paints with a broader brush to suggest that the Chicago School produced 'God's-eye knowledge … by virtue of its high degree of abstraction'. Loughran's reading identifies the Chicago School with its most problematic elements, setting it up as a foil for critical scholarship.

I think this can be a productive position; there is value in total critique if it serves to open the door to radical alternatives (Castells, 1977; Harvey, 1978; Morris, 2015). If a reductive reading of the Chicago School is needed for such total critique, so be it. But my essay argued for a different strategy. I sought to explore an alternative to the total critique – a differentiated critique—in pursuit of what I referred to as critical human ecology. A reductive reading of the Chicago School risks obscuring lineages that can productively serve as springboards for future scholarship, including in critical urban studies.

I alluded to several of these contributions in my essay but let me focus on the relation between Du Bois and the Chicago School. Loughran (2026) writes that there 'may be some stylistic overlap' between the

two but that they share 'very little' in terms of urban epistemology and methodology. This is true, but only if we accept Loughran's narrow interpretation of the Chicago School, which excludes subaltern currents as well as various lineages that creatively reworked human ecology.

My understanding of the Chicago School includes scholars who fuse influences from human ecology and Du Bois, including E. Franklin Frazier, St Clair Drake, Horace Cayton, Nancy Denton, Douglas Massey, and Elijah Anderson. If we adopt this more expansive and differentiated understanding, there are more than superficial commonalities with Du Bois – we might go so far as to say that Du Bois 'anticipated in every way the program of theory and research that later became known as the Chicago School' (Anderson and Massey, 2001: 4). I think this strand of work supplements *The Philadelphia Negro* (Du Bois 2007 [1889]), which Loughran holds up as a model for critical urban studies.

The Philadelphia Negro is indeed a monumental and brilliant piece of scholarship, providing a fine-grained understanding of the plight of African Americans in Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century. The mapping techniques, ethnographic observations, organisational surveys and historical analysis: all are inspiring, even relative to the Chicago School's best work. Still, Du Bois' classic account of racial segregation and inequality provides only elements of an approach. *The Philadelphia Negro* originated from a project commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania and bears this mark; it is less theoretical and critical than Du Bois' other writings.

The effort to bring Du Bois and human ecology into conversation results in an approach very different from Park's but one that does not easily assimilate into contemporary critical urban scholarship. Compared to the latter, both human ecology and Du Bois place greater emphasis on detailed empirical description as well as combining quantitative and qualitative research to uncover mechanisms of ethno-racial stratification (Anderson and Massey, 2001). In sum, Du Bois has important contributions to make to both human ecology and critical theory, especially to critical human ecology.

Pedagogy and the comparative imagination

Reading the commentaries by Prickett, Ren and Sampson prompted me to reflect on another reason why engaging the Chicago School is productive: its works remain widely taught, informing class discussions and shaping students' learning trajectories. Reflecting on the Chicago School, then, also means reflecting on how we pass on knowledge to the next generation.

Like Prickett, I do not see teaching the Chicago School as a form of 'rehabilitation' but as an attempt to engage with our discipline's history and an invitation to study the city as a 'living entity' through ethnographic investigation as well as statistical analysis. Critical reflection on the Chicago School's flaws and accomplishments helps to teach students how to 'study a city with both rigor and rebellion' (Prickett, 2026) – an inspiring motto.

I am equally excited by Ren's reflections on pedagogy and comparison (Ren, 2026). It is also my experience that reading the Chicago School sparks rather than stifles the comparative imagination. The map exercise – using Burgess' example to depict cities students are familiar with – has the same effect in my classroom: students become both critical of universalism *and* inspired by the effort at abstraction. As Ren argues, it is possible to engage the Chicago School within a comparative framework – her work provides powerful examples of how the city of Chicago and its sociologists can be brought into conversation with different cities and traditions (e.g., Ren, 2018).

Robert Sampson (2026a) gives additional reasons why the Chicago School still resonates today. As he notes, much of the Chicago oeuvre is 'passionate, compelling, and the boldness of its vision is inspiring'. Ironically, many Chicago School writings are more accessible to students than contemporary texts suffering from 'turgid, jargon-laden prose'. Sampson further lauds the Chicago School's 'insistence on studying urban change in its larger context'. Although I question whether this applies to the first generation of Chicago sociologists, who had little to say about politics and economy, it certainly does apply to many of the School's

intellectual descendants, with William Julius Wilson's *Truly Disadvantaged* furnishing a key example (Wilson, 1987). Sampson's own work continues this lineage by linking structural changes in society to both local spatial transformations and individual trajectories (Sampson, 2012, 2026b).

Engaging the canon

Gregory Randolph points out that disparate bodies of work across disciplines harbour the qualities I associate with human ecology, even if they are not directly in dialogue with the Chicago School. He describes urban studies as a 'heterodox field' that is 'perennially open to new methods and critical theories'. The picture of 'urban social science' Randolph sketches is more a shared and diffused set of sensibilities than a unified body of work. Perhaps this is as it should be; perhaps urban social science is most productive when it is located in and across different disciplines, promiscuously borrowing from others without much reflection on shared principles. This raises a further question: do we even need to reflect on an urban studies canon?

There is something to be said for pragmatically adopting whatever is helpful for the question at hand; sustained engagement with disciplinary roots can stifle innovation. My own impression is that urban studies err on the side of eclectic pragmatism whereas sociologists err on the side of canonical reverence. My contention is that scholars in urban studies would benefit from more sustained engagement with the Chicago School of Sociology and its critics – so as not to repeat past mistakes, to reflect on foundational premises, to bring seemingly disparate studies into conversation, and to find inspiring examples.

As a case in point, consider Sampson's argument that the emerging science of cities would benefit from efforts to embed studies of self-organisation and emergence within a 'more structural and institutional understanding of the city' (Sampson, 2026a; see also Törnberg and Uitermark, 2025). Without suggesting that all scholars working on and in cities come under the fold of urban studies, a careful reflection on earlier work will likely pay dividends.

Parsing

All commentaries more or less explicitly asked: is it really possible to 'parse' the Chicago School or any other body of classical texts? While Prickett, Ren and Sampson are sanguine, for Loughran deleting 'the bad' in the Chicago School and keeping the good 'isn't quite that simple'.

I agree that parsing any intellectual inheritance is far from simple. Parsing is not the surgical removal or ideological cleansing of bad elements, but a dialogical process of acknowledging lineages and complexities to both learn from the past and to move beyond it. It is a way to come to terms with the history of a discipline and to reflect on how it carries into the present.

While parsing poses challenges, none of its alternatives seem plausible. One is to consign the Chicago School of Sociology to the dustbin of history as an antiquated body of thought. But as all commentators agree, the Chicago School lives on as a canon and as doxa (Loughran, 2026). Another strategy would be to craft a new canon for urban studies. But such as effort, too, would have to identify plausible foundations. In other words, it would also involve parsing legacies.

I see now that my essay was borne out of a realisation that we cannot truly break free of the past, and that we might as well make the best of our predicament. For me, this means not standing on the shoulders of giants, but engaging curiously, critically, and constructively with what came before us as we continue, both hopefully and carefully, to move forward with 'rigour and rebellion'.

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1. Writing from Amsterdam—a city routinely held up as a contrast case to the American metropolis—this exercise is about relating, not just to the past, but to American hegemony.

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