

A Stranger at the Gate: Reflections on the Chicago School of Sociology

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When I entered Brigham Young University in 1915, I was interested in law and my goal was to obtain a college degree by the shortest route. Looking over the list of courses I might take, I saw “Sociology”—a catchy title, I thought; it should be easy. Someone suggested that I take it in my second term, which I did, but I saw no need of it in law, so most of what I had learned slipped away once I had passed the course. In my third year I took a course in social problems, which knowledge it also seemed I did not need. That was the year I enlisted in the army, and the suspension of my studies for nearly two years reinforced my forgetting.

I returned to Brigham Young University shortly after the war. Some weeks before I graduated, in 1920, my professor of economics and sociology, John C. Swenson, suggested that I consider putting aside my idea of becoming a lawyer and turn instead to sociology, a discipline with a future (he said). I was flattered by his interest in me, but I could not accept his advice. Yet, to use his words, I could not put aside his suggestion. Unwittingly, I was backing away from the law.

Three months later, having accepted Swenson’s advice, I found myself walking the streets of Chicago, uncertain about what to do next. It was Swenson’s idea that I get my sociology at the University of Chicago because “they work with new ideas.” But I was more preoccupied with worries than with ideas. For one thing, I was almost penniless. When I arrived in Chicago

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by freight train, I had no more than twenty dollars in my pocket. Since I had no suitable clothes, what I needed most of all was a presentable suit. Possibly my guardian angel was near. In a pawn shop I found a nearly new suit that was a perfect fit. The pawnbroker said I looked presentable, “like the paper on the wall.” It cost me six dollars.

The next day, as again I scouted the area, I came upon a pair of large brick buildings surrounded by park space. It was a hospital, or so I thought, until I saw the sign carved in stone over the gate: CHICAGO HOME FOR INCURABLES. Who, I wondered, would expect a modern university student to pass through that gate in search of a job? The elderly manager answered my inquiry somewhat reluctantly: “We don’t hire students. They rarely come in here.” Although I was disappointed, I think I was pretending to understand when I replied: “I would not hire students either.” We struck up a conversation. Something I said told him I was a returned soldier. He had felt that I looked too young for that.

He hired me as a male nurse. My duties included tending to the “guests” during the mealtime, assisting them in dressing and undressing, helping them bathe, and so on. It was called a part-time job, but I was continually being asked by the guests to run errands. It was fast becoming a full-time job, which robbed me of my study time. I earned barely enough to pay for my room rent and was left with little more than a dollar a week in pocket money. I had no money for books, and I seriously lacked time enough to study.

All that I had known before the day of registration was that I would either become a student or a job-hunter. I would not be offended if the University rejected me; I felt that a craftsman was a better craftsman if he knew and obeyed the rules of his trade, and I expected the same would hold for students and professors. I resolved that if I failed to pass my courses, I would work for a year or so, read sociology, and reapply for admission to the Department of Sociology.

The Four Chicago School Professors

I reached Chicago with so little money because I had feared that some of my credits from Brigham Young University would not be accepted by the University of Chicago. Therefore, rather than seeking employment during the summer before I left for Chicago, I had taken two courses in sociology at the University of Utah. One of those courses, the sociology of the family, was taught by a professor who had been a graduate student at the University of Chicago the previous year. Most of what he had to say was sketchy. I learned from his lectures that the “Chicago School” was but a team of four professors.

He had more to say about Robert E. Park than about all of the remaining three, but he did not seem to know why. The head of the Chicago School and the founder of the first sociology department in the United States was Albion W. Small, who had studied for his advanced degrees in Germany. He showed me his copy of the encyclopedic sociology text by Park and Burgess. When most textbooks sold for less than three dollars, this one cost about ten, a price I could not afford. My University of Utah professor left me with no impressions of the other two professors of the Chicago team, Ernest W. Burgess and Ellsworth Faris.

Unnecessarily, perhaps, I felt a stranger to sociology on the day of registration because I could not use its vocabulary. I avoided conversations with my fellow students. Having seen how amused carpenters were upon hearing someone use their language incorrectly, I knew that sociologists, and even students of the subject, would not react any differently. I did speak occasionally to some of the mature students, one of whom told me how to register for courses. I fell into a line before the desk at which Professor Small sat checking the cards for the courses, inspecting other materials needed for the records, and advising his own students. I was one of the few who came to him empty-handed. As I had not brought my records from Brigham Young University, I had to tell him my name. I apologized for my oversight.

Small reassured me that the front office could write to Utah for my records. He asked what sociology courses I had taken. I answered that I had had two courses, but that I had forgotten most of what I had learned in them. I explained that I had taken one course three years ago and the other four years ago, and that I had been out of school for two years as a soldier overseas. A few other questions convinced him that I knew no sociology. He said to me: "Tell me about yourself. How did you get here and where from?" "From Salt Lake. I came by freight train." He mused a bit and then asked how I was going to pay my way. I said I had a job and when I told him where, he was greatly amused; he and the manager of the Home had been boys together. "When I came here I would send students to him for jobs," Small remarked. "They never seemed to fit and he would send them back." The information that I had succeeded in getting a job at the Home worked a miracle.

Professor Small reached for some cards. Smiling, he said: "I would be pleased if you would take one of my classes." At his suggestion, I was to take one class from Professor Park and one from Professor Burgess. I needed only to have my cards initialed by them. Fortunately, the Home for Incurables, occupying space equal to a city block, was less than 100 yards from the university buildings in which I attended classes and the same distance from the apartment house where I had secured lodgings.

With One Foot in the Job

According to good administrative practice, Professor Small was clearly “off base” when he admitted me without credentials. To allow me to enter his prestigious graduate school unaccompanied by documents was a violation of procedure for which I was deeply grateful. That was a debt I did not forget to repay. I could not have been happier with his acceptance of me, made all the more gracious by his willingness to overlook my failure to produce credentials attesting to my educational achievements.

The trial I faced was to survive the first quarter of the school year. The university year then was divided into four three-month terms. In two of the three classes I had decided to take, I had to write term papers. For one class I wrote a case study about a man I knew only as “Mugsey.” He was an artful pickpocket, a specialist called a “highdiver.” He would travel about the Middle West, rarely venturing more than 200 miles from Chicago, taking odd jobs here and there to prove he was a working man, a “hobo,” not a bum. On Chicago’s West Side he was regarded as a good citizen and served as the leader of a boy’s club; he enjoyed that. This was a real person, not a fictional character, that I portrayed, although minor parts of my case study were fictional – composites drawn from my own experience.

One day a student in that class told me that a Dr. Ben L. Reitman would be giving a lecture to social workers on the hobo problem. The student added that Reitman was a specialist in venereal diseases, a man not highly regarded by the university community. His lecture proved to be a rambling discussion of the subject, but not without interest; he was more entertaining than informing. Reitman’s knowledge of hobos was restricted to their nonwork lives; it did not include their contribution to society as workers. I became involved in the discussion that followed his talk, and afterward Reitman invited two others and me to have coffee and pie. He was aglow: “That was a good discussion, really,” he exclaimed. Then Reitman turned to me and announced, “We’re going to have a study of homeless men in Chicago, a worthy study too, and you’re going to do it.” At that point in the conversation I thought it wise to be quiet, as I had already said enough. Assisted by the advice of his friends, he made timely suggestions about the kind of study he and his associates had in mind.

I promised to be at his downtown office a week later with a plan for the kind of study he wanted and with an estimate of its cost. I went away with the cautious feeling that Reitman might fail in his search for money, or that he might be merely another bluffer. I knew little about plans or estimates for research, but I managed to put together a proposal that was better than I had expected it to be. It pleased Reitman. When I had my next meeting in his office, he was beaming. He had obtained the money and had placed it with the sponsor of the study, the United Charities of Chicago, to be paid to me as needed.

Armed with those assurances, I took the news to Professor Burgess, my advisor. To give the study professional status, he suggested that a committee be formed, to which I would be responsible. This made sense to me. Burgess was to be the committee's science advisor and chairman, Reitman its authority on the area and its inhabitants, and Joel Hunter, the director of United Charities, its treasurer.

My job in the Home for Incurables had helped me to survive in threadbare fashion, but it also fenced me in, for it gave me too little time for study. Also, I could not abruptly leave it or abandon my responsibilities. I would write letters for a guest who had a skin disease and had to lie continuously with oil smeared over his body. He was an engineer who had contracted the affliction in the tropics. One shut-in, a wheelchair guest, was an artist of sorts who decorated cards for high-society occasions. I would take his cards to a stationery shop. When I would return to visit the ward, I would get requests to do some shopping. After a few months, other carriers were found to answer these requests. Such were the tasks that made my part-time job a full-time job.

Whatever Makes a Good Researcher

It was not only pride that impelled me to avoid close, fun-oriented friendships at Chicago, in which one's status as a student was attained largely through party life. Socially, I have ever been a poor mixer and, as I expected, I was finding my kind of satisfaction in the graduate school. I knew my pride would serve me well in positive ways. Before I had been handed the hobo project, I felt like an outsider among the other graduate students. And, although I was still an outsider when I began my study of the homeless man, especially so with regard to sociological conversation, I knew that by and by that psychological barrier would come down. I would learn to use the "concepts" of sociology appropriately. I admit that I envied my fellow students, who could speak glibly on the subject, but I did not like the way they bandied about their familiarity with concepts and theories. When graduate students met over coffee, most of their talk was about their own research projects, about what they were doing or trying to do. While I could not enter into these discussions, I liked to listen, and I absorbed much of what was said. If my study was mentioned in the course of a conversation, it would be in a joking context. Still, we got along well.

When I was at work, I spoke with the men I met in the Madison Street area, men who were or had been hobo (that is, migrating) workers. One needs to keep in mind the fact that many men who went to the frontier in the 1880s or earlier may have been hobos for a few years only, and then settled down to raise a family. Many others who had been migratory workers in the 1880s may have become homeless old men on the bread lines in the early

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1900s. What distinguished the hobo from other homeless types was his preference for jobs outside of cities. Understandably, as the open spaces of the dwindling frontier were settled, the need for hobo workers diminished; in fact, it was already winding down when I was making my Chicago study in 1922. Migrant workers are still to be found in the harvesting of special crops, such as potatoes, tomatoes, fruits, and grains. However, this labor force is not an aggregate of single men, or hobos; rather, it is a migratory parade of urban families in automobiles.

The Arrival of “The Hobo”

I had what I could not have imagined having when I reached the University of Chicago: a sum of money to be used to carry out research in the area of the city inhabited by the homeless. It was an area that was later identified as “Hobohemia.” It would be an undertaking quite unrelated, except in common-sense terms, to my previous work experience. Moreover, it would concentrate on a socioeconomic problem identified with a specific area of the city. What was required of me was a study that would meet the pertinent tests of science, with which I had little acquaintance.

Although I was a graduate student in sociology who had been accepted under exceptional conditions, and who was unfamiliar with sociological methods as well as with the theories of sociology, I did know something about the subject of my research. I also knew that my fellow graduate students did not know or care to learn about the inhabitants of a slum called Hobohemia, a place they refused to visit.

Because of my failure to put a higher estimate of the cost of living in my proposal for the study, I was forced to take a room in a “workingman’s hotel” in Hobohemia, where I slept and worked. And even though I worked night after night on my project, I could not finish it within the promised year. I needed three more weeks to finish writing the report, which I assumed would sooner or later reach the committee of three. Week after week I delivered to Burgess the pieces I had typed, the “documents.” Each week, when I brought more material, I waited for his comments, which came only occasionally, when he would ask a small but pertinent question. In time, I came to realize that he was being cautious. A university had to avoid research regarded as outside the zone of respectability. Hobohemia was widely held to be an underworld populated by “undesirable” persons. If Burgess ever held that view, it vanished as, week after week, he read my “documents.”

Soon I had well over 100 documents, ranging in length from two typed pages to ten or so. These I arranged on the floor of my hotel room in piles representing chapters. I had to devise a method of extracting, for the purpose of organizing chapters, materials drawn from various sources, oral as well as

written, and to do so without misplacing any pages. I found that writing *The Hobo* was a matter of moving from chapter to chapter and from one subsection to another in each chapter.

Having delivered to Burgess over half of the manuscript, I had a very uneasy feeling for the next ten days until finally I gave him the rest of it. Burgess called me into his office, which he shared with Park. He was smiling as he remarked: "I did not finish. Professor Park is reading it now." He was too polite to express an opinion about my work while Park was reading the report. Park swiveled his chair to face me. "I have made a few minor changes, which I hope you will accept. The Press will publish it as soon as we can bring it in. You work with Burgess on that." I objected, saying it should be much improved first. Park looked at Burgess and returned to reading the manuscript. I followed Burgess to his desk. He gave me the pages Park had read. I went out, walking on air.

As I have already mentioned, my study was not one the university could have sponsored. Funds for my project were contributed by a private donor, Dr. William A. Evans, a physician and close friend of Dr. Reitman, who wrote a daily column for the *Tribune* on how to keep well. I did not know of him until the book appeared. With no little pride, I was able to give a copy to Professor Albion W. Small. I did not tell him that the book contained not a single sociological concept. *The Hobo* appeared in 1923 and was retired in 1981, although I have not been so informed by the University of Chicago Press. It may be born again elsewhere.

Sociology and the Science Issue

During my first two years in the Chicago sociology department, I wondered when I heard one or another of its students speak of sociology as a science. Yet I came to learn that the majority of the group had been clergymen serving congregations, or missionaries in the less advanced countries, or else sons of clergymen or missionaries. Two of them were even then employed as clergymen. Moreover, as concerns the four professors on our teaching team, Small had once been a clergyman, Faris had been a missionary in Africa, and Burgess's father was a retired clergyman. After completing his higher education, Park had been a news reporter and editor before assuming a teaching position at Chicago.

As a member of the Mormon church, I had once had a strong bias against the theory of biological evolution espoused by Charles Darwin. I wondered if my church-going classmates at Chicago were able to think science and feel religion without experiencing a certain tension between the two fields. At times I thought to ask them how they felt about this, but later I was glad I didn't. I see no reason for anti-science. We can expect anti-Darwinism one



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day to vanish. For about two years at Chicago, however, my struggle to reconcile science and religion was a painful experience.

Why, we may ask, were so many clergymen leaving that venerable profession during the 1920s to enter one or another of the social sciences, especially economics and sociology? Basically, it seems to me, it was because of a labor condition that was only gradually adjusting itself. Before 1900, when the American population was more than 50% rural, and before thousands of road-crossing hamlets – each with its one-room schoolhouse, its corner store, and its neighborhood church – had been wiped out by the spread of the urban-industrial way of life, there had prevailed in the United States a rural culture. By the turn of the century, much of it still retained its frontier flavor, but most of that culture has since been swept away by what Karl Polanyi calls the Great Transformation. That old-time rural culture could not withstand the onrush of urban industrialism. All-weather roads and automobiles enabled rural people to visit towns for their shopping excursions, and towns also became places of entertainment and religious ceremony. The country store and one-room schoolhouse have been largely replaced by the supermarket and the consolidated school. There exists in rural places little more than a feeble image of what used to be. All that is related, although not closely, to the same factors that have transformed rural life elsewhere and that have brought industrialism and its workways to the frontier. Hobo workers were a distinctive form of labor required in a frontier stage of the developing American economy. They have long since ceased to be of any use.

