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REFLECTIONS ON METHOD IN INTERWAR AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

Abstract: *The article provides a historical contextualization of the debates on theory and method within interwar American sociology. This period is often portrayed as the "golden" age of empirical inquiry resulting in proliferation of methodological orientations. It is argued that the demands of professionalization and specialization within the discipline produced a research model which succeeded in analyzing specific issues, but failed to find (in the context of the "crisis" and "disruption" of American society) a convincing answer to the general question of the logic of society's development.*

Keywords: *theory; method; interdisciplinary interaction; fragmentation; crisis*

Úvahy o metodě v meziválečné americké sociologii

Abstrakt: *Článek se zaměřuje na debaty o vztahu teorie, metody a praxe v meziválečné americké sociologii. Toto období je často vnímáno jako „zlatý" věk empirického zkoumání, během něhož bylo zformováno mnoho metodologických přístupů. Na druhé straně, jak naznačuje zde rozpracovaná argumentace, požadavky profesionalizace a specializace vytvořily výzkumný model, jenž sice úspěšně analyzoval specifické problémy, současně však selhal v kontextu „krize" a „rozvratu" americké společnosti, kdy se projevilo, že vědění, jež americká sociologie produkuje, je irelevatní ve vztahu k obecnému problému logiky vývoje společnosti.*

Klíčová slova: *teorie; metoda; mezioborová interakce; fragmentace; krize*

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The development of American sociology in the interwar period can be characterized only inconclusively and with difficulty. Textbooks tend to offer us sweeping summaries: the early period of speculative thought had been replaced with concentrated empirical research, the promise of progressive development had been fulfilled, American sociology had finally found its own distinctive voice, developed specific research methods, succeeded, at last, in coupling with the pragmatist tradition of thinking, and successfully asserted its rights in a competition with related sciences. As is demonstrated in a number of recent historical accounts,[1] however, the model of (sociological) inquiry formed by the "second" generation[2] was one of the major causes of the fragmentation, disunity, and, ultimately, trivialization of the field. In contrast to the early period of development, characterized by the close correlation of basic research objectives with the problem of the (scientific) reform and transformation of society, the main emphasis was placed on professionalization, overcoming amateurish and enthusiastic forms of social inquiry, and on the "scientization" of methods coupled with the "clarification" of terminology which thus far had been deployed ideologically. If the early period employed universally "humanist" persuasive rhetoric as one of the major tools with which to legitimize and win recognition for its cognitive efforts, which had without any serious doubt directed the new science along

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[1] See, for example, Jennifer PLATT, *A History of Sociological Research Methods in America 1920–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996; Jonathan H. TURNER, "The Mixed Legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1988, p. 325–338; Andrew ABBOT, *Department and Discipline: Chicago Sociology at One Hundred*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press 1999; Charles CAMIC, "On Edge: Sociology during the Great Depression and the New Deal." In: CALHOUN, C. (ed.), *Sociology in America: A History*. Chicago: Chicago University Press 2007, p. 225–280; Ken PLUMER (ed.), *The Chicago School: Critical Assessments*. 4 vols. London: Routledge 1997.

[2] The term "first generation" is mainly used to refer to the work of American sociology's "founding fathers" and to the early period of the discipline's institutionalization. Four figures are commonly regarded as the founders: Lester F. Ward, William G. Sumner, Albion W. Small, and Franklin H. Giddings. See, for example, Robert C. BANNISTER, *Sociology and Scientism: The American Quest for Objectivity, 1880–1940*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 1987; Roscoe C. HINKLE, *Founding Theory of American Sociology 1881–1915*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1980.

its path to scientific triumph, then the "second" generation suppressed this uncritical programmatic optimism in favour of strictly scientific "thinking" and "writing" on method. The unified, enthusiastic consensus on the nature of sociology as a science was being reiterated by still-productive Nestor-figures,[3] outwardly proclaiming the scientific possibilities of sociology and addressing the wider public: however, the new intellectual leaders of the discipline wished to raise again – and in a much more rigorous fashion – the question of in which form it was desirable to engage their field.

The most important debates within the discipline – in spite of the considerable diversity of underlying epistemological and methodological approaches – concentrated on three main claims: professionalism, scientism and empiricism.[4] In order to make possible the professionalization of sociology, a rigorously scientific method – almost exclusively empirical at that time – had to be chosen, elaborated and followed. The then dominant epistemological assumption was that only the empirical method allowed for both the accumulation of "scientific" knowledge and the differentiation of systematic cognition from unrestrained speculation. The question of how to advance had indeed been of crucial importance for the field, since its not yet entirely comprehensible delineation of research tools and objectives often enfeebled sociology in relation to related sciences, and limited its access to the resources necessary for the realization of scientific activities. There was also an apparent necessity for sociology to professionalize itself if it wished to enter the interdisciplinary competition[5] for support from governmental institutions or bureaucratically governed foundations, which were much less indulgent than individual enlightened philanthropists from the early

[3] Albion Small and Franklin Giddings continued to exert considerable influence on the discipline, although they were more concerned with preserving the legacy of the first generation and the effects of their own institutional conquest than with aspiring to the role of intellectual leaders.

[4] As Luther L. Bernard put it: "We, as scientific workers in sociology, are so definitely launched upon the trend toward objectivism and definiteness of measurement in scientific method that it is needless to argue in its defense." Luther L. BERNARD, "The Objective View in Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 25, 1918. p. 305. See also PLATT, *A History of Sociological Research Methods*, p. 67–106.

[5] On the part of related sciences, one could often discern an ironical or directly adversarial tone directed towards sociology. As Jonathan H. Turner puts it, sociology had been "attacked for being sloppy economics by the emerging economics establishment, or being the 'bastard child' of philosophy and history by snooty philosophers, for being 'reformist propaganda' by hard scientists, and for being 'abstract speculation' by reformers". TURNER, "The Mixed Legacy," p. 327.

period had been. In the early period, "persuading" others of the righteousness and benefits of a certain plan of research often meant in effect simply enthusing potential benefactors. The first generation active roughly in the period between 1890–1920 had managed to establish a place for sociology in virtually all major American universities, so the task for the second generation was to demonstrate that sociology had become an "independent" research discipline capable of setting up a research model which would help to uncover the "empirical" regularities of social life.[6] It was presumed that the "scientization" of the field would secure the interlacing of cognitive activities and the recombination of sociologists' dispersed research activities into efforts to identify crucial problems for collective engagment. Though the university continued to be the main location of sociology, the emphasis was shifting away from education to research, from "general" theory to thinking on "general" method, from writing programmatic texts "ever searching" for sociology's 'right place' to structuring empirical realities in the disenchanted language of a strict science. The era of exaltation about the inexhaustible new opportunities had been replaced with one of "detail work", drawing its desire to pursue scientific objectives from the values of professional positivism.

The growth of the field, of course, resulted in its internal differentiation. The inconclusive and often directly antagonistic notions of what should constitute the subject of sociological inquiry inspired new attempts to create a shared academic culture. As Luther L. Bernard wrote, the first generation delimited the subject-matter of the discipline, and defended their claim to be founding a respected science, only inconclusively, and it was their demerit that sociology emerged as a "rather spontaneous response to the needs of the times and lacked organization and standardization".[7] The dependence – in part conditioned by the scientific optimism of that time – on models adopted from the natural sciences further diminished any specifically sociological perspective, which was also the case in the confrontation with other, more historically established social sciences. The second generation employed "natural" metaphors or references to the natural sciences' methods much

[6] As Edward Shils claims: "In its first decade Chicago produced only minor and scattered pieces of research." Edward SHILS, "Tradition, Ecology, and Institution in the History of Sociology." *Daedalus*, vol. 99, 1970, p. 760–825.
[7] Luther L. BERNARD, "Some Historical and Recent Trends of Sociology in the United States." *SPSSQ*, vol. 9, 1928, no. 2, p. 284.

more temperately, and brought a "denaturalized" concept of culture[8] into a conceptual area previously reserved for analogies with the world of "nature". A new (sociological) academic culture was much more directed towards a concrete individual, emancipated from the hypertrophied category of "society" as understood through the Spencerian "macroevolutionistic" and grand speculative perspective. To put it in Weberian terms, sometimes "there comes a moment when the atmosphere changes".[9] For the second generation, the dramatic growth and expansion of the cities had become the subject-matter of the discipline with a "micro" analysis as a dominant – both theoretical and practical – approach. As Johathan H. Turner puts it,

> the unit of analysis shifted from the total society to urban neighborhoods, zones, and sectors within a city. More fundamentally, the mentalistic portions of early texts were translated into an action, or social psychological, frame of reference. Research increasingly concentrated on how people defined, assessed, evaluated, and thought about situations.[10]

A concept of culture enabled the introduction of a strong concept of (human) action,[11] which is, of course, crucial and formative for any "micro" perspective, into the general sociological context.

Another problem with the early texts was that it was not possible to reconstruct from them what actually formed the "standards" of sociological research. The values of professionalism and distanced objectivism have always called for the suppression of the "individual" perspective (and today we might also add the "imagination" and "creativity") which had been a characteristic, irreplaceable and formative feature of the work of the first sociologists. Their originality had naturally been in conflict with the calls for the "standardization" of research, for what could not be repeated could not, by definition, become an "exemplar" or a "norm". The model of empirical research referred to the tools of statistical analysis, generally to possibilities of measurement, to numeric variables or scaling techniques. At the "micro"

[8] Sociology shared this systematic interest in a concept of action with anthropology (Boas), philosophy (Mead), ethnography, and psychology.
[9] Max WEBER, "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy." In: *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Shils, E. A. – Finch, H. A. (eds.). Glencoe: Free Press 1949, p. 111.
[10] TURNER, "The Mixed Legacy," p. 332.
[11] A concept of action had already been elaborated by the first generation, but in a different meaning and, for this new conceptualisation, in too close association with a concept of causality. See, e.g., Roscoe C. HINKLE, "Antecedents of the Action Orientation in American Sociology before 1935." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 28, 1963, no. 5, p. 705–715.

level, the concept of observation, traditionally a pillar of any empirical approach, was readjusted to new practical ends: the investigations conducted after WWI added a specifically sociological approach to techniques of "observation" and utilized them for the study of human interaction. The archetypal piece of "micro" research also rested on a rather specific concept of "understanding" (or "interpretation"), which had to be incorporated into the overall analytical perspective very cautiously, seeing that it in any case could not be in conflict with the requirements of distanced objectivism. Unquestionably, the orientation towards "firsthand" data became an underlying "self-evident" assumption of American sociological research after WWI. It was thought that this orientation would enable interested parties to examine, validate or disconfirm the research findings, or to repeat a particular piece of research. At least by proclamation, the new academic culture rested its efforts to stabilize the field on a strictly scientific interest in "data" accumulation, on an empirical and inductive approach to substantive problems, and also on specialized observational techniques aimed at the communities, populations or groups under study. In its scientific rhetoric it was to a large extent (although not exclusively) atheoretical,[12] in many instances openly antitheoretical and convinced as to the necessity of the new "organization" and "standardization" of research. In terms of the overall structure of the discipline, it was very often the case that its expansive growth generated "new" problems before the "old" ones had been successfully eliminated.

In consequence, an objectivist and value-free research orientation resulted both in a change in sociology's public role and in its relation to the public in general. The self-interpretation of the sociologist's "professional" role, together with the meanings he or she attached to it, emanated from a strong confidence in the "value" and universal applicability of empirical knowledge for the description, identification and analysis of (social) problems. The sociologist considered himself or herself to be a pragmatic, dispassionate and independent analyst or consultant, rather than a social reformist or visionary. Objective empirical research primarily set out to provide a scientific account of social phenomena, and to open them up for study in ways relevant for science. Its objective was not a "remedy" of social imperfections or the elimination of problems, but their methodical identification, processing and thorough analysis. One of the main proponents of the "turn" to professionalization and scientization of the field, Robert

[12] See, e. g., Tony BURNS, "The Theoretical Underpinnings of Chicago Sociology in the 1920s and 30s." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 44, 1996, no. 3, p. 474–494.

E. Park, argued that the very meaning of the sociologist's work was to be a "calm, detached scientist who investigates [...] with the same objectivity and detachment with which the zoologist dissects the potato bug".[13] These rather rhetorical formulations expressed a desire to cover a newly delineated subject matter of sociological interest, articulated through concepts such as culture, action, or interaction, with the same methodological self-assurance with which natural scientists approached their (mostly passive) objects of interest. The proclamations stressing objective and distanced approaches were not to be read as if sociology were losing or weakening its interest in social problems as such. However, they suggested that it was necessary to change the manner in which these social problems had been envisaged, grasped, and investigated by sociologists.

The identification, conceptualization and operationalization of social problems had become a specialized matter. The vision of a unified sociology, with orderly relations between its general and applied branches, looked more and more like the untenable, utopian dream of the founding fathers, who were not only wrong in their belief that it was possible to keep theory and practice together, but also in their underestimation of the inherent dynamic of the discipline's development. Professional empirical research necessarily resulted in a differentiation of interests, and accumulating empirical knowledge called for a specialized approach. If a sociologist wished to demonstrate his or her competence for solving a problem, he or she had to be able to apply an empirical approach, or method, or to formulate an empirical project. A scientifically adequate, morally distanced and disinterested approach was, in terms of method and analytical tools, markedly different from less rigorous procedures, mainly those represented by "social work", a discipline which from the very beginning has been very closely linked (historically, personally, and thematically) with the development of American sociology. Social work,[14] as Charles Camic puts it, "because of its overwhelmingly female composition and (resulting) lower salaries, remained a low-status profession whose direct services to needy recipients were not seen as a suit-

[13] Robert E. Park cited in Martin BULMER, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984, p. 76.

[14] Since its founding, practically oriented social workers formed a relatively significant part of the *American Sociological Society* membership: a close connection seemed logical also with regard to the proclaimed objectives of the first sociologists, as they had been inextricably associated with social reformism and claims of social amelioration. A mutual estrangement culminated in the end of the 1920s.

able occupational task for the scientific sociologist".[15] By its differentiation from engaged approaches, unsecured in empirical method and proceeding by means of practical intervention, the specialization of research interests had not been halted. By the end of the 1920s nine sections were established within the *American Sociological Society* – rural sociology, family, community, religion, education, statistics, social work, and psychiatry[16] –, which were more and more markedly being formed as distinctive sociological subfields, or specialized areas of empirical research, rather than as diverse, but functionally interconnected, applications of a unified sociological approach.[17]

The concept of interdisciplinary inquiry also went through a specific process of interpretation in the interwar period. The anyway problematic relations between the social sciences (particularly sociology, political science and economics) were made still more fraught when they all became direct rivals competing for the enormous grants dispensed by the Rockefeller family for the purposes of scientific research. As the *National Research Council* allocated resources almost exclusively to the natural sciences, the *Social Science Research Council*[18] was established in 1923 as a joint effort of the representatives of the *American Political Science Association*, *American Sociological Association* and *American Economics Association* and officials of various Rockefeller foundations. The grant system, which by means of carefully allocating the resources provided by various philanthropic foundations had an intense influence on practice. The identification of problems

[15] CAMIC, "On Edge," p. 232. See also Mary Jo DEEGAN, "Dear Love, Dear Love: Feminist Pragmatism and the Chicago Female Love and Ritual." *Gender and Society*, vol. 10, 1996, p. 590–607.

[16] Lawrence J. RHOADES, *A History of the American Sociological Association, 1905–80*. Washington, D. C.: ASA 1981.

[17] Also new sociological specialized journals began to proliferate in this period: for example, the *Journal of Educational Sociology* (published since 1927), the *Journal of Social Psychology* (1930), *Population* (1933), *Rural Sociology* (1936), or *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1937). See ABBOT, *Department and Discipline*, p. 105.

[18] In 1924, the national associations of psychologists, anthropologists and historians mingled in. A major part of the budget flew in from nongovernmental resources, especially from the Rockefeller's foundations (*Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial* a *Rockefeller Foundation*, and also from *Russel Sage Foundation*, *Ford Foundation* or *Carnegie Foundation*. In 1927, SSRC received three extensive Rockefeller's grants: 750 thousand USD allocated to a general project fund for a five year period, 550 thousand USD to the administration for a 10 year period, and 500 thousand USD for a formation and publishing of the *Journal of Social Science Abstracts*. See Jonathan S. TURNER – Stephen P. TURNER, *The Impossible Science: An Institutional Analysis of American Sociology*. Newbury Park: Sage 1990, p. 55.

and methods in the social sciences, was by no means as 'value-free' as the strict concept of professional academic research would require it to have been. The expectations of John D. Rockefeller Jr. himself and many of his foundations' officials directed social sciences towards practical concerns, in accordance with what was later termed the Rockefellerian "realistic agenda".[19] The chances of winning support were naturally much higher when research aspirations complied or were compatible with (no matter how vaguely defined) this overall conception of relationship between science and practice. The "realist agenda" preferred narrowly focused "specialized" research, statistical methods, systematic "coverage" of the problem under study, and, particularly, results "exploitable" across disciplines. What was thought to join the disciplines together, was not essentially shared interests in solving substantial problems, but common methods exercised in conformity with the basic, mostly implicit, instructions of the Rockefellerian "realistic" agenda.

New organizational structures[20] gave rise to scientific communities and strengthened the standing of research universities with access to Rockefeller's resources. The University of Chicago, founded by John D. Rockefeller in 1890, was consistently patronized, and had privileged access to these funds, and further Rockefeller grants facilitated the establishment of academic research at Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Texas, Virginia and North Carolina universities.[21] As Stephen P. Turner and Jonathan P. Turner put it, "the emergence of foundations [...] as a major source of financial support for

[19] *Ibid*., p. 42.

[20] Before the establishment of these structures, empirically oriented sociologists had been "dependent upon university budgets or on the work they could fit into their spare time, perhaps with some ad hoc outside funding," when a dominant part of their "appointment" was not the provision of expertise but education. Martin BULMER, "Support for Sociology in the 1920s: The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and the Beginnings of Modern, Large-Scale, Sociological Research in the University." *American Sociologist*, vol. 17, 1982, p. 187. See also William BUXTON – Steven P. TURNER, "From Education to Expertise: Sociology as a 'Profession'." In: HALLIDAY, T. C. – JANOWITZ, M. (eds.), *Sociology and its Publics: The Forms and Fates of Disciplinary Organization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 373–408.

[21] Rockefeller's foundations also supported organizations such as the *Institute for Social and Religious Research* (ISRR), where several dozens of social scientists had been employed in the 1920s, the *Local Community Research Committee* (LCRC) affiliated with the University of Chicago, and the *Institute for Research in Social Science* funding scientists from the University of North Carolina. In a period from 1923 to 1928, Rockefeller's foundations delivered more than $20m to the social sciences (which in modern terms amounts to more than $200m). See Donald FISHER, *Fundamental Development of the Social Sciences: Rockefeller Philanthropy*

academic social science had major consequences during the 1920s".[22] The Rockefellerian "realist" agenda consecrated the turn away from the grand themes of general theory, as it did not credit what it considered "pure academicism, theory, and moralizing".[23] To put it simply, if sociologists wished to comply with the Rockefeller precepts, they were compelled to "forget their founders", as *their* work when viewed from the new disciplinary "strictly scientific and re search oriented" perspective looked like naïve and aimless "theorizing and moralizing". Large-scale external research funding also seemed to imply that the "scientization" of sociology was imminent, and that sociologists merited prestige and a firm professional identity as experts respected by the public. The scientists' conviction that "the more they advanced the frontiers of knowledge, the more they would be called on to share that knowledge in applied contexts"[24] resulted in a thorough and almost unconditional identification of sociology with empirical research. Every acute (social) problem called for an empirical project, and also every consistent sociological approach logically had to emerge from an empirically demonstrated correspondence between the phenomena under study and their accounts, thus, at least programmatically, isomorphism between (sociological) theory and practice seemed to be accomplished.

The *resentment* towards general theoretical thinking, the concentration on statistical and mathematical methods on one hand, and on methodologically oriented *field studies* on the other, brought about a certain inability to coordinate activities which would go beyond specialized areas of inquiry. The requirements of the intellectual integrity of the discipline, which in the minds of the first generation was to be achieved at the level of "general theory", almost entirely disappeared from epistemological concerns and in the face of the anticipated professionalization of sociology, seemed no longer to be on the agenda. Between the early 1920s and the mid 1930s no articles were published in the *American Journal of Sociology* which could be deemed "exclusively" theoretical, and in the same period the annual meetings of the *American Sociological Society* paid no systematic attention to "theory". The prospects for progress were associated with the "empirical" method, while any residual hopes for "theory" referred to the demonstration of the conti-

and the United States Social Science Research Council. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1993.

[22] TURNER – TURNER, *The Impossible Science*, p. 40.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 42.

[24] CAMIC, "On Edge," p. 237.

nuity of (sociological) research and practice continuity. As Roscoe C. Hinkle puts it, the attempts

> to renovate sociology and sociological theory seemed to appeal to few others than graduate students at Chicago, Wisconsin, and Harvard. Whatever the reasons may be – the urgency of problems in then-contemporary American society, the abstract or qualitative character of these formulations versus the increasing prestige of more specifically stated quantitative or statistical hypotheses [...] the further theoretical or research implications evoked little interest in the discipline at large.[25]

The turning away from the "metaphysically" understood concept of society to the investigation (or observation) of actors, communities, populations, or groups, deprived sociology of any unifying subject-matter transcending the context of specialized inquiries, and the abandonment of the approach grounded in "social evolutionism", or "evolutionary naturalism" decoupled the general epistemological and methodological contexts of the discipline.

The superiority of (sociological) research over (sociological) theory was, of course, clearly manifested in the way in which their mutual relation had been conceived of in general reflections on sociological method. The question was framed simply: under which circumstances was theoretical thinking within sociology "defensible"? The answer was, with regard to actual needs and aims of sociology as a science. The first generation had appropriated a place for sociology in the area of "general sociology", historically founding sociology intellectually, ideologically, and in terms of knowledge interests in the overall dissection of the field. For the second generation, theory was "defensible" (more or less) only as a shielding commentary to the problems of generalization, explanation, observation, quantification, empirical reference, confirmation or concept operationalization. Red Bain in his contribution to an important anthology, *Trends in American Sociology*,[26] rejected earlier theoretical thinking for its "over-simplification, premature generalization (and) [...] particularism"[27] and proposed his own concept of "sound" theory subsuming the "body of secure and confirmed generaliza-

[25] Roscoe C. HINKLE, *Developments in American Sociological Theory, 1915–1950*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1994, p. 171.
[26] George LUNDBERG – Read BAIN – Nels ANDERSON (eds.), *Trends in American Sociology*. New York: Harper and Brothers 1929.
[27] Read BAIN, "Trends in American Sociological Theory." In: LUNDBERG, G. – BAIN, R. – ANDERSON, N. (eds.), *Trends in American Sociology*. New York: Harper and Brothers 1929, p. 80.

tions, which are based on sense experience and are logically consistent, critically analyzed, and pragmatically sanctioned".[28] Scientism, pragmatic eclecticism and methodological imperialism to a large extent contributed to the isolation of the second generation, which had conferred a specific authority to American sociology, but had, simultaneously, reduced the intellectual context of sociology such that research efforts, as Lewis A. Coser put it, often "failed to withstand the test of time".[29] After WWI "sociology in the United States developed as a distinctively American discipline and increasingly separated from its European precedents and counterparts",[30] which was, in turn, reflected in the fact that theoretical inspirations and innovations for research no longer originated from within sociology but had to be drawn from related disciplines.

A focus on "culture" and "cultural change" in the interwar period had linked the research interests of sociology and anthropology.[31] Within the context of social evolutionism, the concept of culture was brought together with general questions of "adaptation", "social change", "universal cultural patterns", "language", "sign", and "symbolic" levels of "communication". Anthropological methods of inquiry into "cultures" (especially those developed by Boas' school) also somewhat disturbed the faith of American sociologists in the neutral, objectivist model taken from the natural sciences, and this paved the way for a more historically sensitive approach, focusing more on the detailed description of particular "cultures", "groups", "actors", "communities" or "populations" in a specific spatio-temporal context, rather

[28] *Ibid*., p. 73–74. See also F. Stuart CHAPIN, "Social Theory and Social Action." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 1, 1936, p. 1–11.

[29] Lewis A. COSER, "Sociological Theory From the Chicago Dominance to 1965." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 2, 1976, p. 145.

[30] HINKLE, *Developments in American Sociological Theory,* p. 14.

[31] The problem of culture as discussed from a contemporary anthropological perspective was introduced into sociology by Charles Ellwood in his article "Theories of Cultural Evolution." See Charles A. ELLWOOD, "Theories of Cultural Evolution." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 23, 1918, p. 779–800. In 1922, William Ogburn published his book *Social Change*, in which he developed a concept of "cultural lag". See also Clarence M. CASE, "Culture as a Distinctive Human Trait." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, 1927, p. 906–920; Theodore ABEL, "Is a Cultural Sociology Possible?" *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 35, 1930, p. 739–752; Luther L. BERNARD, "Culture and Environment: The Continuity of Nature and Culture." *Social Forces*, vol. 9, 1930, p. 39–48. More than 30 articles and books concentrating primarily on the concept of action were published before the beginning of WWII. In the period 1915–1941, almost 50 articles written by anthropologists were published in the two most important sociological journals (*American Journal of Sociology* and *Social Forces*). For an overview, see HINKLE, *Developments in American Sociological Theory, p.* 174–175.

than on uncovering general or universal regularities. Although "culture as a concept", as Roscoe C. Hinkle argues, "could not and did not achieve an acceptable formulation as a theory in sociology during the second period",[32] it briskly occupied a paramount position within the conceptual framework of American sociology, transformed thoughts on "social evolution" and relieved them of their immediate dependency on "natural necessity". The problems of social and cultural "change" have generally been approached in American sociology as parts of one "research" interest, without any (disciplinary) preference and outside the (previously obvious) "ideological" framework of social, or cultural, "determinism". An epistemologically and methodologically relatively restrained concept of an anthropological and sociological inquiry into "cultures" and culturally conditioned "human action" had been confronted with a strongly objectivist account of "human action" introduced by "behaviourism". However, the "behaviourist"[33] approach, characteristically reducing problems of human behaviour to biophysical problems, has not – with some exceptions[34] – inspired American sociologists to found an analogical concept of inquiry, which would rely exclusively on "sense data".

Although behaviourism had been – in comparison with the anthropological concept of inquiry – much more in line with the positivist-objectivist notion of the disinterestedly observing "scientific" approach, the second generation resisted the temptation to displace problems complicating (or ruling out) a purely neutral and unified account of behaviour from their "science". Questions of "subjectivity", "meaning", "values", "norms",[35] irrelevant from the behaviourist perspective, were so formative for the "new" research interests and so closely tied to the traditional American theme of "individualism" that they could not be bypassed. A pragmatic social philosophy, in particular the work of John Dewey, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and George Herbert Mead, incorporated into the foundations of "symbolic interactionism" and into the very concept of microsociological inquiry, has become an

[32] HINKLE, *Developments in American Sociological Theory,* p. 186.
[33] Most systematically elaborated within psychology (e. g. Watson, Pavlov, Tolman).
[34] For example, George A Lundberg and Luther L. Bernard attempted to develop a sociological "behaviourist" approach. See, for example, George A. LUNDBERG, *Foundations of Sociology*. New York: Macmillan 1939; Luther L. BERNARD, *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt 1926.
[35] Behaviourism, as Robert MacIver claims, waves the subjectivity of experience away and thus denies any difference between "a paper flying in the wind and a man flying from a pursuing crowd." Robert M. MACIVER. *Society*. New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith 1931.

important source of inspiration for a systematic elaboration of these issues. The pragmatic orientation of the second generation is reflected not only in an emphasis on empirical research, but also in the theoretical implications of empirical research for a "sociological" theory of action, in which "communication for the purpose of solving problems of collective concern becomes an essential condition of social order".[36] The focus of "interactionist" research on the issues of "meaning", "interpretation", "intersubjectivity", and the sign and symbolic levels of "language" also fundamentally changed the conceptual framework associated with "human action", and brought a self-reflexive actor, able to "control" his or her behavior and not unconditionally "subject to" the inherent laws of nature or the environment to the scene. Pragmatic thinking particularly influenced the institutional identity of the University of Chicago, "for it promised a thoroughgoing rethinking of philosophy in light of contemporary social conditions".[37] In the context of the intellectual development of American sociology after WWI, the link between social pragmatism and (sociological) empirical research enabled one of the most prolific interdisciplinary encounters between philosophy and sociology,[38] and also gave rise to one of the most significant sociological schools.

The Chicago dominance

The period between 1920–1932 is, in terms of the organizational, intellectual and disciplinary development of American sociology, associated with the so-called "golden era" of the Chicago School.[39] Since its founding in 1892, the University of Chicago had been conceived of as an elite research uni-

[36] Hans JOAS, *Pragmatism and Social Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1993, p. 25.
[37] Neil GROSS, "Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Twentieth Century American Sociology." In: CALHOUN, C. (ed.), *Sociology in America: A History*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press 2007, p. 192.
[38] However, this interpretation is not accepted generally. It was attacked most vehemently by J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith in their *American Sociology and Pragmatism*, where they argue that pragmatic philosophy, and Mead in particular, have less influence over Chicago sociology than it is generally believed. Their argument is discussed in detail later in this article, see footnote 77.
[39] Robert E. L. Faris dates the "golden era" to the period 1920–1932, Martin Bulmer to the 1915–1935. See Robert E. L. FARIS, *Chicago Sociology, 1920–1932*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970; BULMER, *The Chicago School of Sociology*.

versity,[40] and its influence on the academic system in the U.S. was often so hegemonic that what was regarded as "research" in particular disciplines matched precisely what was practiced by Chicago (in our context, social science) departments.[41] The long-term influx of Rockefeller money enabled the formation of a solid organizational base, characterized by a preference for graduate education and integrated collective research.[42] It was a cumulative result of these processes that University of Chicago graduates to a large extent monopolized[43] American sociology and spread a distinctive "Chicago" style of sociological thought across the United States. The Chicago School[44] in its "golden era" became a model for other universities, to a degree unprecedented in history. As noted by Jonathan H. Turner, "at its peak in 1925, one-third of all graduate sociologists in American universities were enrolled at Chicago; and as these radiated out to other universities, they carried the Chicago vision of what sociology could and should be".[45] Chicago also held another comparative advantage, in that its sociology department had expan-

[40] Albion Small, a founder of the department of sociology at the University of Chicago, was well aware of this disproportionate influence of his *alma mater* on the American academic system, and was also convinced of Chicago's unique role in the institutionalization of academic research. As he himself said, "it is doubtful if higher education in the United States has ever received as much stimulus from a single event as came to it from the founding of the University of Chicago." Albion W. SMALL, "Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 21, 1916, p. 764.

[41] There was not only the renowned Chicago school of sociology; a comparable authority in different periods was acquired by the Chicago school of philosophy (a department of philosophy at the University of Chicago had been founded by John Dewey), the Chicago school of economics, the Chicago school of political science, and the Chicago school of professional psychology. The Chicago school of sociology, as Young claims, "was unique in never having a strong relationship with economics." Cristobal YOUNG, "The Emergence of Sociology from Political Economy in the United States: 1890 to 1940." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 45, 2009, p. 95.

[42] These innovations were, as Jonathan H. Turner writes, "truly revolutionary for their time. In a field in which the dominant mode of inquiry had been the lone scholar working with materials from libraries and archives, Chicago created an infrastructure for collaborative and interdisciplinary empirical research. The organizational innovations made by the Chicago Sociology Department [...] provided a model for other universities and departments to emulate; and they were what allowed Chicago to gain its influence on the profile and direction of sociology in America." TURNER, "The Mixed Legacy," p. 331.

[43] They also had privileged access to the *AJS*: "The early *American Journal of Sociology* was the incarnation of one man [Albion Small]. The middle [-period] *AJS* was the incarnation of a department." ABBOT, *Department and Discipline*, p. 104.

[44] It has to be acknowledged that the very concept of a "Chicago school of sociology" is a construct conceived as late as the 1950s.

[45] TURNER, "The Mixed Legacy," p. 330.

ded to such an extent that various research orientations and practices could co-exist within it. The "eclectic" approach to empirical research[46] developed by an early generation of the Chicago School[47] had not limited the selection of themes and problems to be solved to some pre-defined "agenda". In contrast to the relatively strong quantitative focus of the Columbia department, Chicago sociology was characterized by "diversity", "creativity" and "openness" to combining different research methods.[48] Intellectual "diversity" in Chicago also intensified interdisciplinary (team) projects, in which the sociology department cooperated closely with other "strong" social science departments.

Modern sociological orientations have interpreted the intellectual legacy of the Chicago school in their own ways, as the two main research approaches now – quantitative and qualitative – identify the Chicago research model (which was not internally unified) with different things.[49] The qualitative approach stresses the social psychological elements of the Chicago research style, and the tradition of "field studies", and believes that theoretical and conceptual innovations, which led to the development of the

[46] An empirical approach had formed the methodological (but also "ideological") foundation of the Chicago school. As formulated by Morris Janowitz, "to the extent there existed a Chicago school, its identifying feature was an empirical approach to the study of the totality of society." Morris JANOWITZ, "Introduction." In: W. I. THOMAS, *On Social Organization and Social Personality*. Janowitz, M. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1966, p. viii.

[47] Charles CAMIC, "Three Departments in Search of a Discipline: Localism and Interdisciplinary Interaction in American Sociology, 1890–1940." *Social Research*, vol. 62, 1995, p. 1014.

[48] A basic characteristic feature of the Chicago school, as Martin Bulmer says, was "its collective commitment to excellence in empirical research and its considerable intellectual and methodological diversity, rather than the embodiment of a particular kind of sociology." BULMER, *The Chicago School of Sociology*, p. 234.

[49] Personal interviews, life histories, field observation and the analysis of personal documents are most often thought of as the qualitative research tools of the Chicago school, while ecological mapping, population analysis and survey research are regarded as the quantitative tools. See Bernard FARBER, "The Human Element." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 31, 1988, p. 349. It is perhaps ahistorical to draw the quantitative/qualitative distinction here, as it was not as important for Chicago sociologists as it is in more recent sociology. As Marjorie Devault puts it, "in this [...] period, there was no sharp differentiation between qualitative and quantitative methods; the main distinction was between the community survey approach – based in mapping and ecological interpretation and including both qualitative and quantitative elements – and the newer life approaches, which drew on personal documents and emphasized people's subjective experiences in their social environments." Marjorie L. DEVAULT, "Knowledge from the Field." In: CALHOUN, C. (ed.), *Sociology in America: A History*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press 2007, p. 159.

paradigm later known as "symbolic interactionism",[50] were its most significant contribution. The quantitative approach identifies the Chicago School with the overcoming of the amateur form of "social surveys", in the early days impregnated with the values of social reformism, and with the development of sophisticated statistical methods, questionnaires and scaling techniques.[51] Although subjective preferences are difficult to suppress even in retrospective histories of the social sciences, and even though contemporary sociology finds "field research" less scientific than did Park and Hughes, the important fact that both of these approaches, now so divergent, were creatively enriching one another within the University of Chicago environment in the interwar period, is not denied either in intellectual biographies of the second generation of Chicago sociologists,[52] or in historical studies analyzing the Chicago school as an "institution".[53] At the general intellectual level, both orientations within the Chicago department had attempted to link research and practice, to "scientize" sociological methods, to achieve both the public "utilization" of sociological knowledge and professionalization of the field. And in accordance with then dominant ideas about scientific exploration, the crucial task was to overcome the "ideological" thought style typical of the first generation of American sociologists. Theory, which was supposed to have ensured the "intellectual" integrity of the field in the early period, was taken down from the heights of general abstract thinking and dragged back to the empirical data, from which stemmed and to which were directed all considerations as to the possibility of "generalization" in sociology as a rigorous science.

[50] See Herbert BLUMER, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall 1969.

[51] It is much more common to identify the Chicago school with firsthand field research and to play down the importance of its "quantitative" research. However, as stressed by Martin Bulmer, "to pose [an] antithesis between the 'soft' ethnographic research of the Chicago of Park and Burghess and the 'hard' survey research of the Columbia of Lazarsfeld and Merton is to perpetuate an error." BULMER, *The Chicago School of Sociology*, p. 6. See also Martin BULMER, "Quantification and Chicago Social Science in the 1920s: A Neglected Tradition." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 17, 1981, p. 312–331.

[52] See, for example, Fred H. MATTHEWS. *Quest for and American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977; Winifred RAUSHENBUSH, *Robert E. Park: Biography of a Sociologist*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press 1979.

[53] See, for example, ABBOT, *Department and Discipline*; BULMER, *The Chicago School of Sociology*; Gary A. FINE. *A Second Chicago School? The Development of a Post-War American Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995.

As Martin Bulmer has pointed out, "the first phase of American sociology ended with the publication of The Polish Peasant in Europe and America in 1918–20".[54] In 1910, the author (in collaboration with Florian Znaniecki) of this five-volume work, William I. Thomas,[55] received a grant of $ 50,000[56] to investigate the Polish community in Europe and Chicago. The methods Thomas used in his research became the standard for all "fieldwork research" and the book itself is commonly regarded as American sociology's first truly scientific work.[57] The method of data collection employed (consulting

[54] BULMER, *The Chicago School of Sociology*, p. 11; see also Lester R. KURTZ, *Evaluating Chicago Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984, p. 12.

[55] William I. Thomas is one of the most important figures in the turn from the speculative thought of the first generation to empirical inquiry based on extensive data collection. He began to lecture at the University of Chicago in 1895 and obtained one of the first PhDs issued by the university in 1896. He became a professor in 1910 and until his enforced departure in 1918 (Thomas was arrested in a hotel room, registered under an assumed name, in the presence of a woman married to a soldier) he was an intellectual leader of the department. After the public outcry, he worked outside university structures for a while (later he occasionally lectured at the New School for Social Research, Columbia University and Harvard). In 1927 Thomas became a president of the American Sociological Society, thanks especially to the influence of his friend Robert E. Park and to the insurrection of the "young blood" in his favour. His *The Polish Peasant* together with his *Source Book for Social Origins* (1909), *The Unadjusted Girl* (1923) and *Primitive Behaviour* (1937) belong to the canon of American sociology.

[56] He received the money from Helen Culver, a local philanthropist. Many years later Thomas admitted, in a letter addressed to Dorothy Swaine Thomas, that he accepted the money without knowing in advance for what research he would use it. See See J. David LEWIS – Richard L. SMITH, *American Sociology and Pragmatism: Mead, Chicago Sociology, and Symbolic Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980, p. xii.

[57] These accounts characteristically leave out the methodological and scientific significance of William E. B. Du Bois and his *The Philadelphia Negro* study originally published in 1899. W. E. B. Du Bois was trained at Chicago and it is now acknowledged that his *The Philadelphia Negro* was the first major empirical study predating Thomas and Znaniecki by about 20 years. There is an alternative sociological tradition, largely organized in terms of problems of class and race, conducted by "segregated scholars" at Howard and other black universities. Its significance is that it delivered the trained research workers to the Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, which came out in 1944 and is now considered the last outcome of the 1930s funding. See Francille Rusan WILSON, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890-1950*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press 2006. In chronological sequence, Du Bois belongs the first generation of American sociologists since he has left sociology by 1910, however, in many respects he was arguing for what the American sociologists argue as late as the 1920s. The work of Du Bois and other "segregated" scholars is now frequently referred to as the missing "Pensylvania School". See, e. g., Dan S. GREEN – Edwin D. DRIVER, "W. E. B. DuBois: A Case in the Sociology in the Sociological Negation." *Phylon*, vol. 37, 1976, no. 4., p. 308–333.

personal documents, autobiographical material, letters, etc.)[58] has become a pillar of the "life history" approach concentrating on "values", "lived experiences" and "attitudes", and established the "fieldwork tradition", with three main strategies of data collection – "participant observation, open-ended (or semistructured), interviewing, and life history work".[59] "Fieldwork research" also corresponded with the idea of an empirical inquiry into "actors, communities, populations or groups" (mostly) in an urban environment. Crystallizing, substantive research problems (urbanization, crime, immigration, racial and ethnic relations, homelessness, juvenile delinquency, etc.) were stripped of their previous links to "social reformism", analyzed from a scientific distance, and defined as "value-neutral." As Jean-Michel Chaupoulie argues, "sociologists [...] studied the entire process of contacts between [...] populations, as well as the significance of behaviour, which sometimes the subjects themselves did not understand".[60] Robert E. Park,[61] who together with Ernest W. Burgess carried on a long-running "urban field methods" research seminar at Chicago, required his students to set out into

[58] Thoroughly reasoned and systematized in a famous „Methodological Note" included in *The Polish Peasant*.

[59] DEVAULT, "Knowledge from the Field,", p. 154. The canonical works of fieldwork associated with the Chicago concept include renowned books such as *The Hobo* (Anderson [1923]), *The Gang* (Thrasher [1927], *Family Disorganization* (Mowrer [1927]), *The Natural History of Revolution* (Edwards [1927]), *The Ghetto* (Wirth [1928]), *The Strike* (Hiller [1928]), *Suicide* (Cavan [1929]), *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (Zorbaugh [1929], *The Saleslady* (Donovan [1929]), *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw [1930]), *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career* (Shaw [1931]), *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Frasier [1932]), *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (Cressey [1932]), *Vice in Chicago* (Reckless [1933]). See also Roger A. SALERNO, *Sociology Noir: Studies at the University of Chicago in Loneliness, Marginality, and Deviance, 1915–1935*. Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland & Company 2007.

[60] Jean-Michel CHAPOULIE, "Using the History of the Chicago Tradition of Sociology for Empirical Research."*Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 595, *Being Here and Being There: Fieldwork Encounters and Ethnographic Discoveries*, 2004, p. 164.

[61] Robert E. Park started to lecture at the University of Chicago in 1913, when he was 49 (he graduated from Harvard University and worked as journalist for a long time. After William I. Thomas' departure, Park became the most recognized member of Chicago department. In his texts Park focused on racial problems, mass behaviour, urban problems and "human ecology". In 1921, together with Ernest W. Burgess, he published *An Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, where he announced the transformation of sociology from the philosophy of history to the science of society and the coming of the era of "empirical research". The book served as the so-called "Green bible" for Chicago students, and delineated the concepts (such as "assimilation", "accomodation", "conflict", and "contact") on which a majority of Chicago research projects were based.

the field, "get the seats of your pants dirty in real research", and process multiple forms of urban social life data "systematically".[62]

It should be noted that seen from today's perspective, the application of sociological methods was not overly rigorous or systematic. As pointed out by Jennifer Platt, "even at the University of Chicago [...] the publications [...] were often extremely vague about the status and origins of their data".[63] Although research interests of Chicago sociologists are often characterized as atheoretical (or directly antitheoretical),[64] the old problem of the unification of theory and research had not disappeared from the disciplinary agenda. The proliferation of new research methods and the accumulation of empirical knowledge led to a specific "theoretization" of the problems of social organization/disorganization, social control and social change, and also to a specific theory of "knowledge". Park's and Burghess' ecological perspective came from the metaphor of the city (Chicago) as a "social laboratory"[65] and related urban issues to the "theoretical framework" taken from natural science (environmental) studies of "plant and animal organization". This framework was then used for an interpretation of the processes of human social organization and change.[66] Neil Gross describes Thomas', Park's and Burghess' studies of Chicago as "inductive efforts to identify social laws governing the modernization project",[67] and even though it is clear that in their works the "theory" of (human) action emerged from the systematization of research findings rather than the other way round, the imperative to

[62] Robert E. Park cited in BULMER, *The Chicago School of* Sociology, p. 97.
[63] PLATT, *A History of Sociological Research Methods*, p. 34. See also Jennifer PLATT, "The Chicago School and Firsthand Data." *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 7, 1994, p. 57–80.
[64] Lee Harvey considers the image of Chicago sociologists as "atheoretical empirical researchers" to be one of the most widespread "myths". See Lee HARVEY, *Myths of the Chicago School of Sociology*. Avebury: Aldershot 1987, p. 109–154. On the other hand, Edward Shils for example claims that the Chicago school vision failed and left behind "a tendency towards the repetition of disconnected investigations." Edward SHILS, *The Present State of American Sociology*. Glencoe: Free Press 1948, p. 12.
[65] The metaphor of a "sociological laboratory" had been used as early as the textbook published by Small and Vincent in 1894. See also Robert E. PARK, "The City as a Social Laboratory." In: SMITH, T. V. – WHITE, L. D. (eds.), *Chicago: An Experiment in Social Science Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1929, p. 1–19.
[66] As expressed by Ernest Burghess, "the processes of competition, invasion, succession, and segregation described in elaborate detail for plant and animal communities seem to be strikingly similar to the operation of these same processes in the human community." Robert E. PARK – Ernest W. BURGHESS, *The City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1925/1967, p. 145.
[67] GROSS, "Pragmatism, Phenomenology," p. 192.

integrate theory and research in light of the growing precision of methods and techniques (or concepts) was becoming increasingly urgent for Chicago sociologists. Ruth S. Cavan, author of *Suicide*, a famous study published in 1928, recalls in a retrospective account of the "golden era" that this period was not

> a time of theorising. Rather it concentrated on collecting facts, grouping them under concepts, and or identifying relationships among them. These facts, concepts and relationships might be compared to building blocks, the construction of theories was to come later [...] Thomas recognized the need for developing theories [...] The time has come to theorize, but Chicago sociologists seemed reluctant to take this step.[68]

The absence of "theory" that would go beyond the context of particular inquiries caused problems especially in relation to "general" issues of "subjectivity", or the "intersubjectivity" of human action constantly present in thinking about the "life history" approach and the whole "fieldwork research" methodology.

The accounts or descriptions of "action" proceeded from a rather definite idea of the ways in which the actors under study understood, interpreted, and construed their own actions. Although it is of course highly tentative to reconstruct this idea from the texts of Chicago sociologists, it is obvious, as Roscoe C. Hinkle stated, that "Mead, Thomas [...] and Park were alike in insisting that each person in a social situation is an independent personality with its own internal and separate sphere of consciousness, imagination, and the will with which he can initiate and control his own action and influence the conduct of others", and that their work "do[es] contain references to the components of what was later termed the action scheme".[69] What was later identified as a "situationist" paradigm was directly based on Thomas' definition of the proper perspective of a "researcher": "The cause of a social or individual phenomenon is never another social or individual phenomenon alone, but always a combination of a social and individual phenomenon".[70] Thomas documented his "research" approach to the problem of "action" ("acting in a social situation is the social fact to be explained") in his concrete studies (*The Polish peasant*, etc) and implanted it into a conceptual

[68] Ruth S. CAVAN, "The Chicago School of Sociology, 1918–1933." *Urban Life*, vol. 11 1983, p. 416.
[69] HINKLE, "Antecedents of the Action Orientation," p. 710–711.
[70] William I. THOMAS, *Social Behavior and Personality*. New York: Knopf, p. 55.

framework in which he enriched the vocabulary of a theory of action with such simple notions such as "crisis", "value", "attitude", "situation", "new experience-mastery-recognition-security" (the famous "four wishes"), etc. The basic unit for an explanation of social "action" was the individual's definition of a social situation[71] and universal human impulses: the situations are affected by certain objective conditions, but for the action itself how the subject understands these conditions is more important. Park interpreted the nature of human "action" in similar terms, when he wrote in his famous passage about "assimilation" that "every single act, and eventually all moral life, is dependent on the definition of the situation. A definition of the situation precedes and limits any possible action, and a redefinition of the situation changes the character of the action",[72] and the differences (or conflicts) between cultures are brought about by clashes of interpretations.

Thomas's and Park's conceptualization of "action" for the purposes of "life history" and "fieldwork research"[73] was clearly influenced by the intellectual environment of the University of Chicago, especially by interdisciplinary contacts between the departments of philosophy, sociology and psychology, whose interests were rooted in the ideas of "American pragmatism"[74] and merged together in the concept of socio-psychological "interactionist" research. The specific concept of empirical research in Chicago was at a general philosophical level inspired especially by the theoretical

[71] A "definition of the situation" concept had been elaborated in the "Methodological Note", however, in the form in which it entered all textbooks as the famous "Thomas theorem" ("if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"), it was first expressed by William I. THOMAS – Dorothy S. THOMAS. *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*. New York: Knopf 1928, p. 572.

[72] Robert E. PARK – Ernest W. BURGHESS, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1921/1969, p. 764.

[73] In relation to the possibility of (systematic) collection of (subjective) data, Thomas and Park considered "life history" an invaluable instrument, by which means a researcher can put himself "in the position of the subject who tries to find his way in this world," i.e. in the world of the subject's own experience. THOMAS, *Social Behavior*, p. 154. Park gave priority to "life history" because it provides "information and insight in regard to [...] subjective experiences, [...] attitudes and states of mind, outlook on life, and above all [...] changing [self] conceptions and motivations." Robert E. PARK, *Human Communities, the City and Human Ecology*. Glencoe: Free Press 1952, p. 80.

[74] The core faculty (Thomas, Burghess, Ellsworth Farris, Everett Hughes, Herbert Blumer, and Louis Wirth) had all been students of Dewey and Mead. See FARBER, "The Human Element," p. 341. Small closely collaborated with Dewey. See James T. CAREY, *Sociology and Public Affairs: The Chicago School*. Beverly Hills: Sage 1975, p. 163.

and conceptual framework elaborated by George Herbert Mead[75] in his "ontogenetic account of the origins of the self as a structure of consciousness".[76] His now notorious concepts such as "self, I-me, generalized other, individual act, etc." had a profound impact on the Chicago milieu, and distinct traces of these ideas can be found in the work of all distinguished members of the second generation.[77] Mead's approach, relating to Charles H. Cooley's theory of human interaction and the communicative process (especially his concept of the "looking-glass self"), changed the common conception of the roles of language and culture (meanings and "significant" symbols) both at the intersubjective level and in terms of the socialization process ("mind is the product of socialization"), and became the basis of "microlevel" analysis, constructed on the concepts of "interpretation" and "definition". Mead's general methodological deliberations, in which he identified a "reflective" dimension in the relationship between the "scientist as an observer" and the "examined actors", confronted the "life history" approach and "fieldwork" research with the problems of the "objectivity" and detachedness of their

[75] Mead was a member of the University of Chicago philosophy department in 1894–1931.
[76] GROSS, "Pragmatism, Phenomenology," p. 189.
[77] Henrika Kuklick mentions Herbert Blumer and Ellsworth Faris, who had drawn directly on Mead's ideas and transplanted them into a sociological theoretical and methodological framework, and also all the other famous protagonists of the Chicago department, repeatedly (positively) referring in their texts and lectures to Mead's work (Thomas, Vincent, Small, Henderson, Burghess, Park, Wirth and Ogburn). See Henrika KUKLIK, "The Ecology of Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 89, 1984, p. 1436. J. David Lewis and Richard L. Smith in their *American Sociology and Pragmatism* strove to cast doubt upon Mead's alleged influence on Chicago sociology by analyzing quantitative data – focusing especially on the number of references to Mead in dissertations, the number of students attending Mead's lectures and on the interpretation of their own questionnaire circulated among graduates of the time when Mead was active at the University of Chicago. They concluded that „Mead was a marginal figure in the intellectual history of Chicago sociology, having influenced Faris and perhaps a handful of graduate students but never the basic character of the department (which was always shaped by Small, Thomas, and Park)." SMITH – LEWIS, *American Sociology and Pragmatism*, p. 189. At a theoretical level, they tried to demonstrate that Mead was much more a "social behaviourist" than "symbolic interactionist" and that "symbolic interactionism" as a whole is a Blumerian construct without any closer connection to Mead's ideas. SMITH – LEWIS, *American Sociology and Pragmatism*, p. 117–140. However, their argument and the way they attempted to document it quantitatively isinconclusive, and inconsistent in its own terms. From a different point of view, as for example expressed in the work of Norman K. Denzin, Peter Mills, or Henrika Kuklick, those outcomes that Lewis and Smith indicate to be revealing of the "myth" of Mead, may be interpreted conversely – as an affirmation of Mead's influence. See Norman K. DENZIN, "On Interpreting an Interpretation." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 89, 1984, p. 126–133; Peter J. Mills, "Misinterpreting Mead." *Sociology*, vol. 16, 1982, p. 116–131; KUKLIK, "The Ecology of Sociology," p. 1433–1441.

own perspectives; in other words, with the fact that "those individuals who corroborate the facts are made, in spite of themselves, the experiencers of the same facts".[78] "Interactionist" research, particularly in the form in which it was systematized by Herbert Blumer ("One has to get inside of the defining process of the actor in order to understand his action"),[79] shifted the main cognitive interest to the subjective (interpretative and defining) thought processes of individuals and reformulated the major methodological assumptions of micro-analysis, which became an arena for confronting pragmatic and socio-psychological accounts of "action" within the sociological model of empirical research.[80]

The Chicago style of sociological thinking, which co-opted a wide range of intellectual inspirations and an eclectic mix of methodological approaches, profiled what Andrew Abbott called the "contextualist" paradigm: "Chicago felt that no social fact makes any sense abstracted from its context in social (and often geographic) space and social time. Social facts are located [...] Every social fact is situated, surrounded by other contextual facts and brought into being by a process relating it to past contexts".[81] A spatio-temporal dimension allowed "communities, populations, groups" to be viewed not as isolatable passive "statistical" units outside the context of their social relations, but as "participating" actors possessing an "individual" capacity to interpret and define the context, or "situation" of their action.[82] A "contextualist" concept of inquiry was incorporated into "fieldwork" research,

[78] George H. MEAD, *Selected Writings*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1964, p. 137. Herbert Blumer took over Mead's famous Advanced Social Psychology course in 1931, systematically elaborated Mead's ideas into a paradigm, and from 1937 promoted them under the label of "symbolic interactionism". See BLUMER, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 1. Given that Blumer, especially within sociology, became the main conservator of Mead's intellectual legacy, it is often difficult to differentiate between an "authentic" Mead and a "Blumerian" Mead. After WWII, "symbolic interactionism" became a powerful opponent of Parsons' "functional analysis".

[79] BLUMER, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 179. This insight is now a basis of any interpretativist (especially phenomenologist and ethnomethodologist) approach.

[80] Lester R. Kurtz associates Chicago sociology directly with a pragmatist world-view and writes that a specific sociological legacy of the Chicago school lies in its "affirmation of the dialectical relations between individual and society, thought and action, theory and empirical research, large-scale data analysis and 'on-the-hoof' examinations of everyday human life." KURTZ, *Evaluating Chicago Sociology*, p. 97.

[81] Andrew ABBOT, "Of Time and Space: The Contemporary Relevance of the Chicago School." *Social Forces*, vol. 75, 1997, p. 1152.

[82] The Chicago sociologists had, as James T. Carey puts it, "a deep sense of empathy with those whose lives and cultures they described." CAREY, *Sociology and Public Affairs*, p. 66.

"life history", the very notion of "case studies", and the microsociological (qualitative) approach. With the advent of new quantitative and statistical approaches in the mid-thirties, and with emerging techniques of opinion polling and market research, it was, however, soon obvious that "survey research", rather than subjective "case studies", would be considered genuinely scientific works of "sociological" research.[83] The departure of Robert E. Park in 1933, who had inspired and shielded the vast majority of "contextualist" inquiries, intensified the influence of the new quantitative orientation even within the Chicago department, where the previously somewhat marginalized William F. Ogburn – with his group of statistically-oriented students (led by the later famous Samuel Stouffer) – became a key figure.

To summarize, Chicago sociology in its "golden era", associated with research creatively employing ethnographic, life history, statistical, sociopsychological and organizational history approaches, overcame the "ideological" period of the discipline's development and "empirically" produced evidence to support the claim that sociological research merited status and its own particular standpoint in the interdisciplinary competition to produce scientific accounts of the social world. There were some material factors in its decline: for example, the suspension of financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1932, the loss of the Sociology Department's privileged standing within the University of Chicago, the anti-Chicago politics of the *American Sociological Society*,[84] the emergence of the *American Sociological Review* as a direct competitor to the *American Journal of Sociology*,[85] and

[83] Andrew Abbot connects the retreat of a specific Chicago research model with a methodological preference for "variables" in the work of authors such as Ogburn, Stouffer, Duncan and Lazarsfeld. See ABBOT, "Of Time and Space," p. 1165.

[84] RHOADES, *A History of the American Sociological Association*, p. 24–32. The anti-Chicago politics culminated at a meeting of the American Sociological Society in 1935. Stuart Chapin, who obtained his Ph.D. at Columbia University, was elected president (only two of 11 previous presidents had not been connected to the University of Chicago), and, in addition, Herbert Blumer, a prominent member of the Chicago department and a long-standing secretary of the ASS, was replaced by a non-Chicago man. The newly created *American Sociological Review* had become an official journal of the ASS, with the aim of attenuating the authority of the *American Journal of Sociology* published by the University of Chicago. See FARIS, *Chicago Sociology, 1920–1932*, p. 121.

[85] See Patricia M. LENGERMANN, "The Founding of the *American Sociological Review*: The Anatomy of a Rebellion." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 44, p. 185–198. Luther L. Bernard later wrote that he had founded the *American Sociological Review* because "the department of sociology at the University of Chicago, under its leader at that time [it is not clear if he had Park or Ellsworth Faris in mind], had become arrogant and was suspected of making the interests of AJS subsidiary to those of the Chicago department." See Howard W. ODUM,

increasing institutional support for quantitative research. Equally important, however, was the fact that "contextualist" research oriented to subjective thought processes found itself in conflict with the basic assumptions of the scientific approach. In terms of the unified science claim, the Chicago concept began to appear as fragmented, rather as a source of the discipline's "disintegration" than as an instrument of systematization of its research interests and objectives. The Chicago School's "golden era", as expressed by Jonathan H. Turner, "helped create a fragmented field by virtue of its eclectic and unsystematic theoretical stance, its emphasis on research over theory".[86] Sociological knowledge was being "accumulated", but the discipline lacked a unifying theoretical perspective, without which the results of specialized inquiries increasingly seemed to be nothing more than purposeless sets of data, either "subjective", revealing something about the life of chosen actors, communities or groups, or "objective", largely inconsequential outside the context of the particular research. The move away from the speculative thought of the first generation produced a vacuum that could be filled only by means of a "national" concept of sociological research.

Conclusion

The "scientific" concept of sociological research was challenged from many sides in the 1930s. Assumptions related to the expected development of American society had been overturned by the "Great Depression", which dramatically changed not only American society, but also the pragmatic context of sociological research. At the same time, the organizational and institutional structure of the discipline has been undermined: for the first time in its short history sociology stopped expanding, and more importantly, experienced a "regression". On the one hand, due to the economic crisis it was forced to cope with reductions in the academic world,[87] overall changes

American Sociology: The Story of Sociology in the United States through 1950. New York: Longmans, Green 1951, p. 410.

[86] TURNER, "The Mixed Legacy," p. 331.

[87] See Peter J. KUZNICK, *Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists as Political Activists in 1930s America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. In the period 1934–1937, the funding of social sciences by private foundations had decreased by 45 percent. See Roger L. GEIGER, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900–1940.* New York: Oxford University Press 1986. Existing centres of sociological research such as *LCRC* or *ISRR* found themselves without resources as early as 1932. See TURNER – TURNER, *The Impossible Science*, p. 45.

in the financing and organization of science, and career uncertainty,[88] and on the other hand it was facing the more and more apparent "irrelevance" of sociological knowledge to the public, a growing preference for rival disciplines, and marginalization within governmental institutions. To put it in somewhat exaggerated terms, given the avowed objectives of sociological expert "analysis", the "Great Depression" might have seemed like a dream come true. The crisis and the disruption of society would surely create a demand for the sociological perspective, which, having progressed through its ineffectual, ruminative and indecisive period, had matured and was ready to analyze publicly relevant (practical) problems. American society became a "social laboratory", and sociologists felt able to deploy their scientific tools to help uncover the real causes of the crisis. This happy scenario, however, was never enacted. In fact, sociologists (with their newly acquired self-esteem) had to watch the key positions in the Roosevelt administration and in its plan for reform and renewal (the New Deal) being occupied by economists, political scientists and legal experts.[89] There seemed to be no place for sociologists in Washington. As Malcolm M. Willey complained, "Why is it that in this city, overrun with economists, political scientists, statisticians and even historians, one cannot find a sociologist unless he is here in the guise of one of these others".[90] The "invisibility" of sociologists in relation to

[88] LENGERMANN, "The Founding of the *American Sociological Review*," p. 193–196. In 1934, Ellsworth Faris published an article, "Too Many PhDs?", in which he summarized the then widespread fears that the field was facing an overproduction of academically educated sociologists in a situation when there was a "decline in the financial resources of universities, [a] drop in their enrolment a closing up of small colleges." Stuart F. CHAPIN, "The Present State of the Profession." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 39, 1934, p. 507; see also Ellsworth FARIS, "Too Many PhDs?" *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 39, 1934, p. 509–512. The decline of academic opportunities meant that "competition became intense for survival in existing jobs resulting in more and more obvious hostility and resentment towards the Chicago inner-circle pattern of job recommendations, its editorial control over what was published in the AJS, [and] its influence on what was selected for presentation at [...] annual meetings of ASS." LENGERMANN, "The Founding of the *American Sociological Review*," p. 174. In 1931, 50 PhD students finished their studies, while in 1935 it was only 36. In the 1930s there was also a significant regression in the American Sociological Society's membership: from 1567 members in 1931 to 1002 in 1936.

[89] The "exclusion" was even more agonizing when confronted with the fact in the precedent Hoover administration sociologists had been involved in the most important advisory commission (with William F. Ogburn as the director of research), which produced an extensive study called *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (1933). 40 percent of the report was prepared by sociologists. See CAMIC, "On Edge," p. 238.

[90] Malcolm M. WILLEY, "Contribution to Questions for Sociology: An Informal Round Table Symposium." Social Forces, vol. 13, 1934, p. 213.

the national public agenda was all the more marked in a situation where the press and radio were filled with the jargon of "expert" analysis. The sociological perspective was not primarily ineffective in public debates because it was insufficiently scientific, but mainly because it was too self-obsessed and so disengaged with general issues that it was not able to frame its knowledge in the terms of the wider "public debate".

Publicly the most active sociological professional organization, the American Sociological Society,[91] was well aware of the possible consequences of this "absence", and launched promotional efforts which were to result in the mobilization of the discipline in relation to the national crisis. At the annual meeting held at the end of 1933 the majority of the then authorities[92] found that the sociological perspective had been systematically marginalized in the country's reform and reconstruction plans, and self-reflexively analyzed the causes of this sudden marginalization. The *American Journal of Sociology* published a special issue on the New Deal in 1934 and in the same year Howard Odum edited a monothematic issue of *Social Forces* attempting to determine sociology's relation to the national crisis ("Questions for Sociology?", "What is the Role of Sociology in the Current Social Reconstruction?", "What are the Sociological Implications of the New Deal?", "What is the Place of Sociology in the Federal Government?", "What is the Matter with Sociologists?"). These efforts at self-promotion clearly demonstrated which ideas sociologists themselves shared in terms of a sense of their own mission (they saw themselves as governmental advisers, academic critics, or even as architects of society), and more generally, what they thought of

[91] The *American Sociological Society* was by no means the only professional association in the 1930s. Many local and regional "societies" had been founded, including the *Eastern Sociological Society* (1930), *Pacific Sociological Association* (1930), *District of Columbia Sociological Association* (1933), *Southern Sociological Society* (1935), *Midwestern Sociological Society* (1936), *North Central Sociological Association* (1938), *Rural Sociology Society* (1937) and *American Catholic Sociological Association* (1938) – (a complete list can be found in RHOADES, *A History of the American Sociological Association*, p. 29).

[92] As, for example, F. Stuart Chapin put it: "Many statisticians, economists, and political scientists have been drawn into the various Recovery Administration divisions [...] which neglect the point of view of the sociologist." F. Stuart CHAPIN, "What Has Sociology to Contribute to Plans for Recovery from the Depression?" *Social Forces*, vol. 12, 1934, p. 473. Or Ernest Burgess: "No demand has been made of sociology to mobilize and direct upon the consideration of politics and programs of economic and social reconstruction its distinctive point of view and methods of research." Ernest W. BURGESS, "Social Planning and the Mores." In: BURGESS, E. W. –BLUMER, H. (eds.), *The Human Side of Social Planning.* Chicago: American Sociological Society 1934.

public, academic and practical implications of sociological research. Charles Camic describes the unintended consequences:

> when sociologists sought to elevate their standing by demonstrating the significance of sociological research for understanding the problems of the Depression, they spread out in all directions: they focused on topics as diverse as rural migration, urban homeless shelters, family stability, religion, education, crime, and recreation; and whatever the topic, they pursued to a wide variety of questions and approaches [...] they fell all the more into the practice of seizing any interstitial topic [...] further fragmenting their public mission and their research agenda in the process.[93]

The "eclectic" utilization of different research methods, instruments and techniques in various combinations did not lead, contrary to the hopes of sociologists at the time, to the production of publicly and practically relevant (and recognized) "expert" knowledge, but rather to a research practice which caused the field to be viewed from the outside as a set of "arbitrary" findings or data deeply permeated with "inconsistent" deliberations, approaches and perceptions.

The empirical research model that consolidated American sociology in the 1920s was received with much greater reservations in the 1930s: it was frequently pointed out that the detachment of empirical research from theoretical issues satisfied a narrow group of elite sociologists having privileged access to material resources, publishing opportunities, university or institutional posts. In 1933, Charles Ellwood characterized the sociology of the day as "divided into hostile schools which mutually seek to undermine and discredit one another",[94] and able to agree only on the delegitimization of theoretical and philosophical thinking. "Aggressive empiricism"[95] and anti-intellectualism increasingly haunted American sociology, the "ideological" conviction of which could be summed up in a slogan: "Do not think, observe!"[96] Narrowly delineated issues of empirical research could profile

[93] CAMIC, "On Edge," p. 274.
[94] Charles A. ELLWOOD, *Methods in Sociology: A Critical Study*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1933, p. 3.
[95] TURNER – TURNER, *The Impossible Science*, p. 65.
[96] ELLWOOD, *Methods in Sociology*, p. 26. Although the empirical orientation was dominant as early as the 1920s, an analysis of American sociologists' contributions to the *American Journal of Sociology* and *Social Forces* reveals that only 38 percent of empirically based articles were published during this period. It was only in the 1930s when a significant increase occurred and the proportion of empirically oriented articles in American major sociological

particular "scientific" methods, but the suppression of the "general" theoretical dimension in favour of "concrete" research deepened uncertainty about the intellectual integrity of the profession as a whole. The radical dismissal of the theoretical legacy of the first generation in effect meant that American sociology was facing its own crisis without any possibility of self-legitimization through historical reference to a distinctly delimited national tradition. In a situation of intra-disciplinary tension and inter-disciplinary marginalization, the "disruption" displayed itself as a "discontinuity": what suddenly seemed more relevant was the general question of what held sociology together rather than the question of how exact was the (concrete) knowledge with which it contributed to the analysis of social problems. The inability to provide any symbolic unity of theory and research was reflected in the "growing fragmentation of sociology's organizational base".[97] The demands of professionalization and specialization within the discipline, without the possibility of recourse to a firm intellectual identity, produced a research model which succeeded in analyzing specific issues, but failed to find (in the context of the "crisis" and "disruption" of American society) a convincing answer to the general question of the logic of society's development.[98]

journals (*AJS*, *SF* and *American Sociological Review*) reached 64 percent. See PLATT, *A History of Sociological Research Methods*, p. 191.

[97] TURNER – TURNER, *The Impossible Science*, p. 75.

[98] The disillusionment of sociologists was intense. As Ernest W. Burgess and Paul L. Schroeder put it, "the greatest depression in the history of the United States has had no adequate recording by students of society. The social sciences individually and collectively failed, at the appropriate time, to collect the available data necessary for any accurate and systematic analysis of the effects of the depression upon social institutions and upon social behaviour." Ernest W. BURGESS – Paul L. SCHROEDER, "Introduction." In: CAVAN, R. S. – RANCK, K. H., *The Family and the Depression: A Study of One Hundred Chicago Families*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1938, p. vii–xii. The path was thus opened for Talcott Parsons and his revitalization of general theory in American Sociology. Parsons' work was excluded here, although his first writings and claims for theory had been published in the 1930s. Parsons is the initiator of a major reorganization of sociology after WWII and his influence on the profession was strongest in the 1950s. The postwar period also brought a change in the academic hierarchy within American Sociology. The Chicago dominance had come to an end and new leading academic centres such as Harvard and Columbia assumed a strong position.