Robert Ezra Park: A Progressivist

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to trace the origin of Robert Erza Park, trained as a philosopher at the University of Michigan, Harvard University and at the University of Heidelberg, who went on to become a celebrated sociologist at the Chicago School of Sociology (CSS) during the first half of the twentieth century. Additionally, following his initial degree, Park worked as a muckraker (i.e. reform-minded journalist) in major cities of the U.S. in the 1890s (Lannoy, 2004). Subsequently, he was a teaching assistant at Harvard University, a columnist for the Congo Reform Association\(^1\) which he founded in the U.S. and was employed by Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama (Lannoy, 2004). Moreover, Park was the Chicago Urban League’s first board president (Chicago Urban League, 2018). Furthermore, Park become the fifteenth president of the American Sociological Society\(^2\) in 1925 (American Sociological Association, 2018).

Park’s career trajectory was particularly focused on Africans and African Americans and what happens to country folk (e.g. freedmen) who migrated to urban areas. Against this backdrop, Park pioneered studies which led to the development of the race-relations cycle\(^3\). Additionally, Park is largely acknowledged as articulating the hegemonic theory of ethnic group relations\(^4\), which can be equated with assimilation in sociology (Kivisto, 2004). According to Lutters and Ackerman (1996), Park and his collaborator Ernest W. Burgess contributed to advancing the work of their CSS colleagues William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki on the Social Disorganization Theory with their concentric zone model\(^5\), first published in The City (1925). Additionally, Park and Burgess are credited with developing the field of human ecology\(^6\) for sociology (Grove and Burch, 1997).

Admitting, Park cannot be considered a philosopher under a strict interpretation, however he has been outwardly influenced by philosophers that he has studied under. For example, John Dewey (University of Michigan), William James, George Santayana and Josiah Royce (Harvard University), Georg Simmel (University of Berlin) and Wilhelm Windelband (University of Heidelberg) who have led Park to, ultimately, pursue a doctorate degree in philosophy. A factor which has influenced my decision to write about Park relates to his employment with Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute, the first institution of higher learning for African Americans, which as a Caucasian male was highly unusual.

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\(^1\) The Congo Reform Association was an association formed in 1904 by Edmund D. Morel with the aim of drawing public attention against Leopold II of Belgium, who enslaved the workforce of the Congo to exploit the country’s natural resources.

\(^2\) American Sociological Society was changed to the American Sociological Association during the 1950s.

\(^3\) Race relations cycle refers to a process encompassing four-phases to describe the evolution of group relations.

\(^4\) Hegemonic theory indicates a system will remain more stable when a single element is dominant such as ethnic groups through the process of assimilation.

\(^5\) Concentric zone model is one of the first theoretical models to explain urban social phenomena.

\(^6\) Human ecology in sociology can be described as the spatial and temporal relationship between humans and their economic, social, and political environments.
Was Park an altruist or simply concerned with the plight of the destitute former agricultural enslaved workers? Acknowledging these queries exceed the scope of this text, however I posit Park’s curiosity of race and culture culminated into broad-based research which contributed to the development of sociology as a science. In brief, the academic profile and professional experience of Park provided him with a unique perspective of freedmen and their associated immigration to urban centers such as Chicago.

The Undergraduate Mentor and Pivotal Influence

John Dewey was born the son of Archibald Sprague Dewey and Lucian A. Rich of Burlington, Vermont in 1859. John’s parents were a middle-class couple, concisely his father, Archibald, was from a family of farmers who later were involved with the grocery business (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936). Dewey completed his B.A. in 1979 from the University of Vermont at the age of twenty (University of Vermont, n.d.). In 1882, at twenty-three years of age, Dewey started his graduate work at the John Hopkins University, earning his doctorate degree in 1884 at twenty-five years of age (Field, n.d.). Thereafter, Dewey taught at the University of Michigan from 1884 for a period of ten years. During this period in Michigan, Dewey was privileged to influence many promising students, one of these students was Robert Ezra Park (University of Chicago Library—Centennial Catalogues, n.d.; Lutters & Ackerman, 1996).

The Beginning

Robert Erza Park was born the son of Hiram Asa Park and Theodosia Warner Clark of Pennsylvania in 1864. Park’s father was a soldier in the Union Army, and afterwards, similarly to Dewey’s father, was also engaged in the grocery business (American Sociological Association, 2018; University of Chicago Library, 2009). Park’s earned a Ph.B. 7 at the University of Michigan in 1887 while studying under Dewey, thereafter he worked as a muckraker for different newspapers across the country which sparked his interest in social problems (American Sociological Association, 2018; University of Chicago Library, 2018). A decade later, Park completed a graduate degree at the Harvard University in 1899 studying under William James, George Santayana and Josiah Royce (American Sociological Association, 2018; University of Chicago Library, 2018; Biography.com, 2018; Encyclopedia Britannia, 2018). Thereafter, Park studied under the sociologist Georg Simmel in Berlin and completed his doctorate in philosophy8 at the University of Heidelberg, Germany in 1904 while studying under the philosophers Wilhelm Windelband and Alfred Hettner (American Sociological Association, 2018; Biography.com, 2018; Encyclopedia Britannia, 2018).

Park returned to Harvard in 1904 for two years (i.e. 1904-5) as a teaching assistant in the philosophy department, while also working as the secretary to the American branch of the

7 A Ph.B. signifies a bachelor’s degree in philosophy.
8 The title of Park’s dissertation was Masse und Publikum (Crowd and People).
Congo Reform Association\(^9\), which he founded, publishing articles related to the exploited and impoverished Congolese workforce by Belgian colonialists (Lösing, 2014). Thenceforth, in 1905 Park joined Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute. Smock (1988) cites Park served as Washington’s principle ghostwriter and personal assistant. As Washington’s principle ghost writer, the question arises if the publications in which Washington is credited with writing are really the work of Park. Lannoy (2004) maintains upon accepting Booker T. Washington’s offer of employment, Park suppressed his claim to authorship for eight years which represented a period of prolific output.

Park accompanied Booker T. Washington to Europe in 1910 to compare European and American poverty which subsequently led to the publishing of the text “The Man Farthest Down – A Record of Observation and Study in Europe”, a text which Park co-wrote (University of Chicago Library, 2018; Britannica.com, 2018). In fact, Harlan (1986) clarifies “Park researched, drafted, or revised most of Washington’s writings for publication between 1905 and 1912” (p. 291). One can posit given his role, Park may have contributed, although to which degree is uncertain, to a substantive share of the Tuskegee Institute’s funding.

Subsequently, in 1914, the fifty-year-old Park accepted an initial appointment with the University of Chicago as a professional lecturer with the department of sociology, remaining there until 1933 during which time his work as a preeminent scholar flourished (Lannoy, 2004). In describing his time with Booker T. Washington, Park wrote “I think I probably learned more about human nature and society, in the South under Booker T. Washington, than I had learned elsewhere in all my previous studies” (Park, 1950, p. vii).

**Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago**

The Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago was founded in 1892 and was the pioneer and pre-eminent institution of higher education of sociology, training a significant portion of doctoral students from its inception until the 1930s (Deegan, 2012). The term *Chicago School* refers to a specific group of a formidable cadre of scholars at the University of Chicago throughout its influential years—the turn of the twentieth century until the late 1930s with Park as the central protagonist, after succeeding W.I. Thomas in 1917/8 (Lutters & Ackerman, 1996). For the purposes of clarity, the CSS is a complex subject matter as its duration lasted for decades, encompassing numerous intellectuals with all of them having contributed to its (CSS) prominence in varying degrees (Deegan, 2012).

Lutters & Ackerman (1996) underscore the distinguishing attributes of the CSS were the use of standardized suppositions and qualitative methodologies encompassing naturalistic observation\(^{10}\) which was most appropriate for the study of urban and social phenomena. Shils

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\(^9\) The Congo Reform Association was an association formed in 1904 by Edmund D. Morel with the aim of drawing public attention against Leopold II of Belgium, who enslaved the workforce of the Congo to exploit the country’s natural resources.

\(^{10}\) Naturalistic observation refers to observing subjects in their natural environment.
(1996) affirms Park inspired students of the CSS to “observe conduct and elicit information about the experiences of ordinary human beings” (p. 88). Furthermore, Shils (1996) asserts Park’s sociological analysis follows the tradition of nineteenth century sociologists, as his (Park’s) attention was focused on the emerging modern urban centers and primitive international communities at variance with life in rural areas or townships. Noting, out-migration in the American South between 1910 and 1930 contributed to sprawling heterogeneous urban centers in Northern cities such as Chicago (Tolnay and Beck, 1992).

**Robert Erza Park: The Academician**

Prior to elaborating on Park’s academic accomplishments, I shall digress briefly to discuss the Chicago Urban League\(^{11}\), an affiliate of the National Urban League. The Chicago Urban League’s (CUL) first board president was Robert E. Park. The CUL was characterized by black\(^{12}\) social workers assisting black southern migrants in Chicago with employment and housing opportunities (Smith II, 2005). Again, one can posit that Park was selected for this role attributed, in part, to the cognizance he possessed of African Americans and his presumed interest in their plight.

Lutters & Ackerman (1996) postulate Park’s personal research never obtained critical acclaim, as many of the central themes of his research were never sufficiently expanded upon during his career, leading me to hypothesize if this shortcoming may be attributed to the age which Park joined academia. However, Lutters and Ackerman (1996) affirm many of Park’s talented graduate students, over the years, have elaborated on the central themes of his research which has resulted in advancing Park’s acclaim while contributing to a theoretical basis for a systematic study of society. Despite a seemingly numerous volume of articles, Park published few books aside from his significant collaborations with the respected, but younger, sociologist Ernest W. Burgess. The collaboration with Burgess yielded a noteworthy text: *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921). The publication of this voluminous text was the underpinning of Park’s prominence as a sociologist (Braude, 1970). Furthermore, Braude (1970) asserts the voluminous text was often referred to simply as *Park and Burgess* and was emblematic of the CSS for well over a generation.

The publication of Park’s second text *The City*\(^{13}\) (1925) was preceded by an article published by Park in 1915 titled *The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Behavior in the City Environment* which is considered the founding text of urban sociology and of the CSS (Lannoy, 2004). The text The City was written during a time of urban vitality in Chicago, attributed to in-migration from the South’s rural areas in addition to newly arriving immigrants. This influx of

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\(^{11}\) Chicago Urban League was established to assist African Americans migrating from the rural South to the cities such as Chicago in unprecedented numbers at the inception of the twentieth century.

\(^{12}\) Throughout this text the term black, black Americans, and African Americans are used interchangeably.

\(^{13}\) The City was comprised of nine chapters, six of which were written by Park, two by Burgess and one by McKenzie.
individuals changed the landscape of Chicago’s urbanism\(^{14}\), impacting elements such as: urban decay, crime, race relations and the family (Brown, 2002; Lannoy, 2004). In describing the social groups within the urban areas of Chicago, Parks and Burgess developed the concentric zone model (Brown, 2002). The model was essentially a chart comprised of five concentric rings, as a visual aid to describe urban land usage (Park and Burgess, 1925). Each ring equated to a zone and the five zones specified were:

1. The center with the central business district;
2. The transition zone of mixed residential and commercial uses or the zone of transition;
3. Working class residential homes (inner suburbs), in later decades called inner city or zone of independent working men's home;
4. Better quality middle-class homes (outer suburbs) or zone of better housing;
5. Commuter zone (Park & Burgess, 1925).

Park & Burgess (1921/1925) paralleled the competition among individuals seeking desirable areas or zones within cities with the forces of Darwin’s evolution in nature.

Park and Burgess are credited with formally introducing the term and field of study, human ecology, which Park (1936) describes as “an attempt to apply to the interrelations of human beings a type of analysis previously applied to the interrelations of plants and animals” (p. 1). For example, Burgess (1923) asserted cities were analogous to plant life, as cities do not develop at their edges but rather expand, similarly as plants, from their center in coextensive circles as zones.

### The Social Disorganization Theory

The social disorganization theory can be considered a milestone developed by the CSS. The theory is built on the premise that an individual’s residential location is more likely to influence an individual’s propensity to engage in an unlawful undertaking than a person’s individual characteristics such as age, gender, or race (Park and Burgess, 1925; Taub, Taylor and Dunham, 1982). The underpinning of the social disorganization theory can be traced to elements cited in Park’s text The City. Park & Burgess (1925); Taub, Taylor & Dunham (1982) assert the struggle for scarce urban resources (i.e. land) results in competition among individuals and or groups, ultimately dividing urban space into zones with desirable areas commanding higher rents. As Chicago matured, Parks & Burgess posited the center of the city would succumb social and physical deterioration while areas on the city’s edge would prosper (Brown, 2002; Taub, Taylor & Dunham, 1982; Park & Burgess, 1925). The desire to reside on a city’s edge, as described by Park and Burgess, has contributed to the term *urban sprawl*, defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica (2018a), as the rapid expansion of low-density areas away from central urban areas.

\(^{14}\) Urbanism can be described as the relationship between size of population, density of settlement and heterogeneity of its inhabitants.
Concisely, the social disorganization theory was employed to describe unemployment and crime in specific Chicago districts, linking social problems with neighborhood conditions and, thereby subordinating, issues of race and ethnicity as causes (Park, 1925). Additionally, the theory alluded to youth emanating from poor income neighborhoods were more prone to participate in delinquency than those who do not. It should, however, be noted in the past decades the theory of social disorganization has been significantly advanced by many other scholars. In particular, students of Park, Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay have conducted significant sociological studies of juvenile delinquency (Snodgrass, 1976).

The Race-Relations Cycle

The noted sociologist Everett Cherrington Hughes wrote “Park probably contributed more ideas for analysis of race relations and cultural contacts than any other modern social scientist” (Park, 1950, p. xiii). I posit one of the factors that purportedly contributed to Park’s interest in race-relations may be attributed to the wave of immigrants that arrived between the turn of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century and possibly earlier. Concisely, as depicted below, during the thirty-year period between 1891 to 1920 an estimated 18.2 million immigrants arrived in the U.S. (Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, n.d.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number of Immigrants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891 – 1900</td>
<td>3.7 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901 – 1910</td>
<td>8.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911 – 1920</td>
<td>5.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18.2 million</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, n.d.).

The wave of immigration in the U.S., in all probability, contributed to problems of assimilation and to resistance within the U.S. towards additional immigration. In fact, to address the issue of immigration, in 1907 the U.S. Congress created the Immigration Commission to study the origins and consequences of recent immigration to the United States (Michigan State University, n.d.)

Park coined the phrase race-relations cycle, as a mental construct which was conveyed in the text “Our Racial Frontier on the Pacific”. Park wrote:

“The relations of races and peoples are never for very long merely economic and utilitarian...We have imported labor as if it were a commodity, and...we have been disappointed to find that laborers were human like ourselves. In this way it comes about that race relations which were economic became later political and cultural” (Park, 1950, p. 150).
“The race relations cycle which takes the form, to state it abstractly, of contacts, competition, accommodation and eventually assimilation, is apparently progressive and irreversible” (Park, 1950, p. 150).

Succinctly, Bogardus (1930) characterized the race-relations cycle as a recurring behavior of natives towards immigrants. White (1948) asserts Park’s approach was a systematic attempt to describe race relations. Lyman (1968) cites one of the challenges in writing about Park’s race-relations cycle essay is that it can be interpreted from several perspectives.

In describing the four phases of the race-relations cycle, Park commences with the word contact, presumably as social interaction typically initiates through contact. Furthermore, one can assert the term socialization refers to the series of actions between individuals whereby an individual gradually acquires knowledge of how to comply with other individuals’ standards. Park (1950) claims that although individuals may consider each other as threats they (individuals) must, nonetheless, live and work with each other symbiotically.

Park (1950) indicated the second phase as competition which, in turn, can be interpreted as an individual’s struggle within society to earn a livelihood. However, taking into account Park’s research related to human ecology, one can infer the term competition may have been utilized to complement his work in this field. Subsequently, the term accommodation was described by Park (1950) as a moment or occurrence when individuals begin to tolerate each other in superficial ways. For example, individuals might greet each other but continue as distinct entities without sharing elements of a common life. Park wrote:

“With the extension of commercial intercourse to every natural region of the earth, one may perhaps say the whole world is living in a kind of symbiosis; but the world community is at present, at least, quite incapable of collective action” (Park, 1939, p. 3).

Lastly, the term assimilation can be described as an impermeable fusion or amalgamation of dissimilar or different races and cultures. According to Shils (1996), Park acknowledged that assimilation is imperfect, attributed, in part, to the numerous hurdles obstructing individuals to progress between the four phases of the cycle. For example, from conflict to competition or accommodation to assimilation.

Succinctly, Park and Burgess (1921) postulate as people or groups encounter each other initially, for example, by means of immigration or through wars, intergroup relations are initially conflictual and competitive. However, as the process of assimilation advances, Park & Burgess (1921) maintain the degree of conflictual and competitive relationships diminish. Furthermore, Park (1914) maintained “assimilation is nearly inevitable in a democratic industrial society” (p. 611-12).

While Park undoubtedly has many proponents who share his race-relations cycle, there are many opponents as well. Lyman (1968) asserts Park’s race-relations cycle would have been more productive or useful if it was regarded as a model, as opposed to a theory. Furthermore,

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15 Symbiotically can be described as the interaction between two living organisms living in close physical association which mutually beneficial.
cites Lyman (1968), as a theory the race-relations cycle fails because of its untestability or unfalsifiability. Acknowledging, however, “Park’s race relations cycle is a useful way of ordering data on the manner in which immigrants become incorporated into an already established society” (Shibutani and Kwan, 1965, pp. 116-135). Another weakness of the theory is related to the presumed sequential or logical order of the race-relation cycle stages, as the stages proposed by Park may exist simultaneously (Frazier, 1961). Lyman (1968) digresses and underscores, notwithstanding the above, Park’s contribution to sociology has provided a wealth of themes or topics for numerous scholars which, in turn, has undoubtedly contributed to improving social conditions.

Conclusion

This essay was not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive. Instead, it sought to trace the origin of the journalist, theorist and academician Robert Erza Park. For purposes of improved clarity, background information was provided on the epoch in which Park was working. Moreover, the essay attempted to highlight the career trajectory of Park, drawing attention to the application of areas of social inquiry. For example, the application of human ecology and the social disorganization theory in Chicago during the 1920s are representative of Park’s interest in social issues. Furthermore, the essay delineated the concepts of the race-relations cycle, while underlining the views of some of Park’s critics.

One can posit that the unique perspectives that Park acquired while employed as a muckraker contributed to his exposure and interest in social issues. Park’s interest led him to establish the Congo Association in the U.S. and eventually undertake an assignment with the Tuskegee Institute as Booker T. Washington’s principal ghost writer and personal assistant. Undoubtedly, the perspective of African Americans and the South Park gained while employed by Booker T. Washington was formidable. Park’s notable background and cognizance of prevalent social issues contributed to his transition to academia at one the preeminent institutions of higher learning, the University of Chicago. Irrespective of the limited books he has published, many of Park’s concepts were and continue to be a remarkable source of intellectual stimulation within the realm of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of American sociology. Goldberg (2012) cites that the potential for further intellectual stimulation of Park’s concepts is seemingly still not exhausted despite eight decades passing since his prolific period.
Literature Consulted


