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William Thomas and the Growth of American Sociology Between the 19th and 20th Century

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Abstract

Some of the most significant growth of the field of sociology and the use of social analysis were realized outside the university setting, and before the institutionalization of sociology within these institutions, thanks to a myriad of women researchers, settlement representatives, religious and industrial philanthropists. At that time, within academia, Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant* became the first great theoretical and empirical work, whose leading author was expelled from the university by way of a too conservative institution and contradictory ethical evaluations.

Keywords: American sociology, University of Chicago, Thomas' research.

1. Introduction: the emergence of social analysis in America

The Polish Peasant in Europe and America by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918-1920) is certainly the first great classic of American sociology. It was produced at the University of Chicago, which has often led to the assumption – reinforced by the subsequent centrality of the Department of Sociology in those years – that the discipline itself developed simultaneously with the construction and success of the university in those years between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The majority of theorists in the sociological tradition, view that department as a theoretical and empirical garrison in the History of Sociology. This status did not come without significant reservations, progressive contrasts and a myriad of interpretations

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over time. Here we will try to summarize two distant but complementary assumptions:

The first social research techniques, as well as the bulk of empirical social research up to the war were conducted mostly outside the universities by social workers, philanthropists, public health and charity workers, journalists and reformers, and some academic social pathologists, all of them loosely allied in the social survey movement (Oberschall, 1972: 215-6, our bold-italics)

a position expressed for some time, but often ignored or not evaluated in relation to its' consequences. To this we add a more recent and equally emblematic example:

Sociology developed in the context of dramatic social change and widespread debates over the constituted progress and how progress could be attained more surely and rapidly [...] nineteenth-century social science engaged intellectual advocates and administrators on the basis of a broadly shared concern with social problems and social change (Calhoun, 2007: 10, our bold-italics).

The passages of Oberschall and Calhoun are undoubtedly expressive of an articulated, if not critical position, compared to traditional evaluations. They – at least partially – capture a complex process which is coherent, even if not directly correlated, with the migratory dynamics that brought millions of immigrants to America in the 19th century; men and women who directly contributed to the development of the country. The mass arriving towards the end of the century undoubtedly distorted individual and collective structures, influencing the whole of society in a diffusion of wealth and poverty, autonomy and segregation, gender, generation, and ethnicity, as indicated by the investigations carried out in the necessary training processes, and by advanced reflections, on the various analytical categories used. Brief indications of this are attested to on one hand by the objections and reservations of Alan Sica (1990; 1993) and Jan Fritz (1990), those carried out on the the University of Kansas' centennial (Blackmar, 1890); and on the other by the emblematic investigations and methodological choices of Jacob Riis in New York (Riis, 1890; 1894), and the settlements in Chicago (Residents of Hull-House, 1895) and further, by the philanthropic-religious options present more generally in many parts of the country (Addams, 1889; Du Bois, 1899; Henderson, 1896; 1897).

Alan Sica's questions the historical priority of the presence of sociology in Chicago, by considering some gaps contained in Faris' classic volume on the

anticipation of sociology's development there in comparison to other sites (Faris, 1967: 11). This critical thesis was taken up by Jan Fritz (1990), who compared the statements of Albion Small (Small, 1916/1949: 186), and Howard Odum (1951). Other research volumes indicate many anticipations that could question the interpretation that the development of sociology was an academically central process.

It is important to consider in depth, the intensity and progressiveness of the migratory processes referred to as a premise for understanding some research dynamics. Thomas in fact, years later, in his 1939 discussion with Herbert Blumer on *The Polish Peasant*, referred to those migratory processes of the last decade of the 19th century by saying,

At that time, immigration was a burning question. About a million of immigrants were coming here annually, and this was mainly the newer immigration, from southern and eastern Europe. The Larger groups were Poles, Italians and Jews. When I became a member of the faculty of Chicago I gave, among the other courses, one in immigration and one on social attitudes, and eventually I decided to study an immigrant group in Europe and America to determine, as far as possible, what relation their home mores and norms had to their adjustment and maladjustment in America (Thomas, 1949: 103).

On this basis, and in particular in relation to US affairs, we should bear in mind that this is the central reason for the development of social analysis, research, and an unprecedented attention to a society whose destiny seemed only to become larger, and whose structure had shown itself – in particular in that decade at the turn of the twentieth century – to be complicated, crowded and unpredictably dotted with large pockets of misery and poverty, in a dimension in which immigration had become a national 'danger'.

The work of Thomas and Znaniecki was central to the development of sociology, and at the same time it objectively organized the knowledge gained in previous years. One illustration of this is certainly the positive and continuous relationship that Thomas had with the women of the Hull House (Deegan, 1990). In a previously referred to discussion, Read Bain mentioned just that, 'The Polish Peasant is a monumental instance of the revolt against 'armchair' sociology which began about 1900 and has progressed to such an extent that sociologists increasingly regard themselves as natural scientists' (Bain, 1949: 192). This assertion in fact expands the empirical transformation of sociology to include a period clearly prior to Thomas' work, and almost in tune Rosco Hinkle recalls that '(The Polish Peasant) marks the beginning of the concern with research and research methods to which theory was eventually expected to accommodate itself' (Hinkle, 1994: 25). This is why it is essential to

refer to the importance of social contradictions in the development of social analysis.

At the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, Jacob Riis highlighted this unknown reality – more or less voluntarily – to many, with a methodologically innovative analysis which used photography to illustrate ‘How the other half lives’ (Riis, 1890), while from the settlements and referents of a humanitarian religion came a repeated orientation to the need for research (Residents of Hull-House, 1895; MacLean, 1899; Du Bois, 1899; Addams, 1909; Kellogg, 1912). Here it is sufficient to cite these references and confirm the substantial objections advanced towards a tradition that long denied the role played by women in the construction of social analysis and sociology, as well as the welfaristic thrust of which, along with its emotional charge, was its promoter. The memory of the sociologists of the Hull-House (Deegan, 2001) references their extremely active presence and illustrates the explicit segregation of gender that has taken place in many structures of the university system over time, denying participation to subjects who in that period contributed in an original and consistent way to social analysis and reform processes (Madoo Legermann, Niebrugge-Brantley, 1998).

In fact, before talking about the development of sociology within universities, or considering the primacy of this or that, it is appropriate to consider the dynamics of social analysis outside that institution, its protagonists, the methods adopted for those investigations, their realization, and their social effects. In their reflection on American sociology, inspired by the common interactionist approach, Lyman and Vidich confirm what has already been highlighted,

American Sociology developed its theories and techniques of research in response to the major issues of American society – slavery and the organization of labor, industrialization and its social and moral effects, race relations in an increasingly pluralized society, urban problems, social disorganization, the rise of mass society and culture, and personal anxieties (Vidich, Lyman, 1985: 4-5),

showing the difficulty of isolating the ideas of American sociologists from those of other American and European thinkers by giving ample attention to that period, as necessary, for its discipline in institutionalization and construction of the canon (Vidich, Lyman, 1985). A discipline exposed, at this stage, to a series of relationships, influences and contaminations.

The pressing question of academic legitimacy in the face of skepticism and hostility, the previous intellectual background of sociologists in political economy, philosophy and charities and corrections, and finally the supportive

audience of social reformers and social workers, shaped the sociologist's choice of subject, techniques of inquiry, presentation of results, in short the substance of their sociology and their concerns' (Oberschall, 1972: 189).

Despite a substantially distant methodological approach, two authors between the late sixties and the early seventies, like Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld, completely unrelated to the Chicago tradition, in the midst of a crisis of functionalism, confirmed the role of memory in the development of the sociological discipline, beyond the mere chronological dimension.

A genuine history of sociological theory must extend beyond a chronologically ordered set of critical synopses of doctrine: it must deal with the interplay between theory and such matters as the social origins and statuses of its exponents, the changing social organization of sociology, the changes that diffusion brings to idea, and their relations to the environment of social and cultural structure (Merton, 1967: 34),

and in a need to understand the past, as Paul Lazarsfeld highlights in Anthony Oberschall's introduction to the book on the history of sociology (Oberschall, 1972),

The Historian is advised to try to understand the past for its own sake, though it's true that he can never entirely abstract himself from his own age. Still, his goal will be very different from those of the writer who avows to study the past for the sake of the present (Lazarsfeld, 1972: vi).

2. The University of Chicago

The reflection carried out so far with the help of some protagonists on the sociological events and the insistence on the role of memory in considering the sociological tradition, tends to confirm a deep religious root at the base of the establishment of American sociology. We find this to be more or less evident, however constantly present because of concurrent Christian social reforms and the social gospel movement, already perceived in its time by a young historian (Hofstadter, 1955: 200). It is a factor that cannot be separated from the vicissitudes within the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago and, in the case connected to this reflection, from those of William Thomas; even if his expulsion was mainly due to the violation of *The Mann Act*.

The Chicago Baptist newspaper, *The Standard, A Record for Christian Progress* had supported the proposal to set up the university, and had therefore launched a subscription (Wakefield Goodspeed, 1916: 75-81) which was supported, in

turn, by the American Baptist Education Society, established in 1888 under the direction of the priest Frederick T. Gates. Gates was later the depositary and trustee of the sum that Rockefeller donated to the university. He was more generally his economic and philanthropic executor between 1891 and 1923, and also a subsequent author of the Rockefeller Medical Center in New York since 1901. On October 15 of that year, Frederick Gates also read a text, *The Need of a Baptist University of Chicago, as Illustrated by a Study of Baptist Collegiate Education in the West*, in which he advocated the establishment of the university, while a letter from Rockefeller to Rayner Harper dated January 15, 1889 confirmed his willingness to contribute to that initiative. In the end of April that year, Rockefeller donated \$600,000 to set up the university in addition to the \$250,000 raised by the city's Baptist church, in addition to the \$50,000 raised from requests outside Chicago, in the form of matched funds, which would become consistent in the organization of research in the Department of Sociology. Rockefeller's relationship with the University of Chicago therefore highlights a substantial philanthropic donation by a christian-inspired exponent of industrial capitalism; a social enterprise and an educational idea, in a way which penetrated the organization of the university (Veblen, 1918: VI). In fact, Rockefeller's presence in the university went far beyond mere philanthropic donation. The management of William Harper, his associate, blazing in the development of the university, caused a continuous deficit which Rockefeller time and time again leveled, becoming – de facto – increasingly part of the university. By 1910 his contribution had reached \$35 million.

Between 1890 and 1914 Rockefeller also supported Baptist training in a more systematic way, using the *American Baptist Education Society* to distribute more than \$800,000 to 34 different schools. Moreover, going forward in time, a further understanding of that presence and the determined objective conditioning can be offered by the construction of *The Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial for Social Sciences*, in memory of his wife's death (Bulmer, Bulmer, 1981), which received in total \$74 million. Rhetorical questions emerge which, in the silence that has often surrounded the story, are important. Was it something that happened only in Chicago? Certainly not even if the economic consistency of that philanthropic relationship was exceptional. Was it something that took on a very significant character in Chicago? Yes, and the facts show this. The university teaching staff, in its highest roles, had a close correspondence.

Of the early presidents of the American Sociological Society (ASS) Giddins', Thomas' and Vincent's fathers had been ministers, while Sumner, Small, Vincent, Hayes, Weatherly, Lichtenberger, Gillin and Gillette had pre sociological careers in the Protestant ministry. Twenty-one ministers were among the founding members of the AEA (American Economic

Association, in Saratoga, New York) in 1885, and five influential clergymen-educators-reformers were members of the American Sociological Society when it was founded in 1905: Francis Peabody, Graham Taylor, Josiah Strong, Samuel Dike e Samuel Z. Batten (Oberschall, 1972: 198).

The overall character of this structuring has not escaped even the careful research of James Carey, who takes up the roots and religious ties of these sociologists, divided between Founders, Second Generation contributors, The Chicago School itself, pathologists, and the general influence of those actors starting from this point, highlighting a basic homogeneity in the guidelines of the university (Carey, 1975: 46, table 8).

3. William Thomas in Chicago

What was said had a positive effect on progress at the University, and the Department of Sociology, a factor of philanthropic spirit that should be taken up again. William Thomas was a member of the University of Chicago and of its Department of Sociology and Cultural Anthropology *in opinion, not in that spirit*. On the first day of the department's activity on October 1, 1892, he was named president of The University of Chicago. Thomas was never forgiven for not sharing that ideal, too distant from and opposed to any autonomy, indeed he was not forgiven for having made that difference a daily element of his scientific, social and public life, in a morality that contravened all moderation accepting too many differences, autonomies, innovations, above all with respect to female specificities. He was a member of the Department for 22 years, and from 1896, a member of the board of the *American Journal of Sociology* until he was politely invited to leave with his text already published, his great research on Polish peasants. Another completed book, based on the life stories and contact documentation of its protagonists *Old World Traits Transplanted*, was published in 1921 in *The Americanization Series*, directed by Edward Burns. The show was dedicated to the problem of inclusion for migrants, whose paternity was taken on by Robert Park and Herbert Miller, in a tradition of studies that would not reappear in that Department.

Yet, all of this was not enough to help us 'understand' Thomas' behavior. Thomas, originally from the rural south, spent nearly twenty years of his life in Chicago, clearly influencing the institution in significant ways. The quality of his teaching, and the superior level of his scientific activities certainly culminated in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, confirming and strengthening his previous and subsequent works, if we consider his departure from university. A carrier of the American sociological tradition from a unique historical and anthropological background, Thomas emblematically expressed his theoretical

orientation in relation to the history, psychology and methodology of European analysis. At the time of his expulsion in 1920, he had already written fifteen articles, and of particular interest were ones on the female reality, eugenics and the psychology of race in the *American Journal of Sociology* and in the *American Magazine*. His research in Europe on ethnic groups, especially Polish immigrants, began a rewarding partnership with the young Polish philosopher Florian Znaniecki, and opened a special relationship which lasted many years. Also with Helen Culver, whose economic support was decisive for the conduct of his European research, he fully participated in life in Chicago, by joining – in a non-formal way – with Jane Addams and the sociologists of the Hull House.

It should be noted that Thomas' departure from the university occurred before the Department's next development phase, when Albion Small's active position and influence was fading, even before his retirement in 1925, and when a problem would have arisen in terms of the new direction of the department. After leaving Thomas, the university effortlessly hired Robert Park who paradoxically was previously invited by Thomas himself to come to Chicago.

There are other factors that undoubtedly weighed on the matter that must be considered, although it is not clear, and cannot be fully understood, how much influence they had. First of all, the placement of Small. We remember Kimball Young,

Thomas didn't like Small. Anything that Small did, Thomas didn't like, even though he denied it. He just didn't get along with Small very well. I don't mean he didn't respect him, but I think he regarded Small as a philosopher, also as a fuddy-duddy. Small was that kind of a person. And I think Small was always upset by Thomas's rather flashy dressing, and his getting mixed up with gambling, being known as a pretty sharp card player, along with other interesting aspects of Thomas's, oh, work around town. Not that Thomas was crooked, but to this good Baptist minister this was not nice, it wasn't proper (Lindstrom, Hardert, 1988: 271-272).

Compared to the same Department however, Roger Salerno, biographer of Louis Wirth stated that

Where Thomas was a flamboyant public intellectual and often considered radical in his manners and beliefs, Park was more in tune with the staid character of the university administration. He attended church services regularly and shared a similar Christian orientation toward sociology (Salerno, 2007: 33).

Furthermore, Alfred Matthews, who outlined a comprehensive bibliography of Park recalls: '[Park] Gradually worked his way into a key

position in the Chicago Department' (Matthews, 1977: 85). In a form not directly connected but certainly attributable to the major discussion, Mary Jo Deegan recalls Park's substantial distancing from Thomas' university events as well as from the text (*Old World Traits Transplanted*) of which he suddenly became the author of together with Herbert Miller, in a lack of solidarity – which would later result in a subsumption of some categories of the volume taken from Thomas in his 1928 article (Park, 1928). Winifred Raushenbush, Park's biographer and assistant for several years, who had collaborated on the immigrant press volume (Park, 1922) and on his research into racial relationships (Park, 1924a, 1924b), finds a way to highlight that the context certainly determined 'a short temporary strain' between the two friends. '*Park was distressed but powerless to alter the situation*' (Raushenbush, 1979: 93).

In full awareness that history is not made by promoting ifs, it is important to consider that the problem with direction in the department began with Thomas' expulsion. At the time of his expulsion he had published the volumes of 1907 and 1909, and fifteen articles in the *American Journal of Sociology*. His scientific production in terms of quantity and prestige was notable, and its didactic qualities, its relationships (for example with Dewey), would have left no doubts on the new department direction.

The dynamic of his departure was characterized by the fact that his colleagues did not defend him, except for Albion Small who did so weakly. They did not exercise their prestige or authority at all. They did not intervene with the university management, and indeed, they used the affair to their advantage to acquire positions of further power in the Department. In the academic structure comprised of one hundred percent male colleagues, formal relationships clearly dominate others, and even in the era of Small, '*whose sociology was not for men in the street*', university formality could only dominate the personal relationships and the mutual support that was offered between the sociologists of Chicago (Carey, 1975: 7); it was essentially linked more to their profession than to the traits as individual people.

Certainly the propulsion offered from the group of the 'young Turks', organized by Louis Wirth, Kimball Young, George Lundberg, Stuart Chapin, Stuart Rice and others, in 1927 for Thomas' election was long overdue, as remembers Morris Janowitz (of the American Sociological Society seems dictated from a scientific remorse. (Janowitz, 1966: XVII)

We can perhaps hypothesize about the overarching theme of Thomas' presence at The University of Chicago and his role in the development of sociology and sociological analysis, his relationship with people and structures outside the university, his connection with colleagues and the support he was

supposedly offered. We can question the role of his colleagues at the time of his expulsion, and their relationships after. I only want to mention a few additional factors here, and I do not hesitate to adequately consider the internal dynamics of the University of Chicago and its powers, as well as the fact that there are certainly some unclear questions, such as: Why did Thomas decide to go there as soon as he learned about The University of Chicago? Why would he leave the non-denominational public university of Knoxville, Tennessee (founded in 1794) to move to the private one in Chicago? Are Albion Small and Rainer Harper particular interests? Is it Small's critique of capitalism that we are fascinated with? Or, is the city of Chicago as such, so far from the South in every aspect of everyday life? Or was it the charm of a university within the capital of Illinois? Even if the passage of time does not favor the answer to these questions, and we do not adapt to the apparently coherent first answers, there is still a need to deepen our understanding of the theme.

My feeling is that in any case there is an irreducibility, and this is certainly articulated by a series of evident factors between the complexity of his work, and the implications of all of its phases in the context of the university's structures and activities in which he participates. In my opinion, this remains one of the elements of its charm.

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