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Research: The Legacy of W. I. Thomas. From the
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The Chicago School of Sociology and Youth Research: The Legacy of W. I. Thomas. From the Polish Peasant in Europe and America to the Child in America¹

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Abstract

During his career, William I. Thomas richly contributed to the development of youth research, both within the University of Chicago and outside the academy, in contact with social agencies. Moving from a broad focus on the studies carried out by the Chicago School of Sociology, the paper aims at tracing Thomas' contribution and legacy to the advancement of youth research, in order to recognise his influence on the definition of the fields of investigation, the theories, and the research methods employed.

The paper first considers the analysis of the women reformers affiliated with the *Hull House*. The core of the analysis aims at re-evaluating Thomas' contribution, taking into specific consideration three of his works. On this basis, in the last section, the paper attempts to recover his legacy through the studies carried out by the young scholars who worked at the Department of Sociology and in its affiliated institutes and projects.

Paying specific attention to the suggestions he offered, with specific reference to the analysis of the lives of young people with migrants background, young women and the programs for the treatment of delinquency, helps to identify the main strengths and challenges of the first comprehensive study of 'urban youth', that – over time – have inspired fruitful perspectives of analysis and important research experiences.

Keywords: youth studies; Chicago School of Sociology; young women.

¹ The paper partly draws on the analysis already presented in Merico [2018].

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1. Chicago and youth research

Within the more general ‘transformation of ideas about, institutions for, and social experiences of adolescents’ and youth (Kett, 2003: 371) witnessed in the United States between the end of the 19th and the firsts twenty years of the 20th century, youth soon became one of the privileged focuses of social research (Bennett, 1981). City life provided, in fact, young people with ‘new modes of associations and new kinds of human connections around a wide range of tastes, dispositions, and lifestyles’ (Dimitriadis, 2008: 26). In turn, the scrutiny of young people’s everyday life offered a vantage point from which observing the ongoing erosion of traditional social control mechanisms and the development of new forms of social (re)organization.

In the United States, the rising interest in/for youth research followed, although within the same context, two different and separate trajectories, that can be easily traced if looking at the Chicago’s traditions. On the one hand, we can consider the work developed by the women affiliated with the *Hull House*, and particularly the role and contribution of Jane Addams (Rauty, 2017). On the other hand, we can refer to the contribution developed since the early 1920s within the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, since youth realities have been one of the basic subjects through which exploring the urban ‘sociological laboratory’.

Within this framework, the main aim of the following pages is to trace the contribution and legacy of William I. Thomas to the advancement of youth research, in order to recognise his influence on the definition of the fields of investigation, the theories and categories adopted, and the empirical tools employed in both the two above mentioned trajectories.

2. Nourishing ‘the spirit of youth’

The interests of William I. Thomas for issues such as the social reform or the life conditions of women brought him to keep into regular contact with the Hull House residents (Cersosimo, 2019). Alongside their engagement in the designing and implementing of some of the most important reforms concerning childhood and youth, the Hull House’s activists and reformers have certainly contributed to a high degree to the beginning, at the turn of the century, of the scientific scrutiny of the younger generations’ realities (Rauty, 2017). Moving from the collective work *Hull-House maps and papers*, and taking some leading cases, it is possible to refer to: Florence Kelley’s lifelong commitment to child labor and its legislation; Julia Lathrop’s role as President of the Juvenile Psychopathic Institute and then – since 1912 – her appointment as first Chief

of the United States Children's Bureau; Edith Abbott and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge's studies on child delinquency and school non-attendance; and in particular to the work of the two Hull House co-founders, Ellen Gates Starr and Jane Addams – sociologist and Nobel prize for peace in 1931, who published in 1909 *The spirit of youth and the city streets*.

Moving from the standpoint that 'nourishing the spirit and exercising the mind were essential to a rich and full life' (Glowacki, Hendry, 2004: 21), her main aim was to underline how the governing institutions were not aware of the life of youth in the 'city streets', of the ways through which they defined their everyday experience, and – above all – of how they were silently contributing to the definition of that new reality (Nasaw, 1985²).

Following an approach much appreciated by William I. Thomas, her narrative was regularly filled with accounts of the (life) stories collected thanks to her engagement in the social settlement, thus assuming a writing style that 'tended to be autobiographical in focus and informal in tone' (Condliffe Lagemann, 1994: viii). The result is a portrait in which Jane Addams (1909: 45-47) highlights how boys and girls were in a position to be 'made safe only through their own self-control' and in which 'the great processes of social life develop themselves through influences of which each participant is unconscious as he struggles alone and unaided in the strength of a current which seizes him and bears him along'. It was, consequently, necessary to take action for contributing to the definition of 'juster social conditions', able to preserve what she identified as a 'splendid store of youthful ardor and creative enthusiasm' (Addams, 1909: 143; 145). In this respect, early in the book she claims:

Let us know the modern city in its weakness and wickedness, and then seek to rectify and purify it until it shall be free at least from the grosser temptations which now beset the young people who are living in its tenement houses and working in its factories [Addams, 1909: 14].

Along these lines, Addams summarises the way in which she conceived the relationship between research, knowledge and social reform. These are also the reasons why the settlement's residents undertook a wide collection of data, documents, and stories, persuaded that – as clearly stated by Condliffe Lagemann (1994: x) – 'social progress required a synthesis of study and action, science and social reform', and not least 'knowledge into terms of life'. An issue that Thomas clearly appreciated and that influenced his following works (Cersosimo, 2019).

3. Notes on the contribution of W.I. Thomas

Focusing on the individual contribution of William I. Thomas to youth studies, it is possible to look at three works that go through the different moments of his career.

3.1 *Boys and girls in America*

First, it is here worth referring to the study that provided the lasting recognition he still retains: *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* co-authored with Florian Znaniecki (1918-1920). In particular, here we will take into consideration the last two chapters of the fifth volume devoted to *Organization and disorganization in America*.

Early in chapter V, questioning if and how a young generation ‘ever acquires a life-organization at all’, Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920, vol. 5: 295) claim that in large cities – where ‘home and community conditions are such that their behavior is never socially regulated’ – ‘no life-organization worthy of the name is ever imposed’ upon immigrant children. It follows that – according to their analysis – they cannot be considered in a status of ‘demoralization’, because ‘they never had any moral system to lose: it is – they pretend – simple and plain “a-morality”’.

Moving from this assumption, the seven cases reported in the chapter – collected through the *Records of the Juvenile Court of Cook County* – are not meant as a way to identify ‘what were the negative influences which led [... the individual boy] astray and demoralized him’; rather, the sociological problem becomes that of understanding ‘what are the socially constructive influences which tend to develop in him a normal life-organization and why do they fail or succeed’ (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-1920, vol. 5: 296). On this basis, anticipating a position that Thomas will further develop some years later, the authors claim that the challenge is not that of ‘eradicating evil tendencies but of persistently trying to organize whatever tendencies there are for socially useful purposes’ (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-1920, vol. 5: 316-317).

The following chapter adopts, to a large extent, the same approach for understanding the causes of immigrant girls’ ‘sexual immorality’. The analysis of the juvenile court’s records allows Thomas and Znaniecki to see how, under the circumstances that those girls faced in the “new world”, their sexual behavior does not simply accounted for a ‘generally unorganized life’. That it would be considered either as ‘an end in itself [...], or a means to other ends [...], or both’ (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-1920, vol. 5: 320), girls’ sexual immorality seemed – in fact – to produce more intense effects than those detected among boys, which lead them from being ‘merely a-moral’ to being

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‘distinctly anti-moral’ (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-1920, vol. 5: 336). And even if, sooner or later, a young woman ‘will be forcibly “reformed” and settled’ – stressing an issue that will produce disastrous consequences on his own career (Bulmer, 1984; Cersosimo, 2019) – Thomas firmly concludes:

But before her dreams are dispelled she tries to realize them as far as she can (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-1920, vol. 5: 339).

3.2 ‘The unadjusted girl’

The issues anticipated in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* will be further developed by Thomas in *The unadjusted girl*. The book, published in 1923, presents the results of a research – supported by Ethel S. Dummer – on the behaviour of girls, with specific attention to their sexual conducts and prostitution.

Moving away from most of the analysis circulating at that time, *The unadjusted girl* aims to develop a broad understanding of the social ‘demoralisation’ of girls. Following the approach already applied to *The Polish Peasant*, he was mainly interested in analysing the changes in sex behaviour and attitudes because – as pointed out by Burgess – their being ‘culturally conditioned and culturally defined’ (cited in Salerno, 2007: 73). At the same time, the book aimed to suggest solutions to a situation that seemed to be increasingly widespread (Getis, 2000).

Thomas grounds his analysis of *The unadjusted girl* on his theory of the (four) wishes. However, he is well aware that, along with the *definition of the situation*, there is an always unbalanced equilibrium among the different dimensions called into question, because it is drawn on an unavoidable conflict between one’s aspirations and definitions emerging within the other educational agencies. This results in a twofold effect: on the one hand, lessen the influence of traditional institutions on the regulation of young men and women’s wishes; on the other one, because the endless tension between the acceptance and refusal of social norms, it promotes the rise of an always new *definition of the situation*, that is the premise of a permanent openness to social and cultural change.

Thomas adopts his typical research method, based on the collection and analysis of personal documents: autobiographies, records from the juvenile courts and other bureaus, reports of different kind of organisations, research reports, and above all letters, such as those sent to newspapers like *Forward*. Almost evoking the words used in *The Polish Peasant*, the analysis of those documents brings him to acknowledge that:

Their sex is used as a condition of the realization of other wishes. It is their capital (Thomas, 1923: 109).

More in general, through the typical style of Thomas, *The unadjusted girl* offers plentiful materials through which one can observe, in their most intimate and personal unfolding, the aspirations and desires of the girls whose stories are traced back. In this direction, while keeping in mind the criticisms raised against their use in Thomas's work, those personal documents allow to grasp the different forms of human behavior, in the incessant interweaving between normal and a-normal, compliant, deviant and 'unadjusted' (Salerno, 2007).

3.3 'The child in America'

It is now possible to move onto the third Thomas' contribution: the book co-authored with his second wife Dorothy Swaine Thomas (1928²). *The child in America* is the result of a research program, supported by the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial, aimed at offering an extended review of the delinquent children and boys' *Behavior Problems and Programs* carried out in the United States and Canada.

According to the authors, the 'unstabilization of society and of behavior' generated sharper effects on the younger generation (Thomas, Thomas, 1928²: xiii). However, they claim, it is of great interest that most of the programs developed at that time for the study and control of child and youth behavior had an extra-academic origin, being often rooted in the engagement of those who they define as 'public-spirited persons'. In turn, the problems emerging from those experiences drew the attention of academic psychologists and sociologists, producing a new approach – that we can now clearly detect in Thomas' works – 'having as main objective the development of scientific techniques as related directly to the practical problems' (Thomas, Thomas, 1928²: xiv).

Thus, engaging a dialogue – also testified by the quoting of personal communications – with the scholars working in the Department of Sociology and in the research institutes connected with it, through the book the authors trace back the main features of the 'practical programs' carried out in the treatment of delinquency and maladjustment. In addition, in the final chapter of *The Child in America*, Thomas presents a discussion of what his view of 'The methodology of behavior study' is. This is complemented by one of the more sophisticated understandings of his 'theorem' concerning the *definition of the situation*, that is the classical formulation through which 'if men define the situation as real, they are real in their consequences' [Thomas, Thomas, 1928²: 572]. A contribution that will contribute to and account for his lasting recognition, also impacting on the development of youth studies, in Chicago and, from there, on the following generation of youth researchers.

4. Youth in the interstices

Coinciding with the publication of *The unadjusted girl*, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* was also circulated in 1923, with it being recognised as the first monograph of the Chicago tradition. Relying on his own personal experience, Anderson carried out a participant observation and collected informal interviews with transients in *bobohemia*. This allowed him to observe the socialization of young hobos: a process in which promiscuity and violence seem to prevail, together with a sort of slavery linked to the need of accepting adults' 'perversion' (Anderson, 1923a). As further developed in another essay, their stories clearly show the ambivalence of the relationship between 'The juvenile and the tramp', poised between work and leisure, always looking for 'a promise of escape', in 'intimate contact with vice and immorality' but also coveting for 'a background of adventure' (Anderson, 1923b: 292).

As in several other works of those years, Anderson never refers to Thomas' contribution – probably due to Chicago's ostracism towards the latter. In contrast, some years later, Harvey W. Zorbaugh (1929²) explicitly assumes the analysis developed in *The Polish Peasant* and in *The unadjusted girl* – 'the best analysis of the community and its control', he supports (Zorbaugh, 1929²: 223) – as a source for understanding the cultural conflict between immigrant parents and their children born in America, typical of certain area of the Chicago Near North Side. Within this area, in a few square miles, it is possible to identify the variety of social types of youth living in the city: the climbers living in the *Gold Coast*; the 'white collars' living in the world of furnished rooms; the students of the bohemian area; the heterogenous underworld that overnight moved around the commercialised vice district; the sons of Italian immigrants in *Little Sicily*; lastly, all those living in the 'slum'. It is exactly from the lives of those young people that Zorbaugh underlines how 'the last vestiges of the community are disappearing' (Zorbaugh, 1929²: 225): this contributes to producing a context in which young people experiences – at home, at school, in the streets, and so on – meet contrasting *definition(s) of the situation*, so that – in terms that clearly echo Thomas' legacy – 'their wishes are often unsatisfied' and 'life organisations disintegrate' (Zorbaugh, 1929²: 24).

This opens a fracture that most of those young people bridge giving life to an autonomous lifeworld, such as the gang – the subject of Frederic M. Thrasher's book. In *The Gang. A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago*, he claims that 'The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict' (Thrasher, 1927²: 57). On this basis, he explores the variety of configurations – from the informal playgroups to criminal gangs – which seem most capable of responding to those needs that the family, the school and the recreational agencies are unable to satisfy. Hence, he mainly

focuses on the *romantic* dimension of the gang, analysing its relationship with issues such as mobility, adventure, play, literature and cinema – namely the set of attitudes and practices that, with Thomas, the author indicates as ‘The quest for new experience’. Similarly, Thrasher analyses the forms of organization and control acting within the gang, as well as – although his analysis on these aspects seems to be less persuasive – gangs’ relationship with organized crime and the political machine.

In the context of the present analysis it is worth to consider a further aspect emerging from *The gang*. Thrasher’s unit of analysis is not the single gang, nor the individual (Getis, 1998). Rather, he focuses on the so called ‘*situation complex*’, the matrix of social, spatial and institutional factors which, in their reciprocal interlinking, condition and determine the ‘natural history’ of the gang. This is a proposal that seems to be affected – although not-explicitly – by Thomas’ theoretical and methodological legacy, and that allowed Thrasher – throughout his career (Merico, 2015) – to observe and acknowledge ‘young men as actors in their own lives, making decisions that made sense in the context of their quotidian experiences’ (Dimitriadis, 2006: 351).

A further contribution to the analysis of youth realities in Chicago is the study conducted by Paul G. Cressey on the occasion of his dissertation, discussed in 1929, and published as *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (Cressey, 1932²). Assuming a perspective which owes much to Thomas’ analysis, on the basis of a complex ethnographic observation Cressey examines the demoralization process of young women in the context of the transformations that invest leisure time in the urban dimension. The result is the representation of a context in which the relentless individual searches for new stimuli, the development of commercialized recreation and a growing promiscuity inextricably mutually intersect. Moreover, with the only exception of that of *security*, in this special social world all the wishes identified by Thomas find full satisfaction (Salerno, 2007). Thus, within the so-called “sex-game”, the commercial and romantic dimensions are always interconnected: on the one hand, the dancer considers her clients like ‘means’ useful to achieving her goals; on the other, the patron ‘is interested in securing an attractive young woman with whom he may dance and converse without the formality of an introduction and without many of the responsibilities entailed at other social gatherings’ (Cressey, 1932²: 40).

For the actors involved in that institution, entry into the ‘*taxi-dance hall*’ constitutes – therefore – the beginning of a process of ‘personal demoralization’. It follows that ‘the problem of the taxi-dance hall can be regarded as the problem of the modern city’ (Cressey, 1932²: 287). In other words, the ‘*taxi-dance hall*’ can be assumed – once again – as an emblematic microcosm of that rapidly changing society (Salerno, 2007): the impersonality, the weakening of controls, the loneliness, and the maladaptation distinctive of

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the urban reality can, in this way, be immediately revealed; and this offers the chance to understand the (ambivalent) life trajectories and cultural patterns of young women and men who live in it (Rauty, 1995³).

One of the key issues upon which the young scholars trained within the Chicago School of Sociology worked is that of juvenile delinquency. In particular, it was the special focus of the *Institute of Juvenile Research (IJR)*, especially of its sociological section directed – under Burgess’ auspices – by Clifford R. Shaw in cooperation with Henry D. McKay (Getis, 2000). Moving on from Healy’ focus (1915) on the *individual delinquent*, the IJR worked for over 30 years to understand delinquency ‘from the point of view of its relation to the social situation in which it occurs’ (*cited in* Bennett, 1981: 168).

This process was organised in three main areas. The first one was driven by the analysis of official statistics on truancy and (juvenile) delinquency and the mapping of their geographical distribution to understand their transformation over time. The analyses carried out lead the authors to assume that juvenile delinquency rates must be understood as an indicator of the deterioration of the local communities, and do not depend on the specific characteristics of people or groups (Shaw, McKay, 1942²). On this basis, the main theoretical assumption of the IJR is that, like any other cultural pattern, delinquency is socially transmitted in young people’s daily interactions (Bennett, 1981). To test this notion and to further the knowledge gathered, adopting Thomas’s lesson, Shaw combines the statistical analysis with the collection and analysis of the young delinquents’ life histories: emblematic examples can be found in the autobiographies of Stanley the *jack-roller* (born into a family of polish immigrants) (Shaw, 1930²) and Sidney Blotzman the ‘*moron*’ (Shaw, 1931²), as well as in the book dedicated to the Martin brothers (Shaw, 1938). The detailed study of these cases allows to follow the sequence of experiences that substantiate the delinquent career and, therefore, to identify not only the causes of juvenile delinquency, but also the most plausible treatment methods. This reference brings us to the third area of the IJR’s work, that is the two treatment methods they elaborated. The first one deals with the hypothesis of defining individual (re)education projects, centered on the reintegration of the young delinquent into a new family, work and community context (Shaw, 1930²; 1931²). The second and largest initiative is the launch, in 1932, of the *Chicago Area Project* – a vast delinquency prevention plan aiming at contributing to the *social reorganization* of the Chicago’s highest crime areas.

The last study considered in the context of the present analysis is that resulting from ‘*Motion picture and youth*’, a vast research project supported by the *Payne Study and Experiment Fund*. On the basis of the growing concern of public opinion, in 1928, Rev. Short recruited scholars from different universities – including Chicago – with the aim of collecting scientific evidence of the

influence of movies on children and youth – so as to be useful in endorsing a censorship campaign (Jowett, Jarvie, Fuller, 1996). In a first phase, Park and his junior colleague Herbert Blumer from the Department of Sociology were involved, with the task of analysing the data on juvenile delinquency, while also comparing the effects of movies on the young people from the delinquent and middle classes. In 1929 Park was given a fellowship to visit China and Japan and Blumer took on the full responsibility of the research. Always looking for more reliable data on the link between movies and delinquency, following Park's suggestion, in 1929 Short also engaged Thrasher and – shortly after – Cressey. Recovering the suggestion above mentioned, they highlighted the need to study the 'Motion Picture Experience' considering the 'total situation' in which young people's everyday life and education take shapes. This leads them to claim that *motion pictures* cannot be considered as a unilateral force. On the contrary, they argue:

In a society in which there are many factors making both for disorganization and social amelioration, the cinema is an important social and educational force contributing directly and incidentally to both (Cressey, 1938: 524).

A stance that contrasted with the proof the Payne Fund Studies *équipe* was looking for, and that contributed to leaving their *Boys, Movies and the City Streets* the only unpublished book of the Macmillan series (Merico, 2015).

5. Final remarks

The '*golden era*' of the Chicago School and its distinctive sociological *creativity* will last until Park's retirement in the mid-1930s. In the meantime, most of those who contributed to the pathway described so far had left Chicago: this is the case of Thomas, along with Anderson, Thrasher, Zorbaugh and Cressey. It is, however, essential to highlight the pivotal nature of those works, which have significantly marked the future development of the sociological analysis of youth and youth cultures. In fact, while not being a systematic corpus, the works resulting from the Chicago tradition are generally meant as 'the first comprehensive study of "urban youth"' (Dimitriadis, 2008: 27), which over time have inspired fruitful theoretical perspectives and important research experiences (Merico, 2018).

Certainly, the sociological eye of 'the men of the Chicago School' (Deegan, 1988²) seems to mainly be looking at marginal youth, that is those who live in the interstices or in the most disorganised area of the urban mosaic. In this respect, it results in some respects short-sighted, being mainly attracted by the most *problematic* social types (Rauty, 1995³). But here it is important to stress

some (meaningful) peculiarities of Thomas' contribution. This is particularly evident when referring, in first instance, to his (lifelong) attention to the situation of women (Cersosimo, 2019), and of young women in particular. An aspect that is in sharp contrast to what the great majority of the young scholars who worked in close contact with Park and Burgess did, devoting their interest to those subjects whose presence attracted more the attention of public opinion. Secondly, Thomas seems to define his collaboration with the social agencies – decisive for the development of his own researchers, as well as for the evolution of Chicago sociology itself – in a way that seems (at least partially) to reconfigure the ambivalence between the scientific perspective of the social researcher and the stance of the activists, that is those mainly aiming at putting what learned straight into practice.

The most important contribution of William I. Thomas seems – however – to lay in his clear distancing from the 'pathologizing discourse' (Dimitriadis, 2008: 32) that emerges in some cases in the studies carried on youth issues by the young sociologists of the Chicago School. A legacy, in sum, that has not only offered to this tradition several significant suggestions, but that can also help to identify its main limits and challenges.

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