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The Chicago School and Democracy: An Elective Affinity Analysis*

Abstract. This paper argues that the main achievement of the interwar (1914-1936 or so) University of Chicago sociology department was to construct a humanistic social psychology, one that defined human nature as composed of symbols. This replaced the various social psychologies that pictured humans as biologically determined in some way.

In the late teens and early twenties there was a culture war over “Americanization” in the United States. The conservatives argued that the new immigrants (mostly Jews, Italians and Poles) were biologically inferior to the native protestants due to faulty, inborn instincts. They further argued that the new immigrants should not have the full rights of American citizenship. The liberals, lead by the Chicago department, argued that “all men were equal.” They backed this up with the claim that all humans consisted of symbols (cultural elements) and that these semiotic resources were all equal. Human were morally and legally equal because they were “ontologically” equal.

With this social psychology the Chicago department built a sociology, consisting largely of community studies in Chicago. The sociology was important, but not as important as the social psychology.

I then make a comparison between Chicago sociology and Weber’s Protestant Ethic, arguing that in both cases the causal force at work was one that used an elective affinity process.

The major achievements of the classic Chicago school of sociology (World War I to about 1936) were two-fold. First they invented a sociology, along with a rich tradition of empirical research, and second they invented a system of presuppositions to that sociology. The presuppositions referred

primarily to the vision of human nature which that discipline assumed. This second point can also be referred to as their social psychology.

There has been considerable discussion of what the Chicago school stood for, what they had in common, and what, if anything, constituted them as a school. (Becker, 1990; Bulmer, 1985; Platt, 1998, pp. 230-239 and others). Answers to these question have been sought in the first area, that of the sociology of the school. But I think the defining features of the Chicago school can better be found in their social pschology, i.e. in their ideas of what constitutes a human being.

In this paper I will give the most attention to Chicago's social psychology, pretty much ignoring the sociology issue. The school's sociology was in large measure an application of their social psychology. The social psychology was symbolic interactionist, meaning the social is a symbolic, not a physical, process. And the sociology was also primarily symbolic interactionist. Here, in the school's theory of human nature, is where I think they made their greatest contribution, and this will constitute the first part of this paper. But this contribution has never been fully appreciated, so I will go through it in detail. After teasing out Chicago's social psychology, I will compare this cultural product to Max Weber's Protestant Ethic (Weber, 1976). In both the Chicago and the Weberian cases there was an elective affinity process in motion. The elective affinity comparison will constitute the second part of this paper.

Part one will lay out the facts, the cognitive materials, of the Chicago school's view of the human self. Once these have been presented it will be possible to take a second look at these materials and show how they can be

explained by the elective affinity argument. These two parts will be followed by a brief conclusion.

1. The Chicago School on the Nature of Human Beings

The Political-Historical Context. In the period between about 1914 and the early 1920s there was a move in the United States to impose undemocratic restrictions and controls on the recent immigrants (Hartmann, 1967; Matthews, 1970; Hawes, 1968; Higham, John, 1955, pp. 234-263; Ross, 1994). These “new Immigrants” were largely Catholics and Jews. The argument was that the immigrant cultures were inferior to the native, protestant culture, and that they were a threat to democracy (McDougall, 1921). It was also feared that the immigrants might be influenced in a politically leftist direction by the Bolshevik revolution. The most extreme group on this side of the controversy was the then, quite important, Ku klux Klan. The K.K.K. was particularly powerful in the north, especially in Indiana and Oregon.

Backing up these nativist arguments was the belief that cultures and sub-cultures were driven by biological instincts, each racial or ethnic group having a different set of inborn instincts. These instincts were thought to be ranked, with some ethnic groups superior to others. The Poles, Italians and Jews were considered to be the lowest of American ethnic groups, with the Poles at the bottom.

The opposed view, championed especially by the Chicago school of

sociology, was that there were no human instincts. This position was that the self is not primarily a biological organism but a cultural or symbolic one, composed of and guided by symbols. This view implied that all selves had the same interior resources and were equally fit for democracy. Given time and the absence of any legal compulsions or restrictions, -- what W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki referred to as “ordering and forbidding,” -- the immigrants would adapt quite suitably to American culture and democracy. The Chicago school and their allies, eventually won the theoretical fight, and subsequent history proved them to be correct. But nevertheless immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was restricted by the 1924 immigrant law.

In making this point I will draw an analogy with Weber’s Protestant Ethic argument. The University of Chicago sociologists, along with other scholars, were asked by the American elite, personified by Rockefeller, to explain and figure out how to control the immigrants. Like Weber’s Calvinist preachers, these professors were the “carriers” of a vague political ethic. These professors sponsored charities, settlement houses and other reform institutions for helping the immigrants. But they also set out to create a new discipline, sociology, for scientifically guiding this reform process. This discipline developed in a way that changed the ethnic policy of the elite, much as the Calvinist interpretation of the Protestant ethic changed the economic policy of the earlier elite. I will return to this issue later.

The sociologists initial challenge was in working out the subject matter of this science. This discipline had to be differentiated from economics, history, political science and law as well as from ethics, philosophy, religion and all varieties of social reform. The obvious ideas were already used up by

these earlier disciplines. The sociologists had to invent a novel disciplinary idea. The logic of the situation led them from the problem of controlling the immigrants to that of inventing a new and appropriate discipline. They needed the latter to perform the former.

They, especially Albion Small, decided that they needed a generic social idea, not a specific one such as economics or political science had used. They also decided that the new discipline had to include some notion of what a human being was, i.e. a social psychology (Small, 1907, p. 647). Since the social was the merging of individuals, and could not be defined without reference to the individual, the individual or self had to be defined. These early sociologists were also aware, perhaps only dimly so, that in defining the person or individual they were taking a philosophical stand on human nature.

The problem of defining humans, particularly in ways that would bear on law and politics, was an old one for American thinkers. In breaking from 18th century England and fighting the revolutionary war, the colonial thinkers had two distinct moral definitions of the human being. One, from the Declaration of Independence, stated that all human were equal. The other, which was to appear in the Constitution, claimed that women were of less value than men, and blacks and indians were of less value than whites. This split in human ethics persisted until the Civil War. That war, fought largely to free the slaves, implied that blacks were as good as whites. And Lincoln generalized this position in the Gettysburgh address by saying the Civil War was being fought to show that “all men are created equal.”

But not too many years after the war the South returned to white supremacy by successfully abrogating reconstruction. Then Jim Crow laws in

the South formalized black inferiority. The fourteenth amendment to the Constitution (1868) had officially raised blacks to the level of whites, but this amendment was eventually not enforced. And Jim Crow laws were permitted to neutralize it.

So when large numbers of new immigrants came over, beginning in the mid-1890s, there was still a split ethics on the question of human nature. Blacks were officially equal, but de facto they were treated as inferior to whites. And women and indians too continued to have inferior status. We might say the Constitution had become somewhat blurry on the equality issue. By this I mean especially the “living” Constitution, i.e., as it affected the political and legal system in a practical way. Not the official or written Constitution, which tends to lag.

This meant that the new immigrants, although white, did not have an unambiguous legal status. And when these immigrants settled in large ethnic neighborhoods, characterized by the problems of poor people, the protestant natives began to suggest that these people had an inordinate number of social problems and that these problems were caused by the racial or physiological traits of these immigrants. In other words the word spread that the new immigrants had unsolvable social problems, that these problems would never get better and that this situation was caused by their biological or racial inferiority. Gradually this argument started getting some professorial support in the idea that ethnic instincts were at the bottom of the problem and would always be so. This argument was based mainly on I.Q. tests given to all recruits during World War I (Kamin, 1974). Therefore some kind of government intervention was being called for to “make America safe for Democracy” (McDougall, 1921).

These suggestions for intervention ranged from the innocent idea of providing citizen education all the way to the, Ku Klux Klan idea of placing the immigrants in an inferior legal status with fewer political rights than the first class citizens, especially the native protestants.

The Chicago Sociology Department on Human Nature. I now want to show how the Chicago department had egalitarian ideas about human nature and how these were their weapon in the political struggle to define the human self. These egalitarian ideas stemmed from their views that human nature was composed of symbols, not of instincts or other biological determinants.

I will show that all the Chicago sociology department professors held some symbolic view of human nature. Broadly speaking one can say that the distinctive qualities of humans can be explained as machines, biological organisms or symbols. Physicalist ideas picture humans as complicated machines, a model that is rarely found, although it is present in contemporary ideas of feedback. Biological ideas, of which there are several, depict humans as purely physiological. These biological approaches were the most common views of the self during the period of early American sociology. Symbolic approaches see humans as existing at a sui generis level, above that of the biological. The symbolic traits of humans emerge in an evolutionary sense, so goes the argument, as these entities moved from the animal to the human level. Perhaps the process of thought, which is conducted in the medium of symbols, was the most insistent emergent property. The notion that humans are symbolic was somewhat difficult to

explain, however, particularly in comparison to such familiar ideas as machines and biological organisms. Various, closely related, concepts have been introduced to explain the symbolic character of human beings.

Peirce had said that humans were “signs, (Peirce, 1868) a term he used in the same sense as what would later be referred to by others as symbols. As Peirce put it, “A sign or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce, 1974, paragraph 228). I think another way of saying what Peirce was after is to say the distinctive qualities of humans are meanings. If Peirce had developed his notion more fully, the symbolic quality of humans would have been recognized much earlier and more confidently than was the case. But Peirce introduced the idea of the human-as-sign, sometimes calling it the “glassy essence,” without adequate discussion or examples. Therefore the idea had to be reached over and over again, re-inventing the wheel, by the pioneers of social psychology.

George Herbert Mead re-worked Peirce’s idea of the sign with his own notion of the symbol. Unfortunately Mead did not cite nor mention Peirce in his discussion of the symbol. This omission may have been due to Peirce’s reputation as being morally outside the pale. Peirce lived with his second wife before marrying her and he took opium and morphine to control a neurological illness. This was the extent of his unconventionality. Peirce was blocked from getting a job in the University of Chicago department of philosophy in 1892, despite having a recommendation by William James, for these reasons. George Palmer, another Harvard philosopher, wrote to President Harper that Peirce had a “broken and dissolute character.” This was two years before Mead came to Chicago’s philosophy department so he

was not there at the time, but he probably heard of it later.

If Mead had shown how he was building on Peirce, the ideas would have been far more powerful and consequential in intellectual history. For, the idea that human beings are symbols would have immediately had a lineage and a history. This would have constituted a critical mass in the scientific process. Nevertheless, despite what I take to be Mead's timidity in relation to Peirce, Mead was quite the original genius in his own right. He showed both that humans were symbolic, and, going one beyond Peirce, that the social itself was a back-and-forth symbol (Mead, 1934, pp. 80-81). To translate Mead's innovation into Peirce's terms, the first actor performs an action which is the sign or "representamen," the second actor responds with an action which is the interpretant, and then the two, jointly, do something which is the semiotic object. For example, the boy says I love you, the girl says I love you, and then they kiss to express their love. Or, I ask one of my adult sons to get me a beer, he brings the beer with two glasses, we split the beer.

Mead's formulation was the most important of all the eventual statements that the social is symbolic. His explanation of how humans too are symbols, which was somewhat different from Peirce's, was also quite convincing. So he is rightly considered the best theorist on how both the person and the social are composed of symbols. His mistake, though was in not showing how he borrowed from and built on Peirce.

Another early advocate of the symbolic self was Charles Horton Cooley. Cooley got his social psychological ideas from watching his children grow up, a process he described perceptively in Human Nature and the Social Order

(1902). For Cooley the self is a product of the social order, particularly through the influence of the primary group. He thought the individual was born with an unformed self, which was later developed by the actions of the primary caretakers. The inborn self was a bit more hereditarian than Mead's self, but otherwise Cooley's ideas are close to and compatible with those of Mead. In other words Cooley's self adds to the symbolic self of Peirce and Mead.

A final name that should be added is James Mark Baldwin, who also studied his children (Baldwin, 1897). Baldwin had early versions of the symbolic self and the social self, ideas later developed more fully by Cooley and Mead, both of whom built on Baldwin. Baldwin's career was slowed down when he was fired from his Johns Hopkins job on a minor sex scandal (being in a Baltimore bar, which was also a hangout for prostitutes, the evening it was raided). Baldwin moved to Paris, continued writing, but seems to have been diverted from the creative path he had been treading.

At this point it should be noticed that the symbol is the core of the whole family of supra-biological ideas, i.e. the person, the social and the cultural. The person consists of symbols, the social is a special kind of symbol and the culture is composed of symbols. If you define any of the three as symbolic, you can immediately reason to the symbolicity of the other two. If you hold to one, you also, by implication, hold to all three. Boas, who invented the modern anthropological notion of culture, did not lean heavily on the notion of the symbol, but subsequent anthropologists (White, 1949; and Geertz, 1973, p. 45) did, and this notion was certainly implicit in Boas's formulation. So the symbol is at the heart of the modern social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology.

The other social sciences, i.e. economics, political science, law and history, also depend on the idea of the symbol, but since these social sciences are concerned with special kinds of symbols, they could define themselves in terms of their particular version and avoid the question of the symbol in general. Therefore it was sociology and anthropology that pioneered the symbolic character of human nature.

Along with Peirce, Mead, Cooley and Baldwin, Husserl's "intentionality" (defined as content or meaning) was also an early notion of the symbol. Husserl was a pioneer at analyzing the dimensions and nuances of the symbolic interiority of human beings. Although he did not get translated into English until the 1960s, Weber and the Germans had a symbolic view of human nature which borrowed heavily from Husserl. The early formulators of the symbolic quality of human nature then were Peirce, Mead, Cooley, Boas, Baldwin and, in Europe, Husserl.

I will now go through the Chicago sociology department and show how all the members held symbolic views of human nature. In other words they were all symbolic interactionists, meaning that the social is a symbol; and none were positivists, meaning the social is mechanical or purely biological.

The first strong statement from the Chicago sociology department was Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America. Thomas had been moving toward a symbolic interactionist statement of human nature for some years, with his papers on anthropology and on the difference between the sexes. He was also consciously founding social psychology, for which the question of human nature is the central issue.

Thomas had taken a course from Mead, and he was obviously influenced by him, although he stated his own version of human nature, centering around his specialized concept of “attitude,” independently of Mead.

Znaniecki, perhaps even more so than Thomas, was positioned to define the human being -- and in that way to defend American democracy and the new immigrants. Znaniecki had been a patriot in his own country, which had been occupied and sliced into thirds by the Prussians, Russians and Germans. He was a strong Polish nationalist, and if anything, he might have thought Poles had something of a superior culture. When Znaniecki came to Chicago in 1914, where the Poles were ridiculed as being sub-human, he was no doubt quite disturbed. In addition he was familiar with the European notion of “value,” which meant about the same thing as Boas’s culture. He therefore know that the interiority of the human self was cultural, not biological.

This made it obvious to him that Polish culture too, both in Poland and in the United States, was purely symbolic, just as the personal qualities of the Poles were. These understandings lead directly to the profoundly theoretical, “methodological note” of the Polish Peasant. In this note Thomas and Znaniecki state a theory of the person, the culture and the field of sociology in systematic contrast to that of Durkheim (whose lectures Znaniecki had attended). This statement was the clearest and most compelling early explanation -- more so even than those of Peirce and Mead -- of the symbol as it characterizes the person, the social and the cultural.

Of the three major new Immigrant groups, the Poles, Italians and Jews, the Poles were widely thought to be the lowest in intelligence, the most criminal in native tendencies and the most uncivilized in their culture. It is

poetic justice that Znaniecki a Pole would make the strongest statement to date of ethnic equality.

A second member of the department, who followed Mead on the symbolic nature of humans, was Ellsworth Faris. Faris is sometimes considered the least important school member, at least as far as social research was concerned. But when we turn to social psychology, he was, apart from Thomas and Znaniecki, the most important member of the school. He had done anthropological research in his six missionary years in the Congo, and like Thomas, he had a sense of the essential similarity between so called pre-literates and members of industrial societies.

Faris was also the one who reviewed McDougall's Is American Safe for Democracy?, in the American Journal of Sociology (1921, 240-243). For academics, McDougall's was the most threatening attack on the civil liberties of the new immigrants. Faris's quite damaging review was, in turn, a major statement by the liberal side in this "politics of the self" war.

I will treat Park and Burgess together since their views were quite close, and, in the case of their Introduction to Sociology (1921,1924,1967), co-authored. Park got his appointment at Chicago by way of Thomas's influence. Park also assumed co-authorship (with Herbert A. Miller) of Old World Traits Transplanted, when Thomas, who had actually written the book, was deemed too tainted by his sex scandal to be allowed authorship. And in 1927 Park managed, despite opposition, Thomas's election to the presidency of the American Sociological Association. Along with these career connections Park pretty much agreed with Thomas's approach.

But another connection to the symbolic self was with Cooley. In their textbook, Park and Burgess say,

Of all that has been written on this subject (human nature) the most adequate statement is that of Cooley. He has worked out with unusual penetration and peculiar insight an interpretation of human nature as a product of group life. (1967, p. 61)

In another place in the same book they have a discussion of “no separate instincts.” (p. 69)

Ogburn. William Ogburn had met Franz Boas at Columbia and he thereby adopted the anthropological concept of culture. As mentioned earlier, adherence to the symbolic notion of culture implies an adherence to the symbolic notions of the social and the self. In a 1921 paper, after discussing the possible influence of climate on culture, Ogburn said,

So similarly is race inadequate to account for culture. For instance, there have been great changes in culture in England in the past three hundred years but there could not have been any significant racial change in that time. And in Europe at the present time there are wide divergences in cultural status within areas occupied by the same racial stocks. Culture varies with race constant. Such cases illustrate the inadequacy of race and climate as explanations and suggest the importance of history and culture (Ogburn, 1922, p. 73).

Ogburn’s rejection of racial implications meant he could not agree with

the idea of ethnic groups having different instincts, resulting in ethnic stratification. Ogbun also held to psychoanalytical ideas of the self, which are a variety of symbolic self (Duncan, 1964, pp. 289-301).

Small. Although Albion Small did not make any developed statement on social psychology, he did believe that there were six interests: health, wealth, sociability, knowledge, beauty, rightness (Dibble, 1975 Christakes, 1978) . These interests were the same for everyone, but they did not imply any clear notion as to what a human being is. Still they did pull him away from the biological view of instinct, especially the stratified version associated with McDougall. His interest approach was compatible with the symbolic view of the self.

On the other hand his administrative actions and his concern with the definition of sociology did have implications for social psychology. He wanted a novel definition of the field of sociology. This would include some reference to the individual-in-association. But if his notion of the individual was to be new, it could not be mechanical or biological. The only other possibility was the symbolic view of the person.

As he put it in his discussion of “Points of Agreement among Sociologists,”

We are agree that our distinctive center of attention and our principle of synthesis is personalilty. This proposition makes the strategic point in our campaign for recognition of the sociological point of view.... Our attempt is to promote knowledge of human experience in terms of the make-up of the persons who

enact the experience. (Small, 1907, p. 647)

The issue of finding a new definition for sociology, as I will show in my elective affinity discussion, was a Weberian switchman, or in simpler language a “wobbler.” This definition could go in more than one direction, and Small dragged it toward the definition of the person or self. This in turn made social psychology a presupposition of the definition of sociology. In other words Small made the definition of the self, which had been a major political issue in the United States from its very beginnings as a nation, a central issue of sociology. This in turn meant that if you pursued the development of sociology you had to adopt a liberal definition of the self, thereby placing yourself on the liberal side in the early 1920s culture war. Of course Small did not deliberately seek these results. They were, in Robert Merton’s terms, “unintended consequences.”

This review has made it clear that all members of the Chicago department held a symbolic view of the nature of human beings. Small’s views were the least explicit, although his approach to defining the field of sociology placed the symbolic self at the center of the field.

This means these sociologists could not think that ethnic groups had instincts, and that some were higher and some lower. Instead their social psychology had egalitarian implications, implying that human nature was always the same. On the long argued question of the American self they held quite strongly that all selves were equal. This means they disagreed with the views of the original Constitution, with slavery, with the Jim Crow laws and with the widespread idea that some immigrants were not really fit for democracy and freedom. Instead they held that all the immigrants would be

quite adequately American in a short time and that there was no need to tailor the immigration laws to some idea of racial hierarchies.

This also means that the Constitution, as people actually interpret it, i.e. the practical Constitution, had now been “amended” in an egalitarian direction. The Constitution was in a shaky state from the Civil War until sometime in the 1920s. But at that time the notion of human equality, in principle if not always in practice, crystallized. The egalitarian implications of the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburgh address were now explained in a theoretical way. The Chicago people not only explained that all humans were equal, they also explained why they were equal. This was a decisive step beyond all previous egalitarian doctrines. The Chicago people were therefore at the forefront of saving the American Constitution from slipping into some form of fascism.

The problem of understanding and controlling the immigrants was now also solved. The immigrants were all the same in their possibilities, and the problem of controlling them was largely one of just letting them adjust on their own. No special laws or rules were needed. Or in Thomas and Znaniecki’s terms there was no need for “ordering and forbidding.”

Let me now return to the elective affinity analogy, and show how it worked in the Chicago case.

2. Elective Affinity: The Protestant Ethic and Chicago Sociology

To make the comparison it will be necessary to briefly review Weber’s use

of elective affinity. He never gave a formal definition of this concept. He simply used the term to describe the relationship between various socio-cultural elements, although the definition was somewhat implied by the context. The relationships were usually between groups and ideas, but sometimes simply between ideas. In explanatory or logical style the relationships were not causal in the positivistic sense or even functional but rather interpretive or meaningful.

In addition Weber had both simple (synchronic or cross-sectional) and complex (diachronic or longitudinal) uses of the term. In the simple version, the relation was one of mutual attraction, with varying degrees of mutuality, during a single period in time (for example, Jones and Anservitz, 1975). The import of this version was primarily to dissent from an over-simplified variant of Marxian economic determinism, in which ideas always reflect and are caused by the interests of the ruling class (Gerth and Mills, 1946, p. 62-63). Weber's point was that the influence was sometimes two-way.

In the complex version the relation was a temporal process beginning with an initial stage of mutual attraction, developing into a phase of disaffinity in which the intellectuals modified the ideas in some manner, and terminating in still another stage of affinity, in which the elite re-aligned its interests and life style to mesh with the now altered ideational element

The second version builds on the first by showing how intellectuals can sometimes interpose themselves between classes and the classes' preferred superstructure or consciousness (Treiber, 1985). In other words intellectuals sometimes bend the interests of the classes they serve. The same process can be referred to simply as the power of ideas. Some

ideas, the kind Weber referred to as “switchmen” (Gerth and Mills, 1946, p. 280), re-route the interests of the groups that espouse them (Kalberg, 1995.)

Weber used both versions of elective affinity in his analysis of the religious tendencies of various social groupings (Gerth and Mills, 1948, pp. 283 ff.). When he commented on the religious affinities of political officials, chivalrous warriors and peasants he used the cross-sectional model. But when he looked at civic strata he turned to redemptive religions and began to construct the longitudinal model.

Weber’s concept of elective affinity never completely caught on in social theory. It had not been adequately clarified (Thomas, 1985), and, in addition, it could often be replaced by other concepts. In particular the various versions of meaning analysis, such as symbolic interaction, hermeneutics, semiotics, and even Weber’s own *verstehen*, could often do much of the work of the elective affinity concept. What seems to have survived the least is the synchronic, mutual attraction version.

But the multi-stage, diachronic version of elective affinity, which expands the simple version, has proved much more durable. This back-and-forth notion, in which the intellectuals change the valence of the ideological system, is a unique and enduring Weberian insight, and it is worth closer examination and development.

Before turning to the case of Chicago sociology, I will describe the diachronic process of elective affinity in a formal manner.

(1) The ruling elite -- economic, political or religious -- shops around and picks some cultural element, e.g. from religion, law or high culture, that suits and promotes its interests. The Chinese literati, for example, had been looking at a good half dozen world views before they settled on Confucianism (Weber, 1951, pp. 165-167).

(2) The elite selects cultural intellectuals, such as priests, lawyers, professors or artists to watch over and sustain the cultural item.

(3) The intellectuals start promoting their own cultural interest, which is to develop and systematize, with the result that the element is now different from what it originally was. In addition the intellectuals are the only ones who can fully understand and control it.

(4) The element has now drifted in such a way that it no longer promotes the elite's interest as much as it originally did.

(5) Finally the elite, with its sunk costs in the item and in the intellectuals, has to change the way it meets and defines its interests in conformity with the new cultural rules. Similarly the causal process, initially flowing from interests to ideology, now exerts a reverse effect from ideology to interests.

(6) On this scheme there are two distinct moments of maximum isomorphism or affinity: at the beginning when the elite is acting, and at the end when it is reacting.

Given this general view of how elective affinity works, let me turn to the

case of Chicago sociology. I will simplify the preceding scheme and apply it to the sociology of American ethnicity.

	<u>Protestant Ethic</u>	<u>Chicago Sociology</u>
<u>Elite</u>	Calvinist Businessmen	Rockefeller, etc.
<u>Carrier of Idea</u>	Calvinist Preachers	Early Sociologists
<u>Ethical Problem</u>	Capitalism	Immigrant life
<u>Reference point</u>	Calvinism	The Constitution
<u>Key Problem</u>	Predestination	Definition of Sociology
<u>Switchman</u>	Response to Destiny	Nature of the Self
<u>Revised Ethic</u>	Protestant Ethic	Ethnic Egalitarianism

Table 1. Elective Affinity: Protestant Ethic vs. Chicago Sociology

Table 1 compares Chicago sociology with the Protestant Ethic. My purpose is to show how Chicago sociology changed the juridical structure of American ethnic groups in a way that is similar to how the Calvinist preachers changed the ethical definition of modern capitalism. The particular causal process is the way in which new ideas can bring about changes in right and wrong and in the class interests that stand behind these rights and wrongs.

Before the Chicago school developed their theory of the self and its implications for ethnic groups it was not clear how to shoe-horn these groups into American life without spoiling the Constitution. The American elite, symbolized by Rockefeller, thought the new immigrants might be a threat to democracy and needed some kind of special treatment. Just what treatment, i.e. how “invasive” it had to be, was the question the sociologists were being asked. Is there a way these new people can be made into orderly Americans without changing existing laws and practices? Can America be safe for democracy while somehow absorbing these seemingly alien sub-cultures? Or will something more heavy handed be necessary?

When the Calvinist preachers faced their problem of squaring modern capitalism with religion they quickly bumped into the problem of predestination. If this were interpreted in a fatalistic way, capitalism would not have a clear and workable economic ethic. In particular the economic system would fall back into traditionalism and lose its dynamism. If predestination were interpreted in a way that permitted self-control, a much more dynamic economic future became possible. The preachers carried the ethic in the latter direction, and the result was an economy of unprecedented energy.

The American community was in a similarly transitional status when the sociologists were asked to understand the control the new immigrants. The immigrants could be defined as biologically inferior, and an “ordering and forbidding” policy could be recommended. This would have been a backward policy, just as a fatalistic interpretation of predestination would have been

backward. Or the sociologists could produce an explanation that built on the most liberal American values, showing the formula for confident democracy and allowing the country to move in a historically forward direction.

In performing their role, these Chicago sociologists quickly bumped into the problem of giving their new discipline a fresh definition, one that would permit the construction of a new social science. I am saying that the old definitional options, which were primarily biological, would have kept the ethnic problem unclear. In particular a biological sociology would have drawn the field toward a timid view of the ethnic problem -- one that gave in to the popular ideas of ethnic stratification. Albion Small, who was obsessed with giving sociology a new start, sensed that the definition of the field would have crucial implications for the development of the field.

The Chicago people had virtually invented the symbolic view of human nature. This is the idea that was needed to produce an even-handed theory of ethnic stratification. What was missing was a definition of the field that was hospitable to the symbolic view of what a person was. Small pushed the field toward a humanistic definition, and he succeeded in joining the identity of this new discipline to the egalitarian definition of human nature.

Once this was done the elective affinity between the egalitarian self and the egalitarian Constitution clicked into place. America was indeed made safe for democracy. The Chicago sociologists had done what they were asked to do.

Conclusion

I plead guilty to some over-statement here. The Chicago sociologists did not do this ethnic job single handedly. Many sociologists on other campuses were part of the same process, although Chicago was the center and had the largest number of activists.

Also professors were not the only ones in this story. People in government and various other institutional settings were also busily arguing for and against the egalitarian approach to immigration.

I have said little about what I called the “sociology” of the Chicago school. The rich studies of Chicago neighborhoods, however, were a fit expression of the egalitarian social psychology of the school. These studies were done in the same live-and-let-live spirit as the social psychology was.

Also, in the empirical sociology there was not as much agreement as in the social psychology. In particular Ogburn, who had the same fair-minded social psychology as the rest of the department, stood aside as being resolutely quantitative. And Park’s zonal ideas and demographic studies of how particular practices spread throughout Chicago neighborhoods, were also distinct from the qualitative case studies. The people who have said there was no Chicago school are partly right when it comes to Chicago sociology. But the social psychology, the theory of human nature, is another matter. Here it is clear that the Chicago department constituted a highly uniform, cohesive school. And that this school had a significant impact on the development of American democracy.

Another conclusion was that the importance of various department

members gets changed. The hierarchy gets somewhat reversed. Albion Small, Ellsworth Faris and Florian Znaniecki become central people on my reckoning. Park, Burgess and Ogburn become less important. In other words, sociologically the department looks one way, but social psychologically in looks quite another. Since the main political impact of the department was from its social psychology, not its sociology, this switch in focus is quite consequential.

Footnotes

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