

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School

Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The first thing they gave me to look at on the campus of the University of Chicago, while I was in Chicago to carry out my research, was the weekly ‘crime map’, published in the student newspaper *The Chicago Maroon*.

The ‘crime map’ is a plan of the university grounds and the adjoining residential area between 47th Street and 60th Street, on which the crimes which have taken place during the week are recorded by means of pictograms. These crimes vary from assault to sexual harassment, from burglary to mugging. Burgess and Park would have enjoyed looking at this map, even if with mixed feelings, because the technique which they made into a trademark of Chicago urban sociology – ‘mapping’ – is here being used in its own ‘natural area’, even if not in a particularly happy context. A case of ‘The Savage Hits Back’?

The whole thing, including the white emergency telephones on the campus which connect passers-by with the nearest police station, which promise security but have the effect of making the newcomer more worried than might otherwise be the case, may be in the interest of prevention, may even be put down to that enjoyment of anxiety which Raeithel described as being typical of the American mentality; the fact is, however, that the campus today is not just an island of academia – it is also one of prosperity, in the midst of areas inhabited by the poorer black population. The ecological processes that the Chicago sociologists of the 1920s described in such detail have not spared their working and living environment, even if they are defiantly halted at the gates of the campus.

I could not help asking myself what Robert Park, who so much enjoyed ‘nosing around’, and who developed it into an empirical art form, would have done in the face of the well-meaning advice not to venture beyond Cottage Grove when going west. ‘You must imagine Park as a tireless pedestrian, roaming through Chicago in every direction, this way and that, noting down his observations as he goes’, wrote

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School
Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

René König in his essay on the pioneers of social ecology in Chicago (1978). This reminds me of Riehl's 'Wanderstudium' [Itinerant studies] and the figure of the flâneur as drawn by Walter Benjamin.

'Nosing around' is what this book is about. Within the present renaissance of Chicago sociology in Europe, which is not least a response to the new longing for urbanity, there is a link-up with that tradition of naturalistic observation which is seen as the methodological legacy of the Chicago sociologists. Of course, what irritates their re-discoverers, particularly in our method-conscious age, is the fact that Park, considered to be the inspiration behind naturalistic observation in the Chicago style, very rarely took up a position on questions of research methods.

Instead of lamenting this state of affairs, it may be an appropriate time to ask ourselves whether this 'abstinence' should not be understood as an indication of a particular understanding of procedure. What Park might say about present-day discussions on methods can naturally only be a subject for speculation; however, there is more than a grain of truth in René König's remark that Park's particular talent, in contrast to later sociologists with their much more elaborate research techniques, '*was that he still knew how to "see" with his own eyes*' (René König 1984, p. 28; emphasis in the original). What Park was obviously concerned about in his teaching was to convey to his students the art of 'seeing'; and that meant, above all, getting rid of the blinkers with which they were going through life. 'Go into the district', 'get the feeling', 'become acquainted with people': the fundamental premise of Chicago sociology is contained in these instructions, banal as they seem to us today, to leave the study rooms and go out on to the uncertain terrain of 'real life'.

René König is at the same time one of those sociologists who advocate what I would like to call the 'adoption hypothesis', i.e., the assertion that it is ethnology/anthropology, with its paradigm of field research, which acted as the model for sociological ethnography. Robert Park himself made a not insignificant contribution to this 'adoption hypothesis'. In one of the few passages in his work where he explicitly addresses the question of method, in the essay 'The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment' (1925a), he compares the approach of urban sociologists with that of the patient observation methods used by anthropologists to investigate primitive cultures.

In this context, it is not unimportant to note the date the essay was published: 1925. The major monographs by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown based on field research had already made their appearance; the

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School
Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

famous introduction by Malinowski which gave him the reputation of being the founder of participant observation was available; and last but not least, sociologists and anthropologists in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Chicago were (still) working under one roof. Reason enough therefore to agree with the supposition that sociology was inspired by ethnology/anthropology in the principles which guided its investigations. But even Park's favourite expression to characterise his way of working, 'nosing around', should make us stop and think: it does not sound very serious when measured by the standards of the scientific community. No doubt even ethnologists and anthropologists poked their noses into things which did not necessarily concern them, but they did at least manage to conceal this by the use of terminological retouching. The somewhat coarser expression has its sources elsewhere: 'nosing around' is an expression from the jargon of reporters.

This book sets out to show that the orientation of urban research represented by Park ultimately owes its origins to the reporting tradition. This is not surprising when we consider that Park himself, after acquiring his BA, worked as a reporter and editor in New York, Chicago, Detroit and other big cities from 1887 to 1898. This influence is directly reflected both in the areas he investigated and the techniques he used in his research. Park's recourse to anthropology, in the revised version of the essay which originally appeared in 1915, appears in this context as a form of justification, which serves to conceal the considerably less prestigious relationship with journalistic reporting.

The particular significance of Park's years as a journalist and newspaper correspondent (not forgetting his work for Booker T. Washington) would not be understood, however, without taking into account the habitual or attitude component. In research and teaching, the character of his *habitus* (Bourdieu), understood as a system of durable dispositions and schemata, is clearly stamped by his experience in the world of journalism. Park's image of himself as a 'captain of inquiry', leading a team of investigators, corresponds to the rôle of city editor in America. One of the features of this self-image (of the rôle of editor, as well) is the conveying of a view of reality which is unclouded by moral assumptions. That this is not just a question of how knowledge is imparted is revealed by Park's distinct anti-reformer attitude, which to me is the most significant indication of his legacy from journalism. Park certainly does combine his sociological activity with an interest in social reform; what he vehemently objects to, however, is the variety of improvement

prevalent up until the First World War. This particular mixture of social reform and moral education can scarcely be better (or more grotesquely) illustrated than by the cover of the American edition of William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), on the back of which there is an advertisement placed by Enoch Morgan & Sons Co., that publicises their brand of soap Sapolio with the motto, 'Dirt and Despair Are Close of Kin'. In Park's opinion, in order to turn sociology into a science with an empirical basis, it is essential to abandon that particular perspective of social reality, which, inspired and guided by a civilising mission, perceives reality only from a biased point of view; this perspective was certainly still present in the American colleges of the 1920s. In contrast to this, Park insists that we can only allow ourselves to consider how people might possibly live (together) when we know how people do actually live (together).

This change in perspective, exemplified by replacing the phrase 'life as it ought to be lived' by 'life as it is lived',¹ leads on to considerations which go beyond the confines of a reconstruction, focused on one particular person, of the relationship between journalism and sociology.

Embedded in a cultural transformation, bidding farewell to the genteel tradition of 'New England exclusiveness' (Randolph Bourne), with its emphasis on appearances and its social complacency, the figure of the turn-of-the-century reporter, in whom there is at the same time a cultural dissident, now becomes the archetype of an approach to social reality where what counts is reporting and not improvement. Such an attitude of disinterested interest is very much closer to the modern idea of scientific objectivity, which attempts to uncouple the process of finding the truth from any link with a moral point of view, than to a practical sociology influenced by the perspective of reform. Ultimately, this shift illustrates the transition from a perspective of prevention to a perspective of understanding.

¹ This expression becomes a sort of trademark of the new sociological literature. Frances R. Donovan's *The Saleslady* (1929), for example, is announced in advertisements with the slogan 'Life as it is lived behind the counter . . .'

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School

Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School
Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

'News': the reporter and the new

Ours, it seems, is an age of news, and one of the most important events in American civilisation has been the rise of the reporter.

Robert Ezra Park

NEWS: THE SYMBIOSIS OF BIG CITY AND PRESS

'So entirely absorbed do these urchins become in their vocation', wrote *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* about newspaper boys on 2 August 1856, 'that they keep up their cries along an entire block of buildings in which every house is closed and not a possible purchaser in sight.'

It is true to say that the occupation of newspaper boy offers the street urchin a most favourable constellation of two different circumstances: here, he can conveniently combine the need to earn his daily bread with a pleasure in making noise. The indignant tone of the subscription newspaper is not so much directed at the street urchins, who were themselves scarcely a new phenomenon. What is meant is rather the object which requires this kind of praise, an object for which the street urchins are sympathetic mediators. Just as the noisy newspaper boys stand out as different, so does the article which they are offering for sale. The news whose essence they proclaim so loudly is striking because it breaks through people's expectations of the normal course of affairs, drawing their attention to unusual facts and abnormal events. This understanding of news as something aiming at the atypical, the unexpected and the abnormal, is at the heart of the New Journalism which, in the 1830s, began to change fundamentally the nature of the press. It was not by chance that Park, in the context of the rise of New Journalism, spoke of the secularisation of the press. The partisan press, from which New Journalism breaks away, is a pulpit from which the publisher who holds the office of pontiff proclaims the political gospel to his readers. In consequence, as Park's student Helen MacGill Hughes (1940) puts it, news

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School
Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

turns into a sermon. Financed as a rule by political parties or party factions, the newspaper is the mouthpiece of these bodies; it is a sounding-board for factional views which are in democratic conflict with each other.

Right from the start, the rising mass-circulation press understands itself to be democratic in a quite different sense. Now it is no longer public discourse itself which is democratic, but the fact that everyone is potentially in a position to purchase and to understand the appropriate organ, the coincidence of what Habermas (1975) characterised as the economic and psychological facilitation of access. The slogan of the *New York Sun* in 1833, the first paper of the penny press to personify the New Journalism, summarises this perception: 'It shines for ALL!'

That the promise to be a newspaper for all was heralded in New York points to one of the necessary preconditions for the mass-circulation press, the existence of conurbations. However, it would be short-sighted to connect the existence of the mass-circulation press exclusively to the existence of the big city as its market; the big city is at the same time the place which continuously generates news. The feeling of mutual estrangement, which is regarded as a central characteristic of life in big cities, provides the material and also promotes sales. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first mass-circulation newspapers come into being at the historical moment when New York is emerging as a big cosmopolitan city.

With the penny press, which takes its name from its price, there now appears the sort of commercially run form of press that in the famous remark of Karl Bücher 'produces advertising space as a commodity which can only be sold through an editorial section'. As a commercially run press, the penny press necessarily disregards factional party views: in the beginning it does this quite aggressively, out of an understanding of democracy which links it to the market economy. Itself tied to this market economy, the mass-circulation press turns conventional wisdom on its head: the customer no longer finds his way as subscriber to the newspaper; the newspaper goes to look for its customers. The idea of a newspaper printing news merely because it is interesting to buyers (and not because it serves a political purpose) shocked contemporaries. Just how shocking this was is shown by the abuse heaped on the *Herald* by its rivals from the partisan press: 'obscene vagabond', 'profligate adventurer', 'unprincipled conductor' (Hapgood and Maurice 1902, p. 578). What, above all, separates the news policy of the early 'penny papers' from that of the political papers is the local type of news. The penny

press discovers the near-at-hand, but at the same time the abnormal and curious, as newsworthy material. This is where the symbiotic relationship, as Barth characterises it, between the modern press and the modern big city begins: the biggest press story of the nineteenth century is life in the big city itself (Barth 1980, p. 59). While the political newspapers restrict themselves to reporting political affairs, while the trade press informs its readership about wholesale prices, stock market quotations, exchange rates and events from all over the world relevant to business, the mass-circulation press, as a genuine organ of the big city (not representing any interests) makes big city life ('stories about town') its central theme. A characteristic genre of the penny press is the report from the police-courts, short scenes from summary trials, in which curious and picturesque persons, or at all events, persons from big city life who have become 'conspicuous', are pilloried in public.

With the report from the police-courts, the press, as Park emphasises, assumes the rôle once occupied by small-town gossip. With it begins also the history of that type of article which from a European viewpoint stands for American journalism in miniature: the human interest story, 'chatty little reports of comic incidents in the lives of the people' (Helen MacGill Hughes 1940, p. 147).

The 'new news' can only be understood in terms of the double meaning of the Anglo-American concept of 'news' as both news and novelty. A piece of news which, detached from its social, political and economic context, is supposed to be of interest in itself to a particular public, tends to be reduced to the formal category of novelty, and nothing more. Its beginnings are relatively modest: they correspond to the small-town gossip of the 'Have you heard?' type. However, these chatty little reports mark the beginning of a revolutionary change in what from now on is considered to be newsworthy: reports about people, institutions and events which are unfamiliar and unheard-of, which when measured by our own experiences, expectations and ideas, are unusual.

This is precisely what gives the mass-circulation press its opportunity as the mouthpiece of the big city. For what, it might well be asked, actually is familiar, ordinary and usual in the American big city of the nineteenth century? To an inhabitant, compared with the experiences he has brought with him as a migrant from the countryside or an immigrant from the Old World, everything is unusual and novel to begin with, not least the newspaper 'for all' itself. In this respect, the notion of a symbiotic relationship between mass-circulation press and big city makes

Cambridge University Press

0521440521 - The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School

Rolf Lindner

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sense, since the New Press is as much a product of the process of urbanisation as it is mediator and promoter. The new type of newspaper is a central institution and an instance of the transition from the traditional to the modern, represented as a transition from country to town, from the Old World to the New World.

The symbiotic relationship between press and big city is evident not least in the interrelationship between urbanisation and change in mentality. The process of internal, as opposed to external, urbanisation is driven forward by the big city press. Headlines and slogans not only appeal to the ready wit of the big city dweller, with his talent for quick and pointed responses, they also serve as model and material for this wit, both syntactically and semantically. In the manner of its publication (morning, evening, Sunday and extra editions) just as much as in its distribution (street sales), the big city press is the ideal synchronisation of urban forms of communication, perception and behaviour. Since not only does it insert itself into the unceasing succession of impressions but also, because of its understanding of news as novelty, it stimulates this succession, day after day, it is at the same time both expression and promoter of the 'intensification of living on your nerves' (Simmel 1957 [1903], p. 228), regarded as specific to big city life. The self-referential reporting – 'The New Reporter', 'A Night in a Metropolitan Newspaper Office', 'The Business of a Newspaper' – is evidence of the awareness of itself being 'news', i.e., being unusual and in need of explanation. Printed right next to reports about new big city institutions such as the department store, the vaudeville theatre or the big hotel, these reports are one more testimony to the symbiotic relationship between press and big city. The cries of the newspaper boys – which, as a German encyclopaedia at the turn of the century put it, systematically heighten the craving for novelties, a craving seen as a product of urban life – are themselves just as much part of the sensations perceived as being specific to the big city as the rhythm of the rotary printing machines is one of the symbols of the tempo of the big city, and the 'boiler shop' of the metropolitan editorial office is a symbol of its hectic pace.

Thus the big city press becomes both an expression and a symbol of the modern. Just as communications and transport systems are a means of accelerating things in general, their main function being to speed up circulation, so the press (which as an advertising medium serves to shorten circulation time) is a carrier of signs, a mental accelerator, which contributes to a radical transformation in the experience of these and to an increase in the speed of social turnover. Its understanding of news,

like the big city itself, is inscribed in the imperative of change, an imperative which gives its approval to change for change's sake.

In this way, the press contributes to the moulding of 'a new race of people', which, as Werner Sombart remarks, in its lack of restraint and restlessness, perceives change not as 'calamity', but on the contrary, 'wants' it. The new, as Benjamin diagnosed with respect to modernity in general – though the judgement can be applied to the news media in particular – becomes 'a quality which is independent of the use value of the commodity' (Benjamin 1983, vol. 1, p. 55). Expressed another way: the new *is* the use value.

A professional ideology of the new journalist, corresponding to this conception of news, was formed quite early on, presenting a mutation conditioned by the challenges of the big city and the demands of the job: the proverbial 'nose for news'. Having a 'nose for news' means tracking it down, being in the right place at the right time and recognising what is special about a situation. Since the deviant and abnormal is central to the way 'news' is understood, places which are full of news in this sense become advance posts of the New Journalism. The penny press, which was the first to discover the police-station and the courtroom as places which breed news, marks the beginning of the 'assignment' system.

But although the political-partisan conception of traditional journalism was undermined by the penny press, the partisan press itself did maintain its leading position at the national level until the American Civil War. Only after the Civil War, and helped along by innovations which are related to the reporting of the war – such as the introduction of a network of correspondents ('eye-witnesses') for instance – did the New Journalism achieve its breakthrough. The great era of the reporter was about to begin.

TYPES OF REPORTERS AND STYLES OF REPORTING

Like other professions which mark the beginning of a new era, the activity of the reporter at first became an object of satire. In March 1877, a comic strip appeared in the magazine *Puck* about 'The Great American Interviewer' (illustration 1), in which the reporter appears as a snooper, who literally as well as metaphorically pokes his nose into people's private affairs. In this satirical cartoon, the kinship between the reporter and the private detective (who appears on the stage of society at roughly the same time) is still openly expressed. What had undoubtedly at first