
A Review by Lee Harvey 15 May 1985

Bulmer set out to write the history of an institution, the ‘Chicago School’, and to show how it was important in the rise of sociological research during the first half of this century. He intends to offer something other than a series of biographies but admits that focusing on an institution is more challenging and problematic. The challenge is confronted via a reassessment of the ‘Chicago School’ and, using the school as a case study, a consideration of how the institutional framework of sociology developed.

A sub-plot runs throughout the text; that is the interdisciplinary nature of social science at Chicago. The link between the sociology department and other social science departments at Chicago, notably politics, is explored.

Bulmer uses a wide range of original documentary sources as well as standard secondary sources, and in so doing provides an excellently researched historical account of the work of sociologists and other social scientists at Chicago during the period from around 1915 to 1940. In some of the chapters he draws on and develops several earlier articles.

The book begins with a brief outline of the nature of the ‘Chicago School’, which leans heavily, and rather uncritically, on Tiryakian’s specification of a ‘school’. It goes on to point to the significance of the ‘School’ in early American sociology before analysing the interaction between the city and the university. Bulmer then examines the institutionalisation and establishment of the social sciences and the roles that Chicago and Columbia Universities played in the period up to 1930.

Bulmer argues that Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* was a major landmark of empirical sociology and that Thomas exercised a strong influence on Robert Park who was himself to be an influential teacher during the 1920s. Park’s role was primarily in the organisation of research at Chicago and in the encouragement and development of field research. The ‘Chicago School’, Bulmer maintains, was the first institution to pursue an integrated research programme.

Here he returns to the relationship between city and university for, he argues, the focus of attention of this research programme was the city of Chicago itself. This was not to say that the Chicagoans were simply ‘social reformers’. Rather the concern with the city grew out of a distancing of sociological research at Chicago from social surveys. The Chicagoans were concerned not with social reform but with the scientific analysis of how human societies functioned. Nor were they mere ‘urban sociologists’ concerned to account for the growth of the city. Bulmer’s full account clearly shows that the interests of the Chicagoans went much wider than urban sociology.

The link between the city and the university reappears in his analysis of the role of the Local Community Research Committee (1923–30). This period, Bulmer sees as a period of transition for the social sciences. The older style of work centring on the lone scholar was giving way to a more collaborative approach. Important in these changes were the growth of empirical research and the
organisation of graduate programmes. By 1930, the ‘Chicago School’ had a substantial reputation. Bulmer attributes this to its foremost role in the institutionalisation of sociology, both graduate training and the interdisciplinary organisation of research embodied in the Local Community Research Committee.

Apart from reassessing the extent to which the Chicagoans were involved in reformist social surveys and the development of an urban sociology he casts doubt on the centrality of Mead, and suggests that Chicago was not preoccupied with qualitative research. Indeed, two chapters are devoted to the elaboration of the ‘forgotten tradition’ of quantitative research at Chicago.

The last two chapters concentrate on the creative context that developed at Chicago and the ‘cross-disciplinary manifold’ that was so important in the blossoming of social science at the University. In conclusion, Bulmer argues that the ‘Chicago School’ was not concerned with a particular type of sociology but was rather committed to excellence in empirical research and was characterised by a considerable ‘intellectual and methodological diversity’. In the last analysis, the ‘Chicago School’ was significant because it was successful in bridging the gap between theory and empirical research.

Bulmer set out to write a history of an institution and, given the difficulties of the task he set himself has been successful. Inevitably he could not avoid biographical detail altogether, but the sketches he offers of leading figures are more by way of adding detail than they are of constituting the core of the research endeavour. He does not let himself get trapped by a ‘great man’ approach to the history of sociology, although reliance on Tiryakian’s model of a school and associated roles leads him dangerously close to relinquishing his institutional focus. However, by concentrating on interdisciplinary links, formal and informal organisations and relating these both to the Chicago context and the wider development of social science, he maintains a consistent institutional focus.

While not ignoring them, Bulmer, surprisingly, says relatively little about either the role of the Social Science Research Committee (the successor to the Local Community Research Committee) and its links with the Social Science Research Council, or about the Society for Social Research. Both would seem to be important for an institutionally oriented study, and both also seemed to have been far more important in the development of sociological theory and in epistemological debates than, for example, the Local Community Research Committee. This reservation does not, however, in any way undermine the enormous value of the work. Nor, given its broad sweep, would any criticism of Bulmer’s general characterisation of American sociology. Indeed, while some of his generalisations are possibly contentious and his assertion of Chicago’s twenty years dominance of the discipline (from 1915) rather too adamant, Bulmer’s grasp of the historical period and his extensive analysis of it are probably unparalleled.

The book is very readable indeed. It is packed with evidence yet the line of argument remains clear. It is an excellent contribution to the history of sociology, and provides a very clear picture of Chicago sociology.