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The Chicago School

A Liberal Critique of Capitalism

Dennis Smith

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 The Chicago Tradition and its Critics	1
A beginner's guide	1
The men and the themes	4
The argument	7
A vigorous tradition	9
The radical critique	14
1126 and 1929	21
2 Dimensions of Liberalism	29
The wicked city	29
New discipline, new department, new city	31
To Germany	34
Back to America	38
Capitalism and culture	44
Simmel and Veblen	47
3 Making America Work	57
Pragmatism	59
Veblen and Dewey	65
Strategies for change	71
4 Albion Small	75
Preach! preach! preach!	75
A laboratory guide	79
Against individualism	85

5	W. I. Thomas	92
	From coercion to cooperation	92
	Thomas and Small	97
	<i>The Polish Peasant</i>	102
	The quest for control	105
	Aftermath	108
6	Robert Park	111
	Sociology and the real world	111
	The big picture	115
	Intellectual influences	120
	Faces, races, places	123
	The comforts of paradox	127
	The press and the public mind	129
	Questions, not answers	131
7	From Park to Parsons	134
	The rebellion against Chicago	134
	From ecology to functionalism	136
	Talcott Parsons and Chicago	140
	Parting of the ways	144
	The tide from Europe	147
	Freud and Marx	149
8	Louis Wirth	153
	First generation, second generation	153
	<i>The Ghetto</i>	154
	The promise of America	156
	Objectivity and the intellectual	158
	From pessimism to optimism	161
9	William Ogburn	167
	More measurement	167
	Social trends and democracy	169
	Knowledge and values	170
	Freedom and organisation	173
	Science and social change	175
	Happiness	180

10	Morris Janowitz	184
	The persuaders	184
	Back to Germany	185
	The modern military	188
	Macrosociology	191
	Prejudice and control	193
	Life at the local level	197
	Enlightenment and social control	201
	Beyond selfishness	204
11	Is Our Republic to Fail?	211
	A static agenda	211
	Unfinished business	213
	Janowitz and Habermas	214
	<i>Bibliography</i>	221
	<i>Index</i>	237

For my father

Preface

The front cover of this book depicts Liberty with her torch. In the mid-1880s she was delivered by her European creators to the American Ambassador in Paris. While this book was under way, the rusting statue was given a clean-up and general refurbishment followed by a magnificent firework display. These events celebrated the centenary of the original arrival in New York of Liberty in 1886. Apparently, it was a good deal easier to raise the cash for the fireworks than for the clean-up and refurbishment. Albion Small, the founding professor of Chicago University's sociology department, might well have found that rather symbolic. In fact, cleaning-up and refurbishing American liberty in its various expressions was a central objective of his life's work. He became very disillusioned.

This book discusses the dilemmas and pitfalls confronting Small and a number of other Chicago sociologists who tried to construct a morally-relevant and socially-useful academic discipline. They took very seriously the goals and values lauded as 'the American Way' and wrestled with their ambiguities. In doing so they often came up with conclusions which were unsympathetic to 'vested interests' and dedicated individualists. In other words, being a good American did not mean that you necessarily agreed with the person on the streetcar reading *The Chicago Tribune* – still less with those who owned the streetcar company and the newspaper house.

Jack P. Diggins has recently speculated on the form that the American declaration of Independence might take if it were rewritten by the sociologists: 'We hold these truths to be socially conditioned: that all men are created equal and mutually dependent . . . ' and so on (Diggins, 1979, p. 482). The point is that their

intellectual and moral location within the tradition of American liberalism provided the Chicago sociologists to be studied here with a critical perspective upon modern American society. However, it also imposed limits upon that critique. Some of these limits become more clearly visible when a comparative perspective is adopted. Like the statue, the rhetoric of 'liberty' was originally European. The fate of liberalism in Europe has been different. The European comparison, especially with Germany, has been stressed here in order to emphasise the extent to which the perceptions of men like Albion Small, W. I. Thomas, Robert Park, Louis Wirth, William Ogburn and Morris Janowitz have been shaped by the fact that they are Americans as well as the fact that they are sociologists.

During a visit to Chicago in 1983, I met Morris Janowitz, Gerald Suttles and Albert Hunter. My conversations with them provided valuable background and insights. Needless to say, they are absolved from any responsibility for the argument of this book. At Chicago I enjoyed the warm hospitality of Bert Hoselitz, his wife Gunhild and their daughter Ann. Their unstinting kindness was greatly appreciated.

Once again, many thanks to Tanya, Penny, Sue, Ed, Freda and Cleo for their benevolent interest. Ian and Butch Riddell were also tolerant and supportive. In particular, I am grateful for the many expert and insightful comments of Val Riddell, head of American Studies at Nene College, Northampton.

D. S.