

Chicago Schools of Thought: Disciplines as Skewed Bureaucratized Intellect ¹

Eugene Halton

“Today most of our larger academic institutions are as thoroughly automated as a steel-rolling mill or a telephone system: the mass production of scholarly papers, discoveries, inventions, patents, students, Ph.D.’s, professors, and publicity...goes on at a comparable rate; and only those who identify themselves with the goals of the power system, however humanly absurd, are in line for promotion, for big research grants, for the political power and the financial rewards allotted to those who ‘go with’ the system.”

— Lewis Mumford (1970: 181).

Ignorance, Bliss, and Orthodoxy

DURING THE SUMMER after my first year as a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the Committee on Human Development in 1974, I took my virtually blank slate mind to Philadelphia for the summer, and spent my days at the library trying to read up on symbols. I was embarking on a study of the meaning of things—on the meanings of household possessions—and I needed to develop a broad-based theory of signs and meaning.

I had the great fortune denied to most graduate students to have to figure it out for myself, and I embarked on a course that summer that would lead me to my own explorations into pragmatism and Chicago thought, and to the symbolic anthropologists of Chicago, such as Victor Turner and Milton Singer. My ignorance was truly bliss, for it endowed me then and later in those anthropology courses brimming with incredibly clever students, with a deep sense of how much I needed to find out, and of how finding one’s own way, though the road may be bumpy, may lead to discoveries not on the roadmaps of the academy.

That summer, not knowing what I was supposed to be looking for, I stumbled on to the work of Hugh Dalziel Duncan. He was born in 1903 and died in 1970, and lived most of that time as an independent scholar in Chicago, apparently from monies made in real estate. His first regular university appointment was not until 1965, at Southern Illinois University, in the sociology and English departments. While there, he and his wife Minna commissioned a masterpiece house from the architect Bruce Goff, a younger protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright. During that span of roughly five years between his appointment and his death a number of his books were published. The first one I read that summer was *Symbols and Social Theory*, published in 1969, which seemed a good starting point given that I was looking for

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a social theory of symbols. This was “Chicago sociology” and “symbolic interactionism,” although I didn’t know that until I dug into it.

There I read about the usual suspects of sociological theory, Weber and the others, but informed by a perspective on symbolic action. Section five, titled “The Emergence of Symbolic Interaction Theory in American Sociology” started with a discussion of Ogden and Richards’ classic 1923 book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, which included supplementary works by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski on the context of situation and Charles Peirce on semiotic. Duncan went on to describe the way the pragmatists situated meaning in the act. I went on to read other works of his, including his 1962 book, *Communication and Social Order*, which again included a wide range of theorists, extended discussion of the work of critic Kenneth Burke, and Duncan’s extended discussions of art and of comedy and social integration. I now realize that this was my intellectual mother’s milk that summer, that these found works helped me to form an image of a philosophically, anthropologically, humanistically informed social science as what I wanted to learn.



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My ignorance helped me tremendously by allowing me to believe that Duncan’s work was a representative statement of sociology, rather than a book that must have seemed outmoded by the newer, slicker breed of academic sociologist, and a book that now in retrospect looks like the pioneering effort it was. I remember when I taught in the social science core course at the University of Chicago while still a graduate student in 1979, how a sociologist responded to my saying that I had been writing on Peirce, Dewey, Mead and pragmatism by observing, “How quaint.” The sociological revival of philosophically-informed pragmatism I would help usher in was not yet visible.

In the 1960s anthropologists at the University of Chicago such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Milton Singer, Marshall Sahlins and others were busy developing new approaches to culture and symbols that sociologists would appropriate in watered-down fashion a couple of decades later. But there was Duncan, writing throughout that same period a perspective on symbols, communication, and conduct that drew not only from his University of Chicago traditions, but from a broader sense of the culture and life of Chicago. He got to know Frank Lloyd Wright, and acquired Louis Sullivan tiles from buildings that had been torn down that he embedded in his shower in his Carbondale “castle,” as I discovered when I stayed in the house a few years ago. His sprawling book, *Culture and Democracy: The Struggle for Form in Society and Architecture in Chicago and the Middle West during the Life and Times of Louis H. Sullivan*, is a massive compendium drawing from a wealth of literary, architectural, philosophic, and social science sources. I find that I don’t agree with a number of his positions, and his

friend and mentor Kenneth Burke rightly recommended editing it down. Yet looking through that book recently, I was impressed by its sheer freedom, its freedom to wander intellectually. This is precisely the freedom that academic scholars so often deny themselves.

Earlier pedants, over a century ago, called Simmel a dilettante for his wide-ranging writings. Rule number one of the academy might be: good fences make good disciplines. These days the rule has been updated to: good inter-disciplines make good disciplines. But the relation of a discipline to research can often be arbitrary. Duncan did not have an academic position until the last five years of his life, and I suspect his abilities as a generalist might have kept him outside of university employment for so long. Generalists can often threaten specialists. I remember Morris Janowitz from the University of Chicago sociology department insinuating that Duncan was not hireable because he was outside the proper mold of a sociologist. You certainly don't see his name coming up in the histories of sociology: those canonical and orthodox works seldom venture from the world of academics employed as sociologists in universities, or what I prefer to call more simply, "The Club."

Members Only

I began to develop my interests in varieties of Chicago thought against the best wishes of the University of Chicago, and in fact, only by using great resistance to the university. Though the Committee on Human Development actively punished anyone attempting to pursue theoretical interests, it was sufficiently disorganized to enable me to explore courses in other departments that I felt necessary to my development.

I audited Donald Levine's sociology courses on the history of social thought and on Simmel and Weber, and found the ideas he exposed me to exactly what I needed at the time. I was tearing into philosophy and social theory on my own, exploring, among other things, the then disregarded origins of philosophical pragmatism in Peirce, and Levine's courses amply demonstrated the connections between philosophical and sociological traditions I was seeking. The breadth of interests one saw in the work of Simmel and Weber, and Levine's teaching of that range, confirmed for me that the world of the intellect I was entering—and sociology in particular—could encompass a philosophically informed outlook for social thought.

So armed with my enthusiasm and naiveté, I finally signed up for my first registered sociology course, taught by Morris Janowitz. Early on, Janowitz had invited Edward Shils to the class to speak about John Dewey and pragmatism. Now, unlike the sociology graduate students I encountered in the mid-seventies, I had been steeping myself in the works of all of the pragmatists, meeting them on my own terms without the official roadmaps provided by the education system and sociological and philosophical canons. Perhaps it is more fair to say that there were no real roadmaps, really, at least not at the University of Chicago then. Pragmatism had died there by the early 1930s. There had been a revival of Chicago ethnography

at the end of the 60s, but the earlier Chicago pragmatism and social thought was absent, even though Mead was becoming a more significant figure in sociology.

There had been a course offered on Charles Peirce in the philosophy department—only offered, in fact, at the urging of a friend of mine who was a student in the philosophy department. But I found it so dry, it was not nearly as helpful as a private reading group some friends and I formed in Hyde Park, reading line by line in weekly meetings. And no one was teaching Dewey or Mead. There was no interest in the philosophy department in teaching Chicago home-grown pragmatism, and none that I had seen in the sociology department either. So I looked forward to Shils's talk.

But Shils surprised me in presenting an image of Dewey as an individualist, and pragmatism as a tradition of "rugged" American individualism. When it was time for questions, none were forthcoming from the docile sociology students, who were already schooled that raising critical questions was not in their best career interests in that sociology class. So I, again with naïve enthusiasm, politely questioned Shils about his interpretation, and suggested that the focus of Dewey's thought in general, and even in that work in particular, had been to develop a thoroughly socially based public philosophy, rooted in habits of conduct. Shils argued back, truculently, that Dewey was an individualist, citing Dewey's discussions of habit in the book *Human Nature and Conduct*. I replied that, in my opinion, Dewey's sense of habit, like Mead's, was framed within an understanding of the social act, and that one could see this even going back to his 1896 article on "The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology," which argued that the "arc" should be reconceived socially as a "cycle" growing out of prior acts rather than some raw, unconditioned, and individual "stimulus."

In my naiveté and enthusiasm, I had unknowingly broken some rules, because Janowitz cut me off at that point, saying caustically, "Sometimes too much philosophy is too much." Apparently one of the rules I had broken was that one should never question a Great Man like Edward Shils. He had been brought to the class to bestow knowledge, not search for it, as he had made clear in the condescending tone of his response to my questions, and as Janowitz had made clear in his rude way of cutting me off. I realized in that moment that whatever else they might have to say of value in their writings, Janowitz had revealed himself to me as close-minded, just as Shils had revealed himself as a know-it-all, closed to a potential learning experience because locked in the security blanket of a brand name professorship at a brand name university. I immediately dropped that course and continued to pursue my own course. Thankfully I never ended-up taking a graduate sociology course for credit.

I was fortunate enough not to be a student in that sociology department, which would have utterly stifled my free intellectual development and any interest I had in sociology or pragmatism or American thought. Instead, I had the Committee on Human Development attempt to punish my interests in theory and in pursuing original research, initially rejecting my preliminary examination because the first answer dealt with a nineteenth-century (and therefore obsolete in the opinion of one examiner), philosopher named Charles Peirce and his semiotic, or theory of signs;

and initially rejecting my dissertation proposal, because, as one reader who had not read the proposal in advance of the meeting put it, she could not understand why I would want to pursue a topic that had not already been written about. Ironically my prelim exam was given to another reader who recommended it for honors, and a revised, enlarged version of that same answer appears in my book, *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude*. The completed version of that initially failed dissertation proposal was published as *The Meaning of Things*, and has gone through numerous printings and four translations. It is regarded as a “keystone” work in material culture studies. I learned much about how trying to think for oneself is a potentially punishable offense. But it was not simply those departments or those individuals—who knows, perhaps I caught them on bad days—those experiences are endemic to the academy, then and now, and its “disciplining” of thought.

I mention these examples to provide a little background on why I am skeptical about attempts to locate histories of social thought solely within academic parameters of disciplines. Today it is simply a false idealism to see universities as great repositories of free speech and so-called academic freedom. Academic freedom usually translates as precisely that: freedom to be academic, to speak the expected truths of the academy while ignoring the world outside.

Actually it is worse than this. For universities are places where graduate students are “trained,” as academics like to say (or, as ranchers say about their horses, “broken”) into particular avenues of thought, always reminded of the disciplinary or interdisciplinary boundaries they should not cross. These days the disciplinary boundaries are supposed to be much looser, but the reins of accepted ideas seem to me to be even tighter. Like American society more broadly, there is a state of what I would term *pluralistic conformism*. Corporate standards of invidious comparison predominate, and intellectual life is largely reduced to thinking and being ranked within the box.

What I learned from Janowitz and Shils that day, and which has been repeated in countless ways on other occasions, is that there is a club with strict membership rules, which operates in stark contrast to the norms of the egalitarian community of inquiry that is supposed to constitute science. And you are either a member or you are not. If you want to be a member, you must perform the degrading initiation rituals, whose purpose is to get you on board. If you are not a member you will be treated as an inferior. If you are a member, you may hope to gather the sacred badges of distinction which will admit you to the inner circle of the mutual admiration society. The price of admission to the club is simply that you go docile when you are expected to do so: good training results in what Thorstein Veblen termed a “trained incapacity.” Orthodoxy trumps excellence. I chose not to enter the club more by instinct than by conscious choice. My guts told me that it is better to bridle than to be broken.

Fluctuating Histories and Iron Cages

And so I found myself bristling when I saw Morris Janowitz's name associated with "pragmatistic sociology" in Donald Levine's book, *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995). Clearly Janowitz was a practitioner of Chicago sociology, but to claim that he practiced something that could be called "pragmatistic sociology," as Levine and James Burk—who wrote the introduction to a collection of Janowitz's writings—do is mistaken, in my opinion. So too is Burk's claim, which Levine follows, that pragmatism represents a "flux" view of reality, for to say that, one must ignore the glaring fact that the founder of pragmatism, Charles Peirce, devoted a great deal of his writing to developing the opposite view: that reality is what it is independently of what particular individuals conceive it to be. But textbook thinking tends to be Procrustean, lopping ideas to fit the accepted canon.

Admittedly the meaning of pragmatism varies in the early pragmatists, but surely the founder's view needs to be considered, especially because Peirce's semiotic conception of reality is so crucial to his philosophy. Could one discuss core psychoanalytic ideas without Freud? And were it not for his being blackballed for being divorced, Peirce might have been the first chair of philosophy at the University of Chicago, a position which went to Dewey.

One might say that Peirce's conception of reality is that which will "socially construct" its community of interpreters in the long run, as the object of an inquiry.²

² Let us consider, for example, what anti-foundationalism, so prominent in contemporary intellectual life, means in the context of a Peircean theory of reality. From a Peircean perspective there is no certain knowledge, but only fallible knowledge, that is, though one may experience innumerable truths in everyday life or science, one's knowledge of any particular truth always remains an opinion subject to correction by the continuing community of inquiry (which also includes oneself).

Peirce showed why Descartes' attempt to rid himself of prejudices to arrive at an indubitable foundation of knowledge based on intuition (in the technical sense, as dyadic knowledge), was unnecessary for science because inquiries are not secured by foundations but rather by the continuing process of inquiry itself. This idea also pervades Peirce's understanding of semeiotic (in the sense that every thought addresses a future thought), of pragmatism (the meaning of a concept is its conceivable effects upon future conduct—and thought itself is a form of conduct) and of the concept of reality. His realism is the opposite of both sides of modern nominalistic "flux" views of reality—of "scientific realism" and of conceptual relativism, as the following quotation illustrates:

"The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase in knowledge."

Here truth itself is a concept subject to possible correction, like any other concept: it cannot claim special privileges but must meet the same logical requirements. The "objectivity" of truth is intrinsically involved in a community of interpretation, the "subjectivity" of truth must yet ever align itself with its object, the real, through the possibility of further interpretation.

If truth is that opinion fated to be arrived upon by the community of interpretation through sufficient inquiry, there is also a sense in which it determines its interpreters. If inquiry is a self-correcting process, in which hypotheses are imagined, tested in experiment or experience, and corrected, in which opinions are formed, revised, and improved to accord more and more with the general reality under investigation, then it is in that sense that the truth, the general law, moves the

Yet admitting such a view by no means precludes admitting the flux of life, the definition of situations, the social construction of selves and societies, which concerned Chicago pragmatists and the three early sociologists Levine concentrates on in his chapter devoted to the American tradition: Charles Horton Cooley, W. I. Thomas, and Robert Park.

The pragmatists did indeed stress a processual view of conduct, and of interpretation as a form of conduct, but there are basic differences between Peirce the founder, and James, Dewey, and Mead, on questions of reality, of science, and of the meaning of pragmatism itself. Peirce held that the meaning of a concept is its *conditional* bearing on conduct, and to reduce meaning to actual conduct is to nominalize Peirce's semiotic realism. Reality itself is a conditional, a would-be, a general, a sign, not an existent or particular.

Science itself, Peirce claimed, was inadequate as a guide to living, a view at odds with the other pragmatists. Ironically Peirce, the one truly "hard" scientist of the pragmatists, and the one who preserved a distinction between theory and practice that the others sought to erase, was also the one who most saw that practical living needed to be rooted in something more than scientifically-rooted critical inquiry: it also needed common-sense. And that is why he termed his outlook "critical common-sensism," a wedding of Kantian critical philosophy with Scottish common-sensism, producing an outlook in which we have, as social beings, ideas which are indubitable (because so deep in our bio-cultural and historical background it does not occur to us to doubt them), yet fallible (still open to doubt and critical revision when they become conscious). "Common-sense" is a concept held in disrepute these days, but when placed in other contexts, such as Gadamer's discussions of "prejudices" as a ground for action, it reveals an interesting way of conceiving the grounds of belief and their relation to critical doubt and inquiry, and of linking the two in a theory of human conduct. It is the stuff of social thought, and of pragmatistic sociology.

In my graduate student inquiries into pragmatism and Chicago thought, I took a route in many ways opposite to that sociologists take. I began with Peirce, with

inquiry toward itself, and so determines its inquirers, determines the valid interpretations that they would be led toward during the course of inquiry. Something like this is the sense Peirce meant.

The law of gravity gradually takes shape over time in the interpretations of its inquirers, their opinions being gradually corrected. This seems to me the easier type of inquiry to understand, and given that Peirce was a natural scientist, it's understandable why his terminology is couched in physical types of examples. In this sense the law of gravity is a "social construction," as the fallible opinion of the community of inquirers, but that community of inquirers is also its social construction.

But what of cultural inquiry, for example, where the object of inquiry is a work of art, a custom, or some other social construction? Here the criterion for truth seems to me to shift more toward its multivocal or perspectival nature or completeness, rather than something like quantitative accuracy.

Or consider interpretative situations where beauty matters more than truth—such as different ways of voicing lines of a play, or of genuinely realizing its characters. Yet it still seems to me that truth can still determine its interpreters in such cases, so that whatever the nature of a particular work of art is, it can speak its voices to its perceptive interpreters—and that great works of art have a kind of openness in their particular natures which can speak truth to interpretations not even originally intended in them: perhaps this is what is meant by saying that great art lives.

nitty-gritty readings of his complicated ideas, then moved to James, Dewey, Mead, and Veblen, then more broadly to Chicago sociology and Chicago thought—not limited to the University of Chicago but including Jane Addams and Hull House, Frank Lloyd Wright’s writings, Theodore Dreiser—and lastly to the sociological tradition known as symbolic interactionism. I had seen that Duncan was able to discuss all of this unproblematically, so it seemed that steeping myself in the philosophical background should be unproblematic. But I also came to feel that the academic sociological elements in that progression represented in a number of ways a diminution of thought.

The growing scientism in Dewey, Mead, and University of Chicago sociologists left them overly optimistic in the face of the forces at work in the 20th century, blind to the enormous destructiveness and dehumanizing energies science and technology could release: their progressivist optimism was proved wrong in the end. If only they and all the even more ardent enthusiasts of science as a way of life in the twentieth-century, ranging from Marxist ideologues and other social engineers to city planners and architects, could have seen why scientific method is inadequate as a basis for practical life, perhaps we could have been spared the many excesses their social experiments spawned.

This is not to deny that “Chicago pragmatism” still holds value. When compared to the positivist and analytical schools which replaced it and the so-called “neopragmatism” of today it provides a much richer theory of meaning. Recent “neopragmatists” such as Richard Rorty may talk Dewey, but it is a “Dewey” divested of experience and human nature, two categories central to Dewey’s thought. The vision of sociological traditions which Levine presents is precisely rendered and has a philosophical depth missing from most sociological accounts, particularly the discussions of the early origins of the various national and intellectual traditions. But as the story moves closer to the present, especially in the American context, “sociological tradition” becomes identified with academic sociology. In the end, there is a double vision: one of an interesting history of social thought, and one of an uncritical acceptance of sociology as a purely academic discipline. Perhaps it is partially a problem of economy of space, given the broad panorama of national traditions he considers, but I do not think that explains it. Despite Levine’s careful attention to different theoretical traditions, academic orthodoxy triumphs over theoretical polyphony.

Why, for example, does Nietzsche figure in the treatment of the German tradition while Emerson, who was an influence on Nietzsche, receives no discussion as one of the progenitors of the American tradition? It was Emerson after all who proposed the terms of “The American Scholar,” stating in the essay of that title, “In the right state he is *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.”

I wondered why Thorstein Veblen, who was at the University of Chicago during the first years of the sociology department, or Lewis Mumford, or C. Wright Mills (who is only mentioned briefly in a couple of places) found no place in this history? I had discovered Mumford on my own as a grad student, and found to my

amazement that despite his place as a public intellectual, he was virtually invisible to sociologists and their disciplining textbooks, and remains so. Or why, for that matter, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, or William H. Whyte's *Organization Man* were excluded? Those people and works provided theoretical insights into American culture and modern society far outstripping the techno-babble of Talcott Parsons, in my opinion. But Parsons was king of the club I suppose, a true role model for the academicizing down of the American mind: the complete antithesis of Emerson's conception of "the American Scholar." Parsons' presence and Mumford's absence showed me what was wrong with sociology's academic self-portrait.

In his book, *The Last Intellectuals* (1987), Russell Jacoby has described the exodus of public intellectuals; a process which went into an accelerated state in the 1950s as rapidly expanding universities absorbed them and consolidated academic control of intellectual life. Jacoby shows how what followed was precisely what Emerson described as a "degenerate state," one in which the American scholar was reduced to the status of a specialized functionary of disciplinary (and later postdisciplinary) knowledge: to a highly articulate, if largely unintelligible to the broader public, parrot. There is a stark contrast between Jacoby's account of the social sciences and Levine's and similar textbooks, and it hinges on the appreciation of public life and its significance for the life of the intellectual. Levine never critically questions the role of the university in the development of American thought in general or of the discipline of sociology in particular. And that is a stark contrast to Veblen's biting book, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*. Veblen originally wanted to subtitle his book, *A Study in Total Depravity!*

Despite his deep understanding of Weber, Levine never questions whether the development of academic sociology may simply have been bureaucratization at work: one chapter among many in the disciplinary bureaucratization of mind. In his concluding chapters, he draws attention to the collapse of belief in disciplinary knowledge in recent years, admitting that "the form of sociology no longer appears to satisfy the sociologist's quest for meaning" (299), and that new ways of conceiving social thought need to be made. But he does not ask whether the very disciplinary boundaries themselves (and the thinkers they contained) may have been distortions which led to the impasse. Ultimately Levine's work itself, like textbook histories of the discipline, remains both a product of, and contribution to, bureaucratized sociology.

Admitting that academic disciplines represent skewed forms of bureaucratized intellect rather than progressive traditions, in my opinion, allows one to admit those who are not members of the club—"Man Thinking" and not only "mere thinkers"—into the dialogue of social thought and the social sciences. It allows one to admit Emerson to the tradition of the American scholar, to admit Peirce's contributions as a yet unfinished project to social thought, to admit Jane Addams and Helen Gates Starr and Florence Kelly of Hull House and William T. Stead, author of the 1894 book involving some social surveys, *If Christ Came to Chicago*, into their rightful place in the origins of Chicago sociology. It allows the masterful work of a former editor of *The Sociological Review*, Lewis Mumford, who

had to drop out of college from illness and never received a college degree, to be admitted to American social thought. It allows one to admit the crucial significance of the writings of Vaclav Havel to contemporary social thought, instead of merely listing the expected roll call of club members from the international academic theory cartel. Better still, it would free sociology from its auto-isolating iron cage, and allow it back into the public dialogue of social thinking—assuming that the door of the cage is not already too rusted to open.

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