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Book Review: The City by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess

Andrew Karvonen revisits the classic urban studies book **The City by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess**, originally published in 1925, and argues that contemporary scholars can take inspiration from the bold scientific agenda promoted by these influential authors from the Chicago school of sociology.

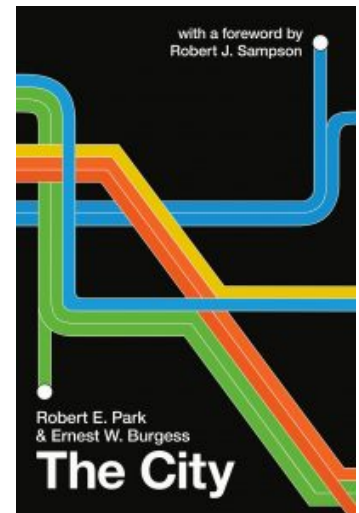
The City. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (with a new foreword by Robert J. Sampson). University of Chicago Press. 2019.

Every academic discipline has classic texts that introduce new perspectives or challenge dominant ideologies. These books are required reading for those who aspire to be experts in a particular field of study and serve as common currency when engaging with other scholars. Within the diverse and ever-expanding field of urban studies, the shortlist of foundational volumes often includes Ebenezer Howard's [Garden Cities of To-morrow](#), Lewis Mumford's [The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects](#), Jane Jacobs's [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#), Kevin Lynch's [The Image of the City](#) and Peter Hall's [Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century](#). *The City* by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, originally published in 1925, is another book that is frequently included in this list of urban studies classics.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, Park and Burgess were leading figures in the highly influential Chicago school of sociology. Their ambition in publishing *The City* was to demonstrate how cities can serve as a useful lens to study the human condition while simultaneously establishing urban sociology as a legitimate scientific discipline. In the foreword to this second reprinting, sociologist Robert J. Sampson argues that the book is particularly relevant in the contemporary era because cities (and by extension, the study of cities) are rapidly evolving. Indeed, the heady mix of austerity and inequality, climate change and disruption, digitalisation and social networks, and public health and contagion is having a profound influence on urban development and how urban scholars study these dynamics. Thus, it is an opportune moment to look back to *The City* for inspiration about the impetus for studying cities in all of their complexity and contradictions. As Park argues:

a great city tends to spread out and lay bare to the public view in a massive manner all the human characters and traits which are ordinarily obscured and suppressed in smaller communities (45-6).

The book largely comprises chapters by Park but also includes a handful by Burgess as well as Roderick D. McKenzie and Louis Wirth, all of them noted members of the Chicago school of urban sociology. The authors provide a wide range of comprehensive and engaging perspectives on the state of sociological thinking about cities in the 1920s. A common thread throughout the volume is an emphasis on 'associated existence' (99) and the various ways in which humans and the built environment come together in the growing metropolis. Such a relational perspective reflects a growing interest in the changing patterns of work, home life, recreation and travel due to the rise of capitalism and the subsequent recasting of connections between the individual, the family, the neighbourhood and government. Readers will undoubtedly see clear parallels with contemporary issues related to immigration, economic inequality, smart cities, resilience and a host of other issues.





The most valuable chapters in the book are those written by Park, with general insights on the drivers and characteristics of urban development as well as thematic chapters on community organisation, the influence of journalism on local politics and the importance of overlooked urban residents including homeless people, immigrants and juvenile delinquents. Park emphasises community as a unique achievement of the modern city when compared to pre-modern human settlements. He argues that:

the community, then, is the name given to this larger and most inclusive social milieu, outside of ourselves, our family, and our immediate neighbourhood, in which the individual maintains not merely existence as an individual, but his life as a person (104).

In contrast, the chapters by Burgess and McKenzie are less relevant to contemporary urban scholarship due to their promotion of ecological and biological concepts as explanatory mechanisms for urban development. This 'urban ecology' perspective was developed and followed by many Chicago school scholars but has largely been debunked as reductionist and overly simplistic in the intervening decades. However, Burgess's concentric diagrams of the urban growth of Chicago continue to play an important role in the history of urban scientific inquiry.

Readers who are looking for rich, detailed descriptions of Chicago and other cities of the early twentieth century will be disappointed. The authors emphasise the importance of using the city as a laboratory to generate empirical data (an idea that has re-emerged with a vengeance in the last decade), but surprisingly, none of the chapters provide comprehensive accounts of the urban experience during this intriguing time period. Instead, they include brief vignettes of Chicago and other American cities as a means to develop and promote general principles of urban sociology. The authors refer to European cities in passing as a counterexample to American urbanisation trends while the rest of the world is largely ignored. An annotated bibliography compiled by Wirth comprises almost a third of the book. While the list is laborious to read, it provides a comprehensive and sometimes illuminating summary of English and German texts of the day from sociology as well as geography, history, economics, political science and civil engineering. The majority of these texts are long forgotten but the bibliography reminds readers of the lasting and diverse interest in the study of urban development.

Is *The City* an urban studies classic that we should all revisit 95 years after it was first published? Or is it an antiquated text that should be reserved for only the most ardent of urban studies scholars? From my perspective, Park's introductory chapter is essential reading for all scholars of cities because it establishes a research agenda that continues to be an inspiration. Bringing the sociological imagination to cities was a brave and innovative endeavour in the early twentieth century and Park's writings provide a vitality and urgency to fuel the creative impulses of contemporary urban scholarship. The remaining chapters of the book are not essential reading but they do provide fascinating, if somewhat dated, insights for those who are interested in the evolution of urban thought in the early twentieth century. Of particular importance is how the volume served to solidify urban sociology as a legitimate scientific discipline. As Park argues, 'sociology is ceasing to be a mere philosophy and is assuming more and more the character of an empirical, if not exact, science' (110). Ultimately, the book provides a compelling snapshot of this critical period in the development of urban studies as a discipline and demonstrates how cities have captivated researchers as an object of endless intrigue and fascination.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Photograph of Chicago, US (Photo by [Sawyer Bengtson](#) on [Unsplash](#)).
