

## The Art of Not Doing Fieldwork

### Maurice Halbwachs' failed encounter with the Chicago School

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**Reviewed:** Maurice Halbwachs, *Écrits d'Amérique* (édition établie et présentée par Christian Topalov), Éditions EHESS, 2012, 453 p., 27.40€.

In the fall of 1930, the well-known French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs came to Chicago, invited by the esteemed University of Chicago Sociology Department, to teach for three months. He wrote letters to his wife Yvonne, and to friends and professional colleagues, most of them describing his day-to-day activities and impressions of the second largest city in the United States. He wrote eight articles for *Le Progrès*, a socialist daily newspaper in Lyon (he didn't sign his name to them, just the initials MH), while he was in the U.S. or on the boat coming back. He wrote two scholarly articles on one of his favorite topics, the budgets of working class families, one devoted to American budgets, the other comparing family budgets in the United States and Germany. Finally, he gave a detailed account of what he had learned about Chicago while he was there, from his own investigations and from reading what the Chicago faculty and their students had produced in the period starting before World War I until he arrived, in a sort of review article published in the *Annales* in 1932.

Christian Topalov has gathered all this material, edited it into publishable form, and provided copious annotations, identifying all the people who Halbwachs writes to and about, and explaining Halbwachs' allusions to Chicago history, politics and landmarks. (I'm a Chicago

native but I learned many things I hadn't known before from these extensive notes.) Topalov's detailed and knowledgeable scholarship makes the book far more useful than it would otherwise be; he leaves few facts unexplained. His unobtrusive interpretations leave some work for the reader to do, but generally provide a sound and informative introduction to the materials. His strategy, giving readers the entire record, lets us see what impressions and facts this distinguished visitor from the Old Country absorbed during his short stay, and the different ways he reported them to different audiences. Topalov's detailed introductory essay points readers toward the important and useful things to be found in what follows.

### **The Sociologist as a Tourist**

Halbwachs met the men who would be credited with making the Chicago department famous, the most important being the statistician William Fielding Ogburn; the early graduate of the department's first incarnation, Ernest W. Burgess; and Robert E. Park, the one-time journalist with a German Ph.D., who had been the ghostwriter for the black political leader Booker T. Washington, and then spent his later years as the dynamic leader of an informal research network of considerable size, centered in the Chicago sociology department but including people from most of the social sciences. That research network, built around Park and his students, produced the great array of monographs and articles that let the world know that "the Chicago School" had created a new, empirical sociology, whose results could be read in the *American Journal of Sociology* and in the impressive series of dissertations published by the University of Chicago Press. Oddly enough, Halbwachs did not meet Ellsworth Faris, the department chairman who had invited him, apparently having been urged to do so by some American foundation executives interested in social science, both in Europe and in the U.S. Faris was away, but Ogburn ably replaced him as host, entertaining Halbwachs at the faculty club, and doing what he could to make the stay pleasant.

Halbwachs read English and spoke it well enough to use it for the two courses he taught (he boasted in his letters to his wife about being able to give his lectures in English and be understood by the students!) but was understandably lonely and a little timid about exploring the vast city he had come to without much preparation. People drove him around, showing him the

sights, and he was amazed at the size of the city, which went on for miles in all directions; at Lake Michigan, which seemed to be an inland ocean; by the exotic neighborhoods populated not only by people of differing economic levels, but also by a bewildering variety of ethnic groups, who seemed to have created their own portions of the city, with the old country language, food and customs; and by the even more bewildering large black population, most of them (as he learned from the available statistics published by the U.S. Census) relatively recently arrived from the South. He worried a little about the famous Chicago gangsters he had read about, but never saw any.

Halbwachs was not a very adventurous visitor. For the most part, he didn't venture far from the University, its faculty club (where he stayed) and its somewhat sheltered position vis-à-vis the rest of the city. He mostly walked around the university neighborhood, although on one occasion he walked alone from there to the edge of the Loop (the city center, named for the elevated ring of aerial tramways that circled it), going right through the center of the large and still growing South Side where the bulk of the city's black population lived. He must have been nervous, but he did it and had that to write home about.

He saw other parts of the city in the company of a variety of friendly guides, Mrs. Ogburn and others, who he met through his activities at the university. These seem to have been the usual kind of excursions tourists make, with someone local pointing out the attractions — “there's the Field Museum of Natural History,” “there's the Buckingham Fountain”—and showing him around the exotic ethnic neighborhoods. So he saw Little Sicily and the Maxwell Street market that dominated the Jewish community on the Near West Side and the adjoining Greek neighborhood, and (at another social class level) the areas farther from the city center where the earlier-arrived Irish and Germans and Scandinavians lived. He found these ethnic enclaves intriguing, unfamiliar to someone used to Paris or Strasbourg. But he seems to have gotten out of the car only in the company of his local guides and not to have done any exploring of his own, aside from that one long walk through the Black Belt.

He did, however, read a lot about Chicago: statistical reports summarizing the results of censuses and other researches, and many of the dissertations inspired and supervised by Park. He got his understanding of the Maxwell Street market from Louis Wirth's classic *The Ghetto*, understood the mesh of interpenetrating sub-areas on the Near North Side through Harvey Zorbaugh's description in *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, and learned about the traveling casual workers who wintered in Chicago ("hobos") from Nels Anderson's *The Hobo*. What he knew about gangs and crime came from books and reports by Frederick Thrasher, John Landesco and others who had done first-hand observation of these matters.

### **Missing the Chicago School**

What he did not do was follow the advice Robert E. Park is said to have given graduate students who studied with him (as reported by my namesake Howard P. Becker, who studied with Park in the Twenties):

*You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial schedules prepared by tired bureaucrats and filled out by reluctant applicants for fussy do-gooders or indifferent clerks. This is called "getting your hands dirty in real research." Those who counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one more thing is needful: first hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and the slum shakedowns; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.*

We can hardly blame Halbwachs for not doing any of that. The Chicago he saw differed remarkably, as he often noted, from the European cities he knew: it was far larger, and far more varied, than anything he knew. And it had not grown the way European cities had, through the gradual spread of population from a central core, but rather by the creation of new housing tracts, new neighborhoods, by speculators, which were then incorporated into the city itself. It's likely, though he doesn't quite say this in any of the documents in the book, that he was just bewildered, didn't know where to begin, or how to think about what he was learning.

He probably didn't know Park's legendary advice—this seems odd today when the name of Park is *the* emblematic name associated with sociology in Chicago— because he hardly spoke to Park during the three months he was at the university. He thought Park was strange, nice enough but with a hard-to-understand accent, and doing what Halbwachs didn't recognize as “real sociology,” which for him seems to have consisted of making theories and then checking them against facts someone else had gathered (which is how he did his well-known studies of family budgets). So he didn't get all the benefit he might have gotten from his stay, neither immersing himself first-hand in the life of the city in the style of Park, nor involving himself with the people who were doing the work later associated with the Chicago school. Instead, he kept to the kind of work he knew and had done, and associated with people who worked in that style.

He clearly felt more at ease with Ogburn, who had created an important, though different, part of the legendary “Chicago,” embodied in the quantitative and demographic work of researchers like Philip Hauser and Otis Dudley Duncan, and who also struck him as a more aristocratic type, with his courtly manner and friendly Southern demeanor.

But it's also clear that by the time he left Chicago he had learned something of how to live there. He felt more comfortable, was more able to get around on public transportation (most of his trips were to have dinner with other professors elsewhere in the city), and had come to enjoy a lot of the differences in the way things looked and the way people acted. If he had stayed for another three months, he might have made much more of the experience.

### **Halbwachs' Three-tiered Approach to Sociological Tourism**

Topalov's arrangement of the available texts (letters, newspaper articles, scholarly articles) lets us compare Halbwachs' three ways of describing what he had seen and learned. Comparing these three genres of writing lets us see clearly how far Halbwachs was from a conception of sociology which would have made Park's advice relevant to his work. The letters express most candidly his reactions to the unfamiliar, somewhat unintelligible, and somewhat

frightening experience of living in Chicago. At first, he doesn't go farther than the short distance between the faculty club he stayed in and the Social Science Building where he taught his courses. His descriptions of what he saw and heard on his excursions, which occasionally appear between the stories of dinners with professors, show him as a curious but careful man, ready to jump to conclusions, the most curious of these being his conviction that neither the Jews nor the Negroes would ever become fully assimilated members of American society. It's not clear which of his experiences led him to that conclusion. Overall, the letters to his wife contain the firsthand impressions that a later sociologist like Everett Hughes would make the basis of part of his practice (Hughes' justly famous essay on "Dirty Work" originated in a chance conversation with a German couple on a train there).

I thought the letters to *Le Progrès* the least interesting of the texts, essentially a collection of large generalizations that we know he had little basis for, more in the style of journalism than sociology. Others may think differently.

His sociological articles (especially the one published in *Annales*, were excellent examples of the genre as it was produced at that period in Europe. He recognized the importance of the way Park and Burgess had conceptualized the organization of city life, and especially its spatial patterns, and mentions Park's great programmatic essay, "The City as a Laboratory for the Study of Human Behavior," but sees these things only as precursors to the more generalizing theoretical statements he thought were "real sociology."

### **The French Sociologist's Dichotomy Between Observation and Theory**

As Topalov says, "{S]es promenades urbaines relevaient du regard touristique et non de ce qui fut appelée plus tard le *fieldwork*." Topalov insightfully relates this way of working to a division of labor common among French social scientists of the day, quoting Halbwachs' description (in a letter to his wife) of the work of Park, Burgess and their students as similar to the practice of such social workers as Jane Addams: ". . . plongés dans la vie, en contact étroit avec les groupes, ils paraissent ignorer totalement toutes nos théories. Ils sont dans la même situation, à cet égard que, vis-à-vis de Durkheim, les explorateurs et les missionnaires."

[...immersed in life, in close contact with the groups, they seem totally ignorant of all our theories. In this regard, they stand in relation to us just like missionaries and explorers stood in relation to Durkheim]

He seems to have thought of them, for the most part, as providing “picturesque” and “precious” facts which real scientists, like Durkheim (and of course Halbwachs himself), could classify, compare and use to arrive at theoretically sound, empirically substantiated theories. It’s worth quoting Topalov’s analysis (pp. 76 ff.) at length:

*Un tel modèle du rapport entre science et observation était celui que pratiquait et théorisait depuis longtemps l’université française – et pas seulement les durkheimiens. Le sociologue ou l’ethnologue, comme aussi le philologue, l’orientaliste ou le géographe était un travailleur de cabinet qui utilisait les informations collectées par les explorateurs, prospecteurs, voyageurs, militaires, administrateurs coloniaux ou missionnaires.*

[This model of the relationship between science and observation had long been practiced and theorized by the French University, not just Durkheimians. The sociologist or the ethnologist, just like the philologist, the orientalist or the geographer was an armchair worker who used information collected by explorers, prospectors, military travelers, colonial administrators or missionaries.]

Scientists like Mauss or Halbwachs taught people to collect such facts for them, but they didn’t do the collecting. They believed in gathering facts, but they didn’t do anything like that themselves. And so Halbwach’s could not quite see the originality of the Chicago approach to sociology, as Topalov describes his practice:

*[C]’était donc un modèle de division du travail précis, solidement inscrit dans des institutions, des hiérarchies symboliques, des formes argumentatives inlassablement répétées dans la littérature ethnologique française de son temps.*

[It was an exact division of labor, anchored in institutions, symbolic hierarchies, forms of argumentation that were indefatigably repeated by the ethnological literature of his time.]

Holding such a view, Halbwachs could not grasp a model of sociology so different from what he knew.

Despite this obstacle to his fully understanding what the Chicagoans were doing, his article for *Annales* devoted considerable space to summaries of the books by Park's students, which evidently impressed him in some way he had not fully explained to himself as yet. He added to that facts gleaned from Robert and Helen Lynd's massive study of Muncie, Indiana, published as *Middletown*, and incidental materials gathered from casual conversations with academic acquaintances and from the novels of Sinclair Lewis (e.g., *Babbitt*). He occasionally makes use of what he heard from his casual interactions with dinner companions or his meetings (in Chicago and Washington on the way back to Paris) with labor leaders, in the form of small asides that report what "one American I spoke with said."

This wonderful, carefully edited collection of documents describes for us an earlier stage of international meetings between American and European sociologists, an era when some American scholars were at home in European languages. It made me want to see similar accounts of such cross-national contacts from later periods, when so much had changed: when sociology stopped being something you mainly did in an office, while others went out to gather the facts you used to create the theories which were the "real sociology." The generation of French sociologists who came to the U.S. after World War II had a different experience, were prepared to learn something different—and yet they went back to a university world quite different from the one they had learned the new techniques in. The story of the movement of people and ideas back and forth across the Atlantic, for which Chapoulie (1991) and Masson (2008, pp. 47-56, 67-83) give good accounts of the immediate post-war period, is not over yet, and we will just have to wait for the memoirs and archives which will tell us what has happened since then.

## References

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Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net) September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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