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Yale

Yale University  
**URBAN  
ETHNOGRAPHY  
PROJECT**

**WORKSHOP IN URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY**

The ethnographic interpretation of urban life and culture

# URBAN ETHNOLOGY: CHICAGO STYLE AND FRENCH TOUCH

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Comparing research in American urban ethnology on white/non-white encounters to French political sociology on the specificity of the “banlieues” reveals several resemblances and many differences. The latter may stem either from methodological gaps or from the populations observed, or a combination of both. Where Americans focus mainly on microscopic interactions at street level, French scholars tend to address the same issue from the top, and they do it in a macroscopic way. Historical and cultural factors help explain why their respective strategies differ in everyday life, and why academic knowledge varies from one bank of the Atlantic to the other.

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2017, 11:30A - 1:20P**

**NEW LOCATION: Gordon Parks Room, 81 Wall Street – Room 201**

<http://uep.yale.edu>

# Urban ethnology: Chicago Style and French Touch

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# Abstract

Comparing research in American urban ethnology on white/non-white encounters to French political sociology on the specificity of the “banlieues” reveals several resemblances and many differences. The latter may stem either from methodological gaps or from the populations observed, or a combination of both.

Where Americans focus mainly on microscopic interactions at street level, French scholars tend to address the same issue from the top, and they do it in a macroscopic way. Historical and cultural factors help explain why their respective strategies differ in everyday life, and why academic knowledge varies from one bank of the Atlantic to the other.

# What is « urban ethnology »?

The **micro** study of **social encounters of mobile citizens** in urban settings with the eye of the **cultural anthropologist**?

The **meso** study of **social problems** in cities with the eye of a **sociologist**?

The **macro** study of **urban policies** and **social control** by **political scientists**?

# The legacy of the Chicago School

Field observation. “Neo-realist naturalism à la Zola”.

A **street-level** view of people living at the margin: the poor, hobos, migrants, gangs, bowling teams, “freaks”, artists, etc.

Focus on “**social hybrids**” from “**Bohemia**” and “**Hoboemia**” (R. Park).

The **City** as a social unit made of **sub-units** (ghetto, street corners) each with its own culture (Park, Burgess, McKenzie & Wirth, 1925).

# The legacy of the Chicago School

From **ecology** to **politics**: nature = disorder, culture = politics.

**Politics** is the art of dealing with the **irrational**.

**Sociology** is the study of **crisis**, **politics** is the study of **civilization**.

# The legacy of the Chicago School

Sociology vs. Social work (1913, Albion Small): against the “do gooders” (Robert Ezra Park).

Community studies (from the 30s to the 50s).

Community based organizations (CBO) (now)?



# The French Touch

From Durkheimian **positivism** to Bourdieu's (and Foucault's).  
**post-positivism**.

From **psychology** to **sociology**.

From **phenomenology** to **structuralism**, then **critical studies**.

# Chicago vs. Paris

Social work

Civic  
involvement

Chicago

Ethnography

**Sociology**

Philosophy

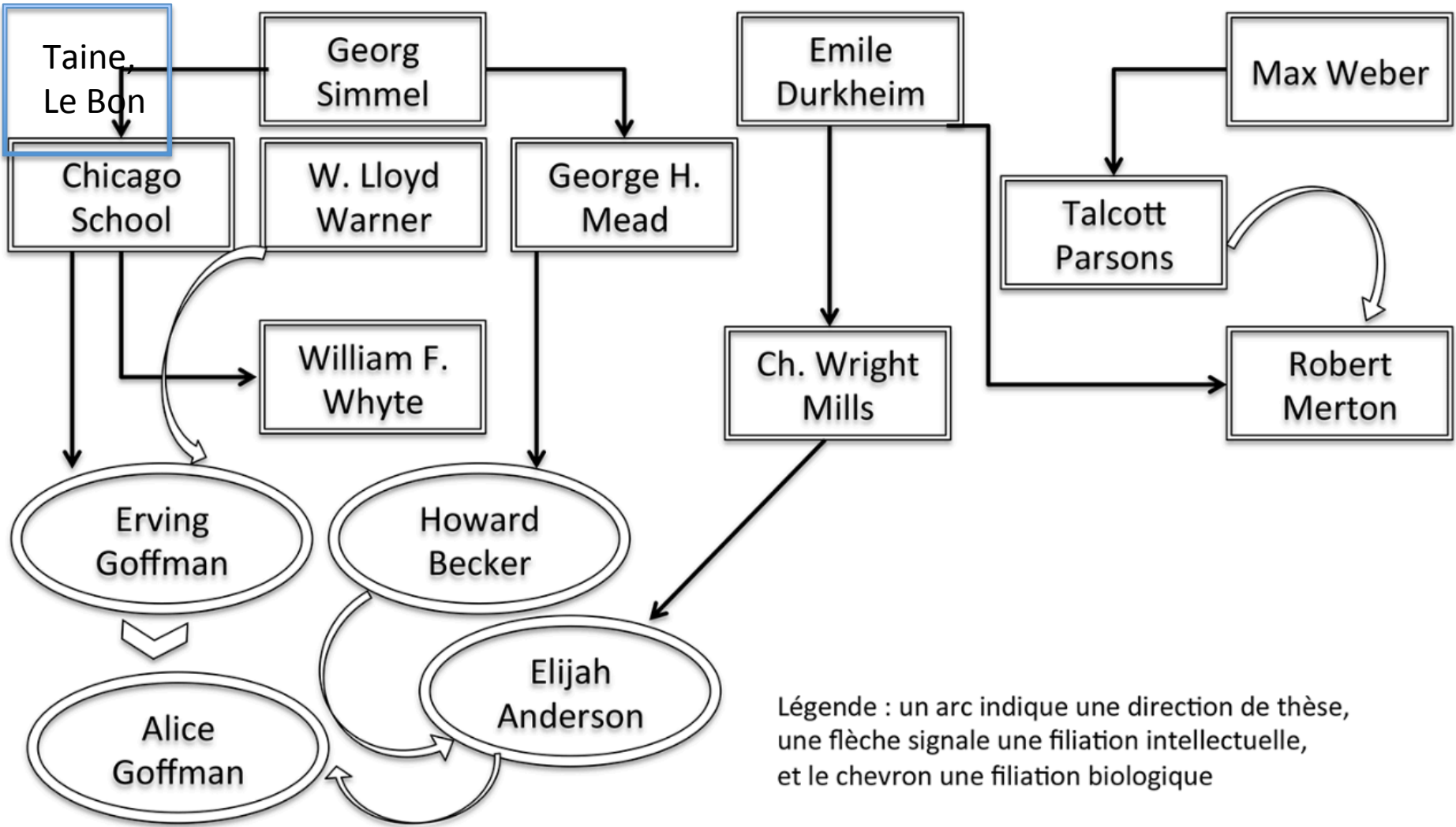
Paris

Human  
Ecology,  
geography

Plus psychology

Minus psychology  
(psychoanalysis ?)

« Moral  
science »  
policy, polity



Légende : un arc indique une direction de thèse, une flèche signale une filiation intellectuelle, et le chevron une filiation biologique

# The pitch: What?

Interactionnism in America / Politization in France.

Social behavior in America / Social Policy in France.

Self-organizing communities in the US, political movements controlled from the top in France.

Inter-ethnic and multicultural relations in the US, transcultural relations in France.

# The pitch: Why?

Because **objects and methods** are dissimilar (**race** as such is not an issue in France).

Because **the field** is mainly assigned to sociologists in the USA and to **political scientists** in France.

Because the **French State** is much **stronger** and more redistributive than the Federal administration in the US.

*Summary*

**DOES METHODOLOGY MATTER?**

**TO WHICH EXTENT THE CONTEXT MATTER?**

Does methodology matter?

# Varieties of methods

Ethnography vs. Sociology.

Public affairs and Political Science vs.  
Political sociology.

Top down or Bottom up.



# Ethnography vs. Sociology

Field work (USA) vs. **interviews** (F).

Interactionism + **agency** (USA)

vs. Structuralism + **institutions** (F).

# Morally driven research in France

Bourdieu: fieldwork is **not** always **objective**. It generates **commitment**, and difficult **moral** choices.

Bourdieu: dependence towards those who are observed :  
*“Observing a community to which the researcher is estranged compels to work permanently to **maintain the interpersonal link** without which the survey cannot be completed”.*

# Politically driven research

Chicago: fighting for **recognition** / Paris: fighting **poverty**.

Chicago: fighting **segregation** / Paris: fighting **inequalities**.

Chicago: fighting **policemen's** inappropriate behavior / Paris: fighting **terrorists**.

# USA: bottom up; France: Top down

Focus : US individual behavior vs. F community organizing.

Indicators: US stigmas vs. F statistics.

Case selection: US hazard vs. F testing hypotheses.

Targets: US outsiders and denizens (Anderson) vs. F ordinary people as citizens.

# USA: bottom up; France: Top down

The Chicago school gives depth and flesh to statistical analysis via unforeseen events that stem from any unlikely encounter.

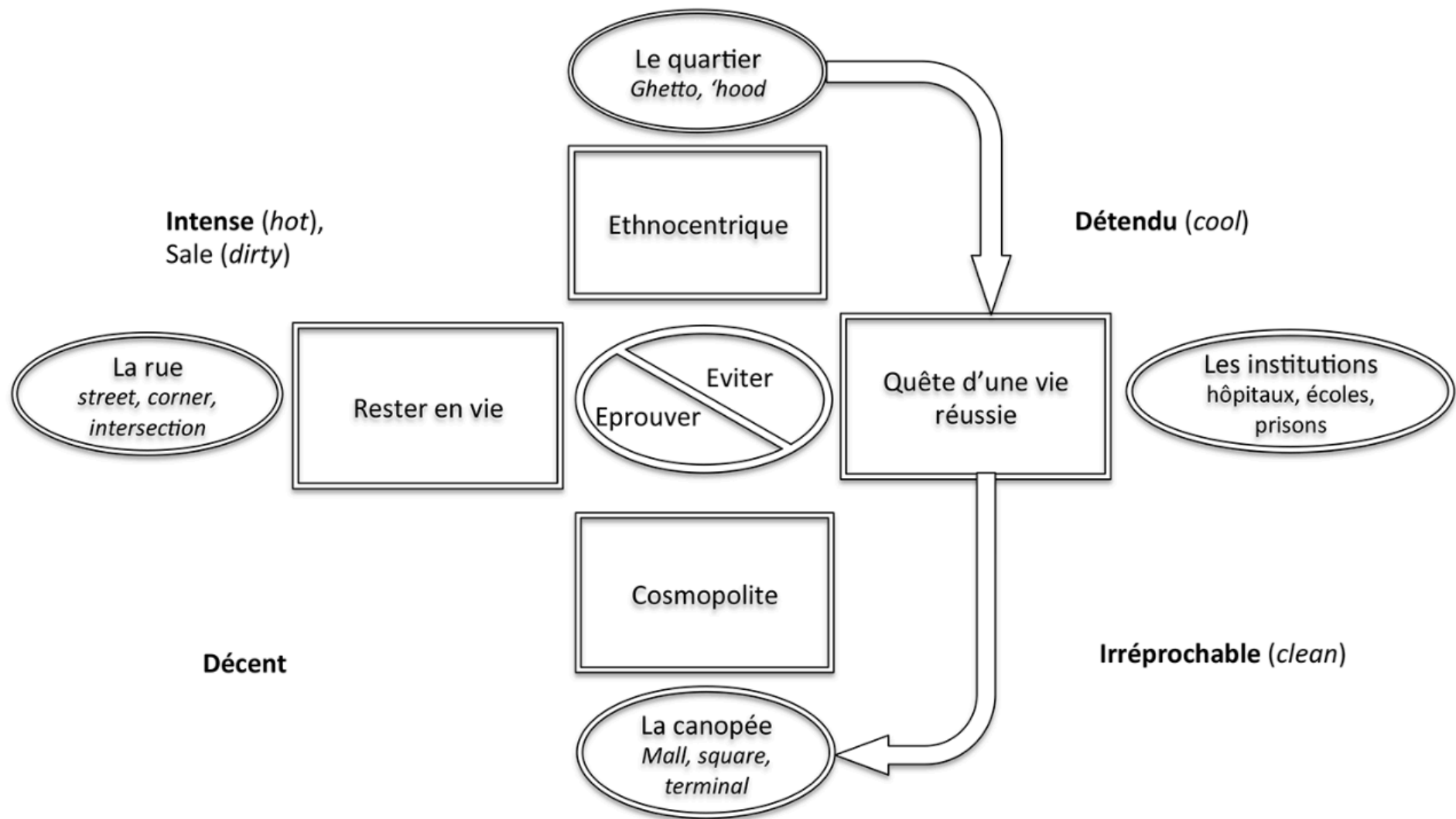
The French Touch levels small differences, it rubs out idiosyncracies, and aggregates events into a general law.

# Two views on the same reality?

Chicago: avoidance / Paris: engagement.

Chicago: survival / Paris: struggle.

Chicago: muddling through the “white space” / Paris: saturating or subverting the white space.



To which extent the context matter?



# Varieties of contexts

The American **ghetto**: a town in the town.

The British **clusters**: islands in urban seas.

The French “**quartiers**”: Chinese walls + highways.

# Varieties of contexts

American **multiculturalism** vs French **pluralism /Republicanism**.

**Race** matters more in the US than **religion** does in France.

The history of **slavery** differs from the legacy of **colonialism**.

# Varieties of contexts?

A **young American black** « has something to **prove**. He is a provisional status » (Elijah Anderson), “he is on probation” (Alice Goffman).

Same with a **young Muslim in France**: more often **suspected** by the police than other teenagers.

# Varieties of contexts?

But: Is the “nigger moment” of acute disrespect comparable to the “**délit de faciès**” in France ? Yes and no.

Yes: **identity issue** in both countries.

No: if a person **speaks mainstream French** she is fully French, whatever her origin is.

Community of **destiny** > community of **origin**.

# To conclude

2 genealogies, 2 levels, 2 ambitions.

The observations made are **partially overlapping**.

American scholars are concerned with the **racial** issue.

French scholars are obsessed by **national** politics.