

ERNEST W. BURGESS

May 16, 1886 - December 27, 1966

*An Exhibition
of Selections from His Papers*



The University of Chicago
Department of Sociology
and
The University Library

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It is impossible to think of the vigor and impact of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology without acknowledging the contributions of Ernest W. Burgess. Ernest W. Burgess was a sociologist of many interests and a human being of endless energy and diligence. This exhibit seeks to reflect the substantial teaching, research, and public service he accomplished.

The central themes of his work can be summarized by the topics Community, Family, and Delinquency—words that serve as the title of his collected papers (*Ernest W. Burgess On Community, Family, Delinquency*, edited by Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., Albert Hunter, and James F. Short, Jr., University of Chicago Press, 1973). In each of these areas his writings still serve as starting points for empirical investigation.

Burgess worked both in quantitative and humanistic sociology. His statistical studies resulted in tightly organized research papers. But he also believed in the importance of life history and human documents as essential tools of sociological investigation. He collected an enormous amount of written social documentation from his students and from his field work during the period of the 1920's and the 1930's. This documentation represents a unique record of the social setting of the "day to day" realities of those years. It is the kind of source material that tends to disappear or be neglected by social historians. An important fraction of his massive files survives and serves as valuable sources for sociologists and social historians. Organized with an awareness of Burgess's own wide-ranging interests, they are now available for scholarly research.

Burgess thought of himself as an empirical research sociologist, and in fact, he was not a self-conscious theorist. However, it is striking to recall that together with Robert E. Park, he prepared the famous *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, the dominant theoretical formulation for many decades and still a source of stimulation and a standard for contemporary efforts.

Sociology as an academic discipline flourishes only if its scholars stimulate students through their personal qualities and commitments. This exhibit is designed to bring into focus the special qualities of Ernest W. Burgess as a teacher. He was a member of the faculty during a period in which a sense of social distance existed between instructor and student. This was especially the case in the University's graduate department which emphasized the tutorial method. But Burgess spoke for the students and reached out to make and maintain contact with them. The exhibit also serves to highlight the types of public service he maintained in professional associations, in civic organizations, and in social planning and community enterprises. His career serves to testify that sociologists can be active and resourceful public-spirited citizens while vigorously pursuing effective teaching and scholarly research.

Morris Janowitz
March 1974

Ernest Watson Burgess was born on 16 May 1886 in Tilbury, Ontario, Canada, and he died on 27 December 1966 in Chicago. During these eighty years he was an incredibly busy and productive sociologist combining a strong commitment to classroom teaching with a heavy research agenda. In addition, he assumed extensive professional responsibilities as editor of various professional publications and as an elected officer in many organizations as well as serving as a consultant to numerous public and private agencies. He carried on a voluminous correspondence with his students, colleagues, and professionals in other fields and was active in Chicago's civic and reform endeavors.

Burgess was the son of Mary Ann Jane Wilson, descendant of a prosperous Canadian farmer, and Edmund James Burgess, of English parentage, who served as Anglican minister and teacher in Canada and the United States. He had a sister, Roberta, who was less than two years his senior and who remained his confidante throughout his bachelor life.

In 1888, Burgess's family moved to Whitehall, Michigan, and in 1905, to Kingfisher, Oklahoma. He received his A.B. at the small Kingfisher College in 1908 and enrolled that fall in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. Julius Temple Howe, one of his professors at Kingfisher, had studied sociology at Chicago. He made it possible for Burgess, who was obviously intelligent and strongly motivated, to be interviewed by Albion W. Small, chairman of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, and as a result, Burgess obtained a fellowship.

Burgess was a student on the Chicago campus while the "big four"—W. I. Thomas, George Vincent, Charles Henderson, and Albion Small—were active, and from them he received his training, which sought to fuse theoretical concerns with empirical research. He became George Vincent's research assistant, made an outstanding academic record, and was elected president of the Student Sociological Club. He was active as well in the Cosmopolitan Club, an early academic interracial group.

During the academic year 1912-13, Burgess was an instructor in sociology at Toledo University. After the completion of his Ph.D. degree in 1913, he served as assistant professor of sociology at the University of Kansas, 1913-15, and at Ohio State University, 1915-16. During these years he was actively engaged in social survey work. In 1916 he returned to the University of Chicago as assistant professor of sociology and remained at Chicago until his retirement in 1952. He was promoted to associate professor in 1921 and to professor in 1927. He served as chairman of the department from 1946 until 1951. Even after his retirement, he was for a number of years an active professor emeritus on the Chicago campus, engaged in research and writing.

When Burgess arrived at the University of Chicago in 1916, he took over Charles Henderson's courses on the community and on urban sociology. He was assigned an office close to Robert E. Park in Harper Library, and although Park was more than twenty years his senior, they

became close colleagues. They taught a course on introductory sociology, and out of this enterprise they prepared the source book *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, which was published in 1921 and became the standard treatise and textbook of the "Chicago School" of sociology. In 1925, together with Roderick F. McKenzie, Park and Burgess published the important collection of essays entitled *The City*, which contained Burgess's exposition of the zonal hypothesis of urban growth and his overview of the tasks of local community research. Burgess's interest broadened, and he taught courses on the family, criminology, and social pathology. These courses reflect his vigorous research efforts on the family, community, and social deviance, especially on criminal behavior.

The allocation of an annual grant of \$25,000 to the Division of Social Science by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation matched by local funds supplied an important source of support for Burgess's work. He reached out in many directions for interdisciplinary stimulation and for access to empirical data. In the early 1920s the University of Chicago established the Local Community Research Committee to pursue both historical and sociological research on Chicago local communities; Ernest Burgess served as an active member of this committee, which grew into the Chicago Community Inventory under Philip M. Hauser. When the Chicago Area Project was organized in the 1930s as a pioneer community action program, he was one of the prime movers. His interest led him to seek work with criminologists, welfare and family service agencies, municipal authorities, and a host of other professional associations. He had close contacts with the U.S. Census since he was involved in the early efforts in small area reporting. Ernest Burgess enjoyed these contacts, and they were indispensable in the collection of essential data. At the same time he was supervising and encouraging a large number of graduate students preparing monographs for the "University of Chicago Sociological Series," which became an important element of the heritage of the period from the 1920s and 1930s.

From 1921 to 1930 Burgess held the office of secretary-treasurer and managing editor of the American Sociological Society and thereby had the responsibility for editing its proceedings. In 1934 he was elected president of the society. He served as editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* from 1936 to 1940, and of *Marriage and Family Living* from 1931 to 1950. He was director of the Behavior Research Fund from 1931 to 1939 and in this capacity edited and published a series of research monographs on delinquency and child development. Burgess was also deeply involved in the affairs of the Social Science Research Council during the period in which it served as an important intellectual focal point in the social sciences. First, he was a member of its research committee and a chairman of its key Problems and Policy Committee, next vice-chairman of the council, and then chairman in 1945-46. In 1950, he was elected vice-president of the American Association for the Advancement

of Science. Burgess was both a founding member and president of a variety of professional associations. He was elected president of the Social Research Association in 1942; the National Conference on Family Relations, 1942; the Gerontological Society, 1952; and the Society for the Study of Social Issues, 1953.

Burgess was an organizer of the first White House Conference on Family and Youth and of the first such conference on aging. During World War II, he was a member of various government committees and participated in preparations for postwar reconversion plans. His civic involvement in Chicago was extensive, and he became a member of the Mayor's Committee for Senior Citizens, the Chicago Crime Commission, and the Citizens Association of Chicago. Burgess was a product of the period when University of Chicago professors were members of downtown clubs; he joined the City club and took part in its extensive discussions of civil reform, a continuous topic in the Chicago metropolitan area.

After his retirement, his interest focused on family research and problems of old age. With Donald Bogue, he was associated with the Family Research Center, later named the Community and Family Research Center.

Ernest Burgess was deeply interested in the problems of social change in Soviet Russia. He studied the language and culture of Russia and visited the country three times in the 1930s. He sought to make use of Soviet materials in his course work long before "comparative sociology" became fashionable. In 1954, he was questioned by the Jenner Committee of the U.S. Senate about his contacts with the Soviet Union. Everett Hughes reported that "Professor Burgess was sternly accused by Senator Jenner who queried him, 'Professor Burgess, is it not true that in 1927 you joined an organization known as the Friends of Soviet Russia?' Burgess replied, 'Oh no sir, that was not in 1927. It was in 1925, and you haven't got the name quite right.'" Burgess was a stickler for facts and not easily intimidated or moved from his convictions.

Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., at a memorial service for Burgess, assessed his contribution in these words:

Professor Burgess was not a systematic theoretician but an eclectic par excellence. He had no great interest in the elaboration of broad, neatly articulated conceptual systems, but made use of parts of available theories or constructed limited conceptualizations of his own. To some, this meant that Burgess was naive, atheoretical, and a raw empiricist. They were badly mistaken. He was far from naive and knew very well what he was doing theory-wise.

Just as in theory so in method, Professor Burgess was pragmatic and eclectic. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, much time was devoted to debating the relative merits of case study and statistical methods for acquiring valid sociological knowledge. Professor Burgess was an astute and skilful user of case-study procedures for collecting and analyzing data on social behavior, an art which unfortunately has languished to the detriment of our discipline. He published several important papers on the subject. However, he had no difficulty in shifting readily to quantitative methods and becoming proficient in the use of those that were relevant to his needs. In his use of different types of methodology, he was by no means a superficial dilettante. He was constantly working toward command of the methods he found promising by taking courses, tutoring, and self-study. In the days of the Park and Burgess Research Seminar, Professor Park would sometimes hurl Jovian thunderbolts at the folly of the statisticians or the misguided Freudians. Professor Burgess, sitting beside him, would nod solemn approval, twinkling the while at those of us who knew of his assiduous study of those forbidden mysteries.

A description of Professor Burgess' scientific orientation would be incomplete if it failed to take note of his strong interest in the application of research findings to the practical problems of society. He was strongly committed to the necessity for freedom of inquiry and the independent pursuit of knowledge wherever the scientist's interest led him; but he was no dweller in the ivory tower. He had a responsible concern for the welfare and development of his fellow human beings. Moreover, he believed and indeed demonstrated in his own work that scientifically sound research could be done in the arena of real life. This was peculiarly characteristic of his research on marriage and the family.