

CITIES, HUMAN ECOLOGY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMINOLOGY: A REEXAMINING OF ROBERT EZRA PARK'S WORK

CIDADES, ECOLOGIA HUMANA E CRIMINOLOGIA AMBIENTAL: UMA RELEITURA DA OBRA DE ROBERT EZRA PARK

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Abstract

Public policies that indicate ways of addressing the various types of violence resulting from the increasing vulnerabilities that city dwellers face is a theme that is perceived as essential in the contemporary academic debate. For this, theoretical foundations that point to epistemological, methodological, and criminological contributions to achieve this goal must be presented, debated, and updated. This article aims to deepen the discussion on the implementation of effective, reliable, and efficient public policies that constitute a constrain to increasing violence, mainly the criminal violence. This is why it's essential to revisit the Robert Ezra Park's work and, consequently, what was produced by the Chicago School of Sociology in the scope of human ecology. Such work presents at

Resumo

Políticas públicas que indiquem caminhos para enfrentar os mais diversos tipos de violência oriundos das cada vez mais frequentes vulnerabilidades a que estão sujeitos os habitantes das cidades são uma temática imprescindível no debate acadêmico contemporâneo, razão pela qual os fundamentos teóricos que apontem aportes epistemológicos, metodológicos e criminológicos para alcance de tal intuito devem ser apresentados, debatidos e atualizados, ou seja, pretende-se aprofundar a discussão sobre a consecução de políticas públicas efetivas, eficazes e eficientes que se constituam óbice a um contexto de crescente violência, sobretudo a criminal. Essa é a razão pela qual é primordial revisitar a obra de Robert Ezra Park e, conseqüentemente, o estudo da produção da escola sociológica de Chicago no âmbito da ecologia humana,



least 100 years of contribution to scientific production and , the analytical fundamentals in various areas of the human sciences. The inductive method was applied to build the argument, with a descriptive procedure, based on the exclusively bibliographic research technique.

Keywords: criminology of the place; environmental criminology; human ecology; Robert Ezra Park; urbanism.

trabalho que apresenta pelo menos 100 anos de contribuição para a produção científica e, portanto, os fundamentos analíticos nas mais diferenciadas áreas das ciências humanas. Foi adotado o método indutivo para construção do argumento, com procedimento descritivo baseado na técnica de pesquisa exclusivamente bibliográfica.

Palavras-chave: *criminologia ambiental; criminologia do lugar; ecologia humana; Robert Ezra Park; urbanismo.*

Introduction

Is it possible for a work published more than 100 years ago to remain relevant or currently provide theoretical contributions to the study of cities by relating social control and urbanism or migration and social exclusion? What about considering vulnerabilities based on the place people inhabit, among many other relations between physical space and social space?

Such questions arise due to the profound, striking, and undeniable transformations that cities have undergone, regardless of their location, throughout the 20th century and the early 21st century. It is necessary to acknowledge a significant environmental and, consequently, contextual variation during this period.

Such temporal lapse coincides with major ruptures in epistemology, like the abandonment of metaphysical theories to explain natural and social phenomena. Crime, for example, was believed to originate from demonic possessions in the context of metaphysical knowledge. However, progress was made in the opposite direction, towards idealist rationalism. In such framework, human reason prevails as the ultimate basis to explain all phenomena, eventually leading to scientific positivism, which provided theoretical tools for Lombrosian explanation in the Positive School of Criminology and its ontological etiology. This school argued that the origin of crime was in the criminal himself, combining rationalist abstraction with empirical observation of the material world in an inductive reasoning empiricism.

In this theoretical debate, epistemology took shape, with contributions from Karl Marx's historical materialism (1818-1883), Niklas Luhmann's systemic perspective (1927-1998), Karl Popper's critical rationalism (1902-1994), among many other theoretical approaches. Their points of convergence lie in the idea

that the search for scientific truths is connected to the longevity of the statements that express them. Thus, evidence that can be transformed into assertions, even if temporary, as immutable scientific truths about investigations aiming to prove a particular scientific hypothesis do not exist. They should reflect an effort by the researcher to achieve longevity, aligning with a paradigm reference, in which theoretical rupture takes longer to occur.

It is within this context of intense contextual change and scientific paradigms that this article is oriented towards revisiting the work of Robert Ezra Park (1864-1944), one of the most well-known sociologists of the equally renowned Chicago School of Sociology. It is aimed at assessing the longevity and thus, the relevance and potential contemporary application of the knowledge he developed in the field of spatial crime studies.

The theoretical rupture promoted by Chicago sociology is well-known, as it sought to explain the practice of certain types of crime through spatial and environmental connections developing in specific city contexts. It asserted that crime originates more from social interactions between individuals and their environment than from pathological individualizations.

It is quite possible that this new theoretical perspective inaugurated an integration between sociology and geography that uniquely and definitively connected the social and spatial dimensions of criminal phenomena. It brought with it the necessary flexibility, if not rupture, of the theoretical paradigms then in force in both disciplines, and consequently, a revision of the explanations produced on the causes of crime in various other scientific fields related to the topic.

In Park's work, the necessary interaction between geography and sociology can be identified in recurring studies focusing on the migratory phenomenon and its specific social consequences in the city. Thus, human displacement, despite its varied causes, had a direct relation with the urban profile shaped by what are called natural areas of the city, gradually configuring what became known as studies related to human ecology, with significant impacts on urban sociology and urban geography.

This entire theoretical framework with a diagnostic bias of criminal deviations inevitably led to a propositional context in which public policies, combined or not with private actions, were pointed out as a promising path for addressing the problem, with the Chicago Area Project (CAP) being the most notable example still in operation today.

It is deemed important to revisit the theoretical framework of Park's work, as well as what was written with his Chicago colleagues two years before the

centenary of the publication of the book titled *The City*¹, co-authored with Ernest Burgess. This work is considered by many as paradigm-setting, given the visible growth of the field. It sought criminological explanations and criminal policy proposals within the studied geographical spaces from sociological, anthropological, environmental, and architectural perspectives. This occurred in the realms of criminal sociology, criminal anthropology, crime geography, and crime prevention architecture, systematized through research on place-based criminology, environmental criminology, or urban criminology.

The aim of this work is to analyze the current relevance of studies conducted by the sociology developed at the University of Chicago between the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, focusing on the relational aspect among geographical space, social environment, and crime, based on Robert Ezra Park's work. To this end, an in-depth investigation was carried out to access what is available on online research platforms and virtual bookstores that facilitate access for other researchers interested in the topic. If they wish to consult the works referenced here in full, certain titles are available in various different works.

Regarding the methodological approaches, the inductive method was used to build the argument through descriptive procedures and exclusively bibliographic research. Clearly, this involves what was developed by the author individually or in co-authorship, as well as analyses conducted by scholars from various scientific fields regarding the validity of this knowledge.

1 From human ecology to symbolic interactionism: the environmental influences on human behavior

To better understand the hypothesis presented here, it is important to highlight the reasons why the theoretical framework of the Chicago School was built on a view of the city as a living organism. This framework is conceived as an institution suitable for being used as a social laboratory² for the scientific investigation

1 Although a preliminary version was published in 1915 in the *American Journal of Sociology*, the definitive version of the article *The City: Suggestions for investigation of human behavior in the urban environment*, much revised, with several modifications and additions, was only published in 1925, in a book of chapters organized by Park, Burgess, and McKenzie, edited by The University of Chicago Press and republished in 1967 and 1984.

2 The term city as a social laboratory is explained by Park (2018b) because the city is a human construction in which individuals have developed the arts, philosophy, and science, achieving an intellectual life that differentiates them from the primitive man. Thus, the city is the world that man has created and in which he is condemned to live. In this way, in making the city, man remade himself, and this is the place where his relationships as a human being will take place and develop, consequently allowing them to be studied and understood there, since the social problem is fundamentally a problem of the city.

of numerous phenomena that are part of human coexistence (Park; McKenzie, 1925; Park, 1967b; Park; Burgess; McKenzie, 1984).

At the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by scientific positivism, the epistemological and scientific value of produced knowledge was based on the empiricism associated with natural sciences. Thus, scientific explanations were grounded in observation, experimentation, and repetition of studied phenomena with the aim of formulating universal general laws; Thus, the inductivist empiricism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857)³ prevailed.

Just as Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), following the postulates of positivist science, developed his theory of the criminal man, whose physical and psychological characteristics would be the same anywhere on the planet, Chicago sociologists Burgess (1923) and Shaw and McKay (1942) developed crime gradients, asserting—after empirically studying 30 American cities – that in any city studied, crime rates would decrease progressively from the center to the periphery.

Hence, Chicago sociologists drew an analogy with the natural world based on Darwin's ideas. They argued that cities, in their evolutionary process, follow natural rules, with population distribution occurring based on observable phenomena, such as competition leading to dominance and succession⁴, which were applicable to all major cities⁵ (Park; Burgess, 1921; Park, 1936, 1948).

Competition for physical space became one of the main references for explaining social relationships developed by individuals, groups, or institutions⁶.

3 In this methodological context, Park (2018b) is incisive in stating that, just as in the natural sciences, in which people made an intellectual effort to gain control over external and physical nature, in the social sciences, through research and impartial methods of observation, they now seek control of themselves, investigating the political problem, which is social control. In this way, they emphasized the statistical method, stating that quantitative information can lead to an understanding of urban phenomena because, although separate, cities are quite similar and what is learned from one can, within certain limits, be true for others.

4 According to Park (1936, 1948), in the context of cities, dominance is characterized by the struggle of forces for strategic locations, generating areas in which real estate is more expensive, which determines the functional relationship of each area of the city with all the others. Succession, in turn, originates, albeit indirectly, from dominance, since the changes resulting from the development of these areas which are the object of the struggle for dominance characterize the phenomenon of succession. In other words, the various stages relating to the process of change from unstable and economically undervalued areas to stable areas with great economic value.

5 It is important to emphasize that, aware of the possible criticism, Park (1936, 1948) had already warned that, although they started from an ecological conception to explain certain social relationships developed by individuals due to the influences of the environment in which they live, human beings are not as dependent on the physical environment as irrational animals and plants, given that the exchange of goods and services ended up cooperating to emancipate them from their dependence on the natural habitat.

6 The Chicago School of Sociology works from the perspective of the city as a place of social represen-

Due to its location, geographic space ceased to be understood strictly as a physical element conditioned by natural phenomena and began to incorporate the social component, the human focus, and its mutual relationship with the environment (Park, 1926, 1939).

Thus, with a biotic focus prevailing, originated from relationships between humans and the ecosystem, studies deepened on the influences that habitat—the environment in which individuals live—exerts on the relationships among these individuals. This emphasized not only the interrelation but also the interdependence that arises while sharing the same physical space, thus necessarily forming communities based on this context⁷ (Park, 1921; Wirth, 1933).

From this perspective—gradually adding the cultural focus to the biotic focus, studies examined the influences of physical space on human behavior. Population, resources, and culture were identified as the three variables forming the basis of a theoretical framework explaining territorial phenomena. This was based on the relationship between individuals with the inhabited environment serving as a reference, forming an ecological unit⁸ when balance among these variables is achieved (Park, 1925, 1939, 1967b; Park; Burgess; McKenzie, 1984).

It is precisely when balance prevails over competition, and when cooperation among individuals generates a healthy interdependence in the inhabited environment, that human societies are formed. These societies differ from animal and plant communities through their customs, morals, traditions, laws, communication, and consensus. Unlike the animal and plant kingdoms, human beings have their freedom and competition limited by a set of principles, norms, and rules that ultimately define the culture of each people (Park, 1925, 1939, 1967b; Park; Burgess; McKenzie, 1984).

Therefore, for Park (1936, 1948), human societies encompass several hierarchical orders. The ecological order is at the base of the pyramid, with the evolutionary process moving through the economic and political orders until reaching the apex, which is the moral order. Each successive level corresponds to a greater

tations. Thus, in the city, individuals play certain social roles that are influenced on a daily basis by the interactions taking place in the social spaces in which they live with other subjects, called institutions or spaces of representation, such as their own homes, offices, schools, restaurants, parks, churches, bus stations, airports, among other spaces of human coexistence (Park, 1925, 1967b, 1984).

7 In Park's view (1936, 1948), the essential characteristics of a community, from a biotic and therefore natural perspective, is the existence of a territorially organized population, linked to the land it occupies, with its individual units living in a relationship of mutual interdependence.

8 Ecological unity or organic unity, according to Park (1936, 1948), is the characteristic of communities that have reached equilibrium through competition, preserving their identity and integrity as an individual unit, also by regulating the number of individuals that make it up.

incorporation and subordination of individuals to the social order to which they belong. Thus, ultimately, society is an organization of control, aimed at restricting competition and promoting cooperation among individuals and, consequently, among the organic units that comprise it.

The systematization of all these ideas, to a greater or lesser extent, is found in studies known as human ecology. Its primary purpose was to translate, from research on centralization and concentration⁹ in cities and their characteristics, the ecological processes created by Darwin. Such processes were based on the struggle for survival of irrational animals and plants into theoretical ecological processes structured on the struggle for urban spaces concerning human beings (Park, 1926).

In summary, human ecology deals with the process of competition and relationships arising from it, investigating relationships from person to person, group to group, and institution to institution. The forms through which these relationships reveal themselves are studied based on physical space indices, with a primary focus on personal relationships. This is because they are reflected in spatial and biotic relations through ecological concepts such as competition, dominance, succession, centralization, concentration, segregation, and others related to ecology (Park, 1936, 1948, 1952; Wirth, 1945; Pierson, 1948).

As a paradigmatic example among various possibilities derived from relationships between individuals and geographic space, those related to land use and economic value stand out. They constitute vectors of growth and transformation in cities, anticipating human ecology by many years, which would come to be known as real estate speculation. Their effects on relationships among residents of large urban centers drew attention, from then on, to the profound connections between urban geographic spaces and society.

Thus, it is observed that ecological theory—contrary to what many critics claim—recognizes the existence of a conflictive, non-harmonious society, although not clearly linking social vulnerabilities and socio-political systems. It builds its premises based on social relationships connected to the space variable, given that changes in territorial configuration would be directly dependent on changes in the social realm, which in turn are connected to economic factors. These interrelations allow for the analysis of the relationship between individuals

⁹ For Park (1936, 1948), centralization was a tendency to concentrate certain activities in specific areas, due to their greater monetary value, and it was dynamic, since activities changed according to the economic interests that existed there, generating effects on the physical and social levels. In turn, concentration reinforces the existence of centralization, constituting the ability to locate certain activities in small areas, thus increasing the economic value of these areas.

and the space they inhabit, with all the implications derived from it in capitalist society (Castells, 2000).

In this context, with the significant economic growth provided by the Industrial Revolution in American cities, the necessary balance between population, resources, and culture was gradually disrupted. This led to changes in urban territory, as intensified migrations¹⁰, coupled with actions of the most socially and economically influential groups, which profoundly transformed the territorial and consequently urban configuration of cities.

From the perspective of viewing the city as something beyond a mere collective entity—as it is not simply a congregation of people and social arrangements—Park (1925, 1939, 1967b) and Park, Burgess, and McKenzie (1984) saw the city as a place and people in deep interaction, an evolving process, a combination of feelings, customs, administrative devices, public opinion, individuals, among many other components related to collective human life, highlighting the moral and physical organization derived from habits and customs of its members¹¹.

This is why Park (2018b) viewed the city as a social laboratory, as studies on health, housing, poverty, and crime could be conducted thoroughly and in the places where people actually live, providing a realistic and objective character to social sciences, and bringing public awareness that the poor and immigrants were also human beings (Park; Thomas; Miller, 1921; Park, 2020).

Thus, from the perspective that under urban living conditions social institutions develop rapidly, and given that all characteristics of human nature are not only visible but amplified in cities, they become an extremely advantageous location for studying institutions and social life (Park, 1926, 1952, 2018b).

10 A very important category for understanding Park's ideas (1928, 2018c) is that of the "marginal man", in which the researcher develops issues of social order, or their disruption. This is based on the phenomenon of migration and its immediate consequences, such as the breaking of family ties, the emergence of new cultures, the emancipation of individuals and the assimilation of habits and customs that derive from this. In this context, the marginal man—whose connotation is not pejorative, it should be stressed—would be the immigrant who lives between two worlds, that of origin and that of arrival in a new place, with all the difficulties that come with assimilating a new culture. Based on studies developed from this perspective of the migratory phenomenon, the relationship between social disorganization and urban disorganization—derived from the spatial segregation imposed on immigrants on the outskirts of large cities—is investigated in the context of spatially determined crime. Park, Thomas, and Miller (1921) and Park (2020) also developed studies on immigration.

11 In their first studies on cities, Park (1925, 1967b) and Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1984) already drew attention to the connections between crime in the urban environment and the breakdown of local ties, with the consequent weakening of the restrictions and prohibitions of the primary informal social control group. They also warned of the effects that urban renewal can have on human coexistence by restructuring ruined neighborhoods with the construction of leisure areas and making sports, dancing and other recreational activities available, as a way of raising the moral character of segregated communities in the peripheral areas of large cities.

All the theoretical development summarized above clearly leads to the logical sequence of statements that aided the development of symbolic interactionism¹² foundations. This is because understanding communities involves comprehending the attitudes and personal histories of the individuals who constitute. Similarly, a greater knowledge of the community living environment makes the attitudes practiced there more intelligible, as while temperament is inherited, the formation of character and habit is influenced by the environment (Park, 1952, 2018b; Blumer, 1986).

In this vein, individuals' behaviors began to be studied not in isolation, based on endogenous explanations of a personal nature in the realm of human actions analysis. Instead, developed relational theories i.e., interactionist theories, in which human behavior is viewed as a reaction to the environmental influences that surround and stimulate it, defining the conceptions individuals have of themselves, their role in society influences the formation of their own character. Thus, human beings are products of the associations they make in the world they live in (Park; Burgess, 1921; Park, 1952, 2018b; Simmel, 2006).

In summary, starting from a specific spatial configuration, analyzed from the perspective of human ecology, the occurrence of inherent ecological phenomena, such as competition, dominance, succession, centralization, concentration, segregation, natural areas, among others, are related to ecology. Based on the interactionist conceptions that guide human action, a more comprehensive study of the locations and people within the city can lead to an understanding of the extraordinary variation of phenomena occurring in its different areas, thus shedding light on the magnitude, quantity, causes, and effects of various factors related to social disorganization and urban deficits, such as divorce and crime.

12 Simmel (2006), one of the forerunners of symbolic interactionism, is one of the first theorists to break with the separatist conception between the individual and society. In a completely opposite direction, he stated that society is what individuals do and suffer, constituting bonds of association that are made, unmade, and remade in a fluid way, emphasizing that the contents of human life are closely related to social life. Finally, she structures the foundations of interactionist thinking by pointing out that in their process of formation, societies progressively show that the relationships among individuals are linked by reciprocal influences and determinations. Another forerunner of interactionist ideas, Blumer (1986) believed that symbolic interactionism is based on the assumption that human beings act in relation to things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them, including everything that humans can notice in their world, such as physical objects, other human beings, institutions that are peculiar to them, such as school or government. Also, part of this context are the subjective ideals that should guide conduct, such as individual independence or honesty, acceptance of orders, requests from third parties, all of which, it should be stressed, in the situations that the individual encounters in their daily life. Furthermore, adherents of this theory understand that the meaning of such things originates from the social interaction that individuals have with others and that these meanings are processed and modified through an interpretative process used by people to deal with things they find.

The epistemological foundations, as well as the methodological possibilities derived from the theoretical material developed by the Chicago School, are well established. The sociological contributions of Robert Ezra Park are quite significant, and it is now pertinent to investigate the applicability of such studies in the field of criminal justice

2 Park's urban sociology: critical update and methodological foundations for a new criminology

The issue at hand in the reflections presented here concerns the content of Park's work and consequently what was developed within the Chicago School of Sociology¹³ regarding the diagnosis and propositions on criminality, its causes and ways to address it. The need for certain contextual approaches with essential critical updates inherent to it is outlined as follows.

Regarding the foundations of Chicago sociology, based on human ecology and prompted by recurring criticisms, Pierson (1948) already anticipated that it was not excessive to recall that, within the realm of sciences, nothing is completely definitive, finished, and completed. It is inherent to the development of scientific knowledge the possibility of maturation and improvement of what was previously constructed. Moreover, new contributions can be valuable for increasing the degree of perfection of theories, with a higher probability of approaching the truth.

Thus, an essential critical update is epistemological in nature, considering that the time elapsed between the early 20th century and the present day has allowed for ruptures of the canons of scientific positivism. This has profoundly influenced theories of human ecology, with social sciences now anchored in various other perspectives beyond the methods related to natural sciences.

Thus, updates and corrections to functionalist organicism, from the epistemological reference aspect that underpinned theoretical constructions in the early days of modern sociology, have been developed, with subsequent methodological adjustments. They were necessary for understanding the mechanisms governing the functioning of societies in their inescapable dynamism.

In this context, functionalist organicism, structured based on the functioning

¹³ This work adopted the information gathered from all the authors researched, specifically Park's absolute influence on what was produced by the Chicago School of Sociology during the period in which the theorist worked at the University of Chicago (1913-1933). Coulon (1995) went so far as to say that most of the empirical studies carried out there were supervised by Park. Pierson (1948), in turn, stated that it was from the publication of *The City: suggestions for the investigation of human behavior in the city environment*, Park's seminal work, in 1915, that the field of human ecology definitely began to spread in the scientific environment.

of plant and animal ecology, started from symbiotic assumptions for community constructions and consensus for societal formation. They should have an ordered configuration by the struggle for a place on the ground mediated by custom and law, with such a theory being excessively consensual and linear, especially when pointing to the functional specialization of individuals and institutions (Castells, 2000).

In this theoretical framework, the category known as “cooperative competition” clearly outlines the starting point of consensuality from the perspective of common expectations of convergent behaviors for the harmonious functioning of groups of individuals. Such groups, due to the pursuit of common goals beneficial to all, based on laws and customs that protected everyone, evolved from communities to harmonious societies, both biotically and socially balanced, disregarding the profound social inequality that permeated and continues to permeate existing social relations and the social ruptures resulting from it¹⁴.

From this perspective, socially functional organization results in a salutary interdependence among individuals and a beneficial distribution of work for the entire social group. Consequently, there is a spatial distribution of areas in cities favorable to those who live or work there, without correlating with the current model of society. This means that social phenomena occurring in the city can no longer be fully explained by the concentric circle perspective of Burgess (1923) and its gradients of crime¹⁵. For instance, since modern cities no longer have the linear configuration required for such an interpretation, certain categories belonging to human ecology have also become obsolete and therefore unnecessary for explaining and understanding human actions within the context of cities.

A traditional example of the need to overcome certain categories related to human ecology is the classic definition of dominance and its derivatives, such as migration, segregation, invasion, and succession, among others. Clearly, these categories reflect actions that originate from social conflicts and thus need to be

¹⁴ In this sense, Silva and Marinho (2014) warn that several Marxist authors have questioned the relevance of urban sociology, since the phenomena that affect the distribution of neighborhoods are linked to the general characteristics of capitalist societies, giving them a special dimension. In this regard, these criticisms focus on the analysis of the distribution of urban neighborhoods based on the location of group struggles in residential markets, which, from the perspective of Chicago sociologists, occurs in an interdependent way with central phenomena of capitalist societies, such as the expansion of labor, industrial and financial capital markets.

¹⁵ Quinn (1948) specifically analyzes the hypothesis of Burgess's concentric circles, and already at that time drew attention to the criticism that many cities do not conform to an ideal spatial circular pattern. However, he warned that there is a definite trend towards the ideal structure of zones, varying according to each context. This ultimately validates the explanation for the spatial structure of any city.

contextualized in a non-harmonic environment shaped by the legal-political systems that configure them.

As a result, a closer alignment with political science and the explicit recognition of a society founded on conflict, in which legal-political systems generate social vulnerabilities through structural violence, is necessary. These aspects are highly relevant for better application of the concepts of social and urban disorganization that prevailed in certain city spaces as triggers for specific criminal behaviors (Guimarães, 2023).

Thus, referencing a clear insertion into the theoretical canons of a conflictual society points towards opposition to classical liberal precepts of a harmonious society, based on the pursuit of the common good and harmony sought by all members of the social pact. This, more or less paradoxically if not categorically, is recognized by the Chicago sociology, which seeks explanations for a wide range of social phenomena, including crime¹⁶, in spatial segregation and related social exclusion.

It is always pertinent to recall, to temper criticisms, that among the epistemological and methodological references of the Chicago School of Sociology is the research conducted by the Pragmatic School. It staunchly defends the applicability of what was theoretically developed, including by philosophy, for solving social problems (Shaw; McKay, 1942).

In this regard, perhaps the best path for theoretical updating of what was previously produced by the Chicago School is an anchoring in dialectical epistemologies that allow the convergence of updated Marxist diagnosis with theoretical propositions of neo-constitutionalism and neo-contractualism. The latter seek the transition/amplification from the constitutional, social, democratic, and legal state to a state of social justice as well¹⁷.

In summary, the above aims to recognize the necessary corrections to what was developed in Park's work, with clear implications for Chicago sociology. However, it must be emphasized that theoretical gaps or shortcomings brought about

16 A useful theoretical update on the social contexts that favor the practice of criminal behavior based on relationships guided by liberal legal-political systems can be found in Durkheim (1995), Merton (2009), and Baratta (1999). Based on the concepts of anomie and structural violence, they ended up approaching the sociology developed by the Chicago School of Sociology and its perceptions linking social and urban disorganization to the ineffectiveness of norms and the lack of access for individuals to the fruition of their basic needs reflected in the existential minimum.

17 For a better understanding of dialectical epistemologies, see Marques Neto (2001) who, overcoming exclusionary idealism and empiricism, understood that the act of knowing is the act of constructing and reconstructing, improving previous knowledge, bringing the subject and the object closer together, with the subject constructing their own object of research.

by time and contextual diversification do not invalidate the substantial methodological and criminological contributions that these studies have made to understanding social phenomena related not only to criminality but also to the broader functioning of society.

Thus, having succinctly outlined some of the various possibilities for theoretical updating of Park's work, we now specifically address the problem proposed in this article. This is done with due consideration of the criminological possibilities of correlating social and urban disorganization with the practice of certain offenses in locations characterized by such disorganizational phenomena.

A key point to highlight in structuring the theories developed by the Chicago School, to which Robert Ezra Park's participation was fundamental, is the change in research methods. Such changes can be understood and summarized by the transition from investigations conducted exclusively in libraries, using purely bibliographic techniques, to field research, inaugurating an empiricist sociology with both quantitative and qualitative character¹⁸ (Eufrásio, 2013).

It is thus understood that this point enabled the rupture of positivist criminology, which, although based on inductive empiricism, focused its research on a merely descriptive quantitative plane. Lombroso's criminal man is a paradigmatic example, not taking into account various other factors that could be related to the practice of offenses, such as vulnerabilities due to the physical space inhabited.

In this context, seeking to address issues derived from poverty and social exclusion in cities from a preventive perspective on criminality, it was necessary to create methods that empirically demonstrate the origins of this problem. Theoretically, indicators of improvements in individuals' well-being were developed, which undoubtedly involved structural urban reforms in cities as well as political changes (Park, 1950; Shaw, 1948).

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the research conducted by Chicago sociologists was triggered by the perception—due to well-defined contextual reasons in time and space—of the serious social problems existing in the periphery of the city of Chicago, inhabited by immigrants who had moved there in search of better living conditions. Designated as natural criminal areas, these were characterized by high rates of specific criminality related to poverty (Park, 1950).

18 The methodological shift brought about by the Chicago School of sociology can be expressed in the interactionist perspective adopted by its researchers. Emerged from it the possibility of investigating the analytical subject, the individual who could provide information beyond the observable context, since he would describe his particular world and, most importantly, his own impressions of that world and his daily relationships, their meaning, and the decisions to act that derive from them. For Chicago sociologists, individuals act according to the way they see the world and not how it might appear to those who observe and research it without knowing this subjective context

Such conditions of segregated social and spatial living led to the erosion of the social fabric, consequently undermining the possibilities of exercising informal social control. This was because community bonds were severed with immigration, families were disaggregated, there were no solid and cohesive religious references, and miscegenation brought with it cultural shock. In short, this context of social instability, the breeding ground for delinquency was established, and, even worse, the development of criminal tradition was structured (Park, 1967a; Shaw; McKay, 1942).

Thus, field research was developed, emphasizing the voices of people experiencing social problems through investigations that favored participatory observation, questionnaires, the collection of life histories of these socially and urbanistically segregated individuals, and quantitative analysis interviews, inherent to the survey method, still currently and widely used in field research¹⁹.

The aim of these new research methods and techniques was to provide objectivity and neutrality to research results by prioritizing the perspective of the researched individuals rather than that of the researcher. This remains an important tool for epistemological control in the production of scientific knowledge.

Thus, data were first collected to represent the reality of the studied phenomenon empirically, avoiding the previously frequent sociological speculation. From the information obtained in the places where the phenomena occurred, from the perspective of those involved, through qualitative sociology, a better understanding of the spatial distribution of criminality was achieved. Possible diagnoses and ways to address and eradicate the conditions causing delinquency were then outlined (Park, 1967a).

In summary, it is through the study of social interactions among individuals and between them and their environment, with cities as the backdrop, that phenomena occurring there should be studied. Emphasis should be placed on the perspective of the people participating in these interactions, combining individual consciousness (qualitative indicators) and objective social reality (quantitative indicators) in the quest for correct analysis and interpretation of social facts specifically contextualized in a given physical space.

From this perspective, a new panorama for criminological studies emerged. From then on, it was through understanding the worldview that the individuals themselves had of the place where they lived, their relationships with other

19 For a better understanding of what the sociology developed by the Chicago School represented in terms of methodological innovation, it is worth reading Coulon (1995), who praises the School's contributions to quantitative and qualitative methods used in empirical research, in concrete fieldwork, emphasizing that they brought it reputation and influence in world sociology.

members of the community, the weight that the concrete conditions of life in that locality had on the choice of daily behaviors. Gradually, the phenomena of social disorganization and urban disorganization were related to the practice of certain offenses. This allowed the development of concretely grounded diagnoses with the possibility of effective, efficient, and specific application of solutions to problems of a distinctly social and community nature, ultimately formulating criminal policies (Park, 1967a; Shaw; McKay, 1942).

3 Theoretical relevance and currentness of Robert Ezra Park's work

This article sought, as stated in its title, to analyze the current relevance of Robert Ezra Park's work. To this end, a critical contextual analysis with political, ideological, criminological, and methodological biases was adopted. Reaching this goal required essential corrections due to changes occurred in the approximately 100 years since the publication of these theories.

Thus, due to the limitations of a scientific article, pertinent criticisms were admitted and analyzed from a constructive perspective, as contributions aimed at corrections and improvements to what was initially proposed. However, it is recognized that such criticisms, improvements, and corrections, which are absolutely common in scientific development, did not distort or alter the fundamental ideas developed by Park but rather serve to fill gaps that would emerge over time.

Hence, the current relevance of Park's work and its pertinence as a theoretical tool for analyzing problems related to urban criminality should be sought through its use in subsequent works. Among them, notable is Valladares (2018), which identifies the researcher as one of the most important sociologists of the 20th century, calling him the father of urban sociology.

Similarly, Eufrásio (2013) wrote a comprehensive work on human ecology from the perspective of urban structure, dedicating an entire chapter to studying Park's work.

In Brazil, other works have also been published with complete translations of several of Park's articles, such as Pierson (1948) and Velho (1967). Additionally, numerous scientific articles have used the Chicago School of Sociology as a theoretical basis to test hypotheses linking certain socially and urbanistically disorganized areas to specific crimes. In this way, the existence of hot spots or spatially determined criminality is recognized²⁰.

20 Several works have been published following this line, such as: Massena (1986), Adorno (1991), Misse (1995), Joas (1999), Beato Filho and Reis (2000), Siqueira (2001), Sogame (2001), Felix

However, beyond the repeated appropriations of the analytical aspect of this work, its impressive current relevance can be assessed by the use of categories developed therein, which now serve as tools for theoretical development and are repeatedly used across various fields of study. They bridge geography, sociology, and criminology, with contemporary studies in environmental criminology paying particular attention to them. This is notably evident in the study of social and structural vulnerabilities faced by certain individuals in well-defined areas of the city and the resulting criminalization and exposure to victimization from crimes committed in such areas (Dantas, 2022).

In this perspective, the studies of Diniz (2005), Batella and Diniz (2010), Andrade, Souza, and Freire (2013), Casteletto (2014), Lira (2014), Faria, Alves, and Ferreira (2015), Santos (2016a), Abreu (2019), Plassa and Parré (2019) are crucial. These studies, to varying degrees, correlate geographic space, social disorganization, urban disorganization, and criminality based on empirical research, proving that the distribution of criminal violence does not occur randomly in urban spaces. On the contrary, certain types of offenses are closely related to specific social and spatial characteristics that demarcate vulnerable geographic areas.

It is important to note that many other works have also been conducted in areas related to informal social control, with substantial research exploring issues introduced by Chicago sociology. These include the functioning of control institutions in neighborhoods, the issue of local communities, and topics related to structural social vulnerabilities.

According to these parameters, Marandola and Hogan (2009), based on ecological variables, investigated correlations between place vulnerability and socio-demographic vulnerability. It is noteworthy that Chicago School studies that cite Park directly permit a distinctly geographic view of vulnerability, facilitating the perception of risks and dangers affecting the place, including a lack of security.

In the same vein, Rolnik (1999) developed the category of “risk urbanism” to designate issues arising from the spatial segregation of certain socially vulnerable groups concerning the places they inhabit and their relationships with various forms of violence coming from this. As a result, propositions were developed to locally address such vulnerabilities, involving sectoral public policies to mitigate

(2002), Freitas (2002), Teodósio (2003), Cerqueira and Lobão (2004), Ferreira and Penna (2005), Diniz (2005), Braga and Gastaldo (2009), Batella and Diniz (2010), Evangelista (2012), Valentin and Pinezi (2012), Andrade, Souza and Freire (2013), Melhem (2013), Cabral de Lira (2014), Lira (2014, 2015), Delgado (2016), Casteletto (2014), Galvão (2014), Melo and Matias (2015), Ramos (2015), Faria, Alves and Ferreira (2015), Ferreira and Marcial (2015), Santos (2015, 2016a, 2016b), Valladares (2018), Abreu (2019), Caceres (2022), Endo (2022) and Dantas (2022).

the territorial exclusion faced by a large segment of the Brazilian population.

Another striking characteristic of Chicago sociology, rooted in pragmatism, is its advocacy for the idea that all thought and knowledge should be considered tools for action. Thus, they should materialize as indicators of feasible public policies that address social and urban problems to tackle structural and consequently criminal violence (Guimarães, 2023). Here, Park's pioneering spirit and his absolute relevance regarding the understanding of the idea that every sociologist should know geography are highlighted. This is because violence, in any of its forms, carries a strong spatial component that must be concretely viewed (Park, 2018a).

Oliveira (2002) echoes this perspective, clearly indicating that public safety policies, structured on preventive and inclusive foundations are suitable means for developing local prevention and citizenship recovery programs. This is based on diagnostics of spatially localized criminality aimed at providing all specific indicators of criminal violence in a given area.

In line with this thinking, Sampson and Groves (1989) conducted an in-depth empirical research to test the theory of social disorganization in certain communities with regard to criminal offenses. The conclusion is that there was robust and consistent evidence of such interrelations, as traditional ecological studies are compatible with various theoretical lines that seek to explain criminal phenomena.

Wickes and Hipp (2018) conducted an extensive investigation in Brisbane, Australia, interviewing over 4,000 people to test the theory of social disorganization and its impacts on informal social control as a tool for regulating undesirable behaviors. According to the authors, this is one of the most studied theories in criminology over the past 20 years.

Following the theoretical line of the Chicago School of Sociology, Johnson (2021), using Criminal Ecology as a theoretical basis and from the observation of structural violence in certain locations, investigated the influences of neighborhood social structure on crime regulation and the levels of criminal violence related to residential instability and vacant housing.

In particular, Kim, Lagrange, and Willis (2012), using the sociology of place specifically related to the link between crime and physical space, investigated the unequal spatial distribution of crime from a sociological perspective. According to the authors, crime is universal but spatially concentrated. Furthermore, crime targets everyone but not everyone in equal bases, being socially constructed in a very concrete physical reality.

In the same vein, Weisburd and Eck (2017) have been studying the relations between physical space and crime for over 20 years, concluding that preventive actions are also effective in combating sectoral criminal violence. The explanation is that by managing areas where criminal activity is significantly higher than in nearby areas, it is possible to control a range of recurring offenses through simple preventive measures such as increased surveillance of targets.

Regarding criminal prevention, Brantingham and Faust (2009) recognized the existence of various possible levels of action in preventing criminal activities. However, at the first and most important level, the population must be provided with social and physical well-being, as well as concurrently develop specific crime prevention education programs.

It is certain that countless scientific works have utilized Park's specific literature or theories developed within the Chicago School of Sociology. These works initiated and developed urban sociology, and the author either participated directly or had a decisive influence on them.

Moreover, new branches of criminology, which are influenced by the rupture of positivist criminology perpetrated by Chicago sociology, are being developed, considering the study of the physical space and human interactions that occurring within it.

In the field of criminology of place, for example, the theoretical bases that underpin its studies are clear. This is because criminogenic factors are analyzed through the contextualization of physical space, possible social disorganization. Also, there is the necessary engagement with the subjects interacting there, whether they are victims or offenders. Most importantly, they develop indicators for public policies and private actions as central elements in combating criminal violence (Brantingham; Brantingham, 1991, 1995).

Thus, there are strong indications that studies structured from the scientific foundations developed within human ecology, which have unraveled relationships between individuals and the urban environment in which they live, with all its derivatives. These refer to interrelations among physical space, structural and criminal violence, spatial and social vulnerability, neighborhood relations, formal and informal social control, new possibilities in quantitative and qualitative empirical research methodology, sectoral public policies, communitarianism, among many other topics, proving the absolute current relevance and pertinence of what has been produced for approximately 100 years at the University of Chicago.

Conclusions

As the first and essential conclusion of this article, the deep antagonism of Chicago sociology, clearly exposed in Park's work, is highlighted against any theoretical approach based on Lombrosian etiology for explaining criminal phenomena. Instead, it points to social circumstances rooted in the interaction among individuals and between them and their environment as vectors of crime.

In this regard, the article exposed the use of epistemological reasons strongly influenced by Charles Darwin's theories to criticize the ontological bias of Lombroso's explanations of crime. It was necessary for Chicago researchers to remain within the realm of Auguste Comte's scientific positivism, with its methods related to natural sciences, to gain scientific recognition for their propositions, as at that time, empiricist inductivism was the predominant method for reaching scientific truths.

To this end, the path taken was through the theoretical development of human ecology, whose main purpose was to explain the formation of societies, their functioning, and the relational constitution among individuals based on the biotic relationships of irrational animals and plants. The central point was the theoretical approaches to spatial struggle for the occupation of the best places for the full development of vital functions.

In such a relational context, based on human ecology, it was concluded that the city emerges as the great research laboratory. This is because studies on health, housing, poverty, and crime could be conducted meticulously in the place where individuals actually live providing, in the view of Chicago sociologists, a realistic and objective character of social sciences based on interactionism premises.

As an important conclusion of this work, the necessary critique and consequent theoretical update from a contextual space-time and legal-political perspective is highlighted. Such an update does not interfere with the foundations of the urban sociology developed by Park and his colleagues at the University of Chicago but is important for better understanding and applying this theory.

It was also conclusively pointed out as fundamental, the epistemological and methodological contributions developed by Chicago sociology in the realm of criminology. The main point was the introduction of empirical research methods that opposed the speculative sociology predominant at the time, in which information originated from speculations and theoretical debates without proper support from the surrounding reality.

The confirmation of interrelations among social disorganization, urban

disorganization, and the practice of crimes in a given physical space, as well as the close connection between the vulnerabilities characterizing such areas and the inherent violences, whether structural or criminal, constitutes the main conclusion of this work. From this, the aim of investigating the relevance and pertinence of Robert Ezra Park's work was achieved, since the use of its foundations over more than 100 years from these writings to the present remains absolutely current, relevant, and influential.

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