thoughts Robert J. Sampson Great American City 1-13

It’s hard whether to feel vindicated or negated by this book. It is clearly an effort by the Chicago School to take space seriously. As a research who has been deeply involved in the sociology of space, that’s gratifying. But Sampson writes about the role of space without ever (as best I can tell from the index) citing Harvey, Marx, Soja. Lefebvre. Really? Really? He suggests that people think globalization has the same effect on cities everywhere, without citing (because he couldn’t since it would invalidate that claim) Janet Abu=-Lughod’s masterful, but long-established, work, NY Chicago LA that describes precisely -- it is the topic of the book -- how globalization in fact affected those three cities in clearly distinct ways. And to answer that question, incidentally, she has to argue that space matters. (Space that is much more rich than Sampson's, with history, and geography, economic history and race and political organization.)

            That could be taken as just a typical complaint about “how could you not cite my favorite person.” Certainly, there’s room for that: how do you do a letter drop experiment without citing Steven Levine’s work in the same area, including his effort to do a letter drop and his decision to abandon it as unworkable. But the other authors are simply egregious:. Btu that’s lie pointing out that when he writes that “effect” is a noun and a verb, that effect is not the same in both senses,; he’s talking about effect and affect, unless he’s effecting a concern with space.

            The sociology of space has come out of the work of Marxist theorists like those mentioned above, and sympathetic researchers. Sampson is happy to cite 100 years of the Chicago School (Suttles in ch 9 about altruistic neighborhoods, Gold Coast and the Slum (which opens ch 17, titled after it.), Wirth, etc ad nauseum.) but, true to the Chicago school would scarcely cite leftists and only glancingly talks about the LA school, and then misrepresents it as non-spatial while ignoring Davis, Soja, and on and on.

            So in that way it’s deeply frustrating. But, then, what is going on here? One possibility is that the Chicago School is the borg: it is consuming the Sociology of Space: we will be assimilated and consumed. That’s sort of a backhanded complement: we won’t acknowledge you, we won’t cite your major theorists, but we will make use of your insights and thus, implicitly, acknowledge through our need to poach the work in this field that it was adding something to sociology that could not be ignored.

            The other option is that it is the kind of opportunistic appropriation by a school trying to remain relevant. After Occupy Wall Street, everyone had an occupy wall street book, tying it to their own work or their pet theories, or writing (for the first time, sometimes) about anarchism to show that they had a contribution to the current discourse. That’s the other option: that the Chicago School is increasingly irrelevant tot a large swath o f sociology of space, and wants back in.

            Of course, the Chicago School was spatial a long time ago -- in the 20s, in a heavy handed, embarrassingly deterministic way. But Samson deploys a classic Chicago School strategy: to claim that what he’s doing is completely novel, and at odds with mainstream work, while misrepresenting the mainstream thought so as to make that appear so. (see the effort to claim that the LA School is not aptil, and that sociology doesn’t notice that location and space matter). Meanwhile, he still clings to all the familiar trappings of the Chicago School, as if through contractual obligation or brainwashing: “ecology,” a whole chapter on “disorder” followed by one on “disorganization.”

            Samson is wrong from the first claim (8) that if community is becoming less richly developed, then peoel whoudl be randomly swirled about with no noticeable patterns. To the contrary, people may be isolated in community, so that community doesn’t help them anymore, but still segregated, so that groups facec ocnentrated disadvantatge.ge. HSamopson makes the obligatory argument for why Chciago is the ideal place to conduct his research, as if it has theoretical justiicaiton instead of the simple fact that that’s where he was. But itChiago is also useful as a setting for the project because it seems that only in Chicago are rwesearchers able to repeatedly approach the racial deprevation of capitalism with naïve wonder and curiosity,a s if they have not seen it before and cannot imagine where it came from or how it works.

            Diagram on pl 232 suggest that community wellbeing is shaped by “copllective efficacy” and “moral/legal cynicism” (both descended from “altruistic character” of a neighborhood. nowhere is the suggestion that tht ewelbbeing ofa community is dependent on,s ay, it’s economic well being, the discrimination it faces, or the citizenship status of its residents. it’s all about whether people mail letters for each other. ISn’t there a preceding variable there?

            There are other more signficiant theoretical criticms to be made about the book -- for instance that taking “space”s eriously means more than census tracts, ti means thinking about the interaction of physicala ndsocal structures, reallys patializing things. But no matter.

            His interaction with the city is almost as casual as Elijah Anderon’s in his most recent, casual book. The Cosmopolitcan Canopy. Sampson walks by, but doesn’t engage, doesn’t know the people: “I observed men sitting around a makeshift table on the sidewalk… They appeared ot be playing cards…I took a picture to capture for the reading the feel of this particular intersection.” Prewsumably it felt different for Sampson, who quoatedZorbaugh, 80 years earlier, calling it “Death Corner” than it did to the men who were sitting around there palyign cards.

            His proposal is ok: “the diea is to renew what is already there while simultaneously investing in communities on the edge fo critical need but not yet deemed policy relevant.” (?) But what about those that are polic relevant. Samson wnt sot mak”make the case” fpr ‘copmmuntiy elvel intervatnetion instead of individual level escape hatches.” But wouldn’t urban renewal count as that? He wants to focus on violence intervatention for communtiews at risk. What about poverty elimination? Tgat will take care of the violent.   
--ciommunity polciig  
--prisoner reentry rpograms.   
--mixed icome hosuing and community economic development.  
--linkign investments in early child development with community context(whatever that means) he celebrates the retrograde harlem children’s zone and Promise Neighborhoods as well. Not as bad as it seems to outsiders, but still not great. Why the children? why not the whole family with a good paying job , great housing a nd a safe community? (424)

            why “intervention” and not something frdemocratic from the ground up? (424)