

## Theoretical-Methodological Contribution of Chicago School Urban Ecology Approach to Communication Studies

Sevil Bal<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The Chicago School, founded in 1892, significantly shaped early communication studies, especially until the 1930s, focusing on the city-society relationship, mass communication, and the press. Beyond this, it offered a holistic theoretical and methodological framework based on human and urban ecology, pragmatism, and interaction. Although explored in a few studies, the school's concepts emphasize the interconnection of culture and communication in urban societies. This study proposes the urban ecology approach as a theoretical tool for understanding the communication-society relationship. The study is based on literature review and historical analysis. It discusses the historical context, research topics, and methodology of the Chicago School, particularly the contributions of Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Watson Burgess through their work on urban ecology and concentric zone theory. The study argues that this perspective provides a comprehensive framework for understanding modernity, urban life, and social interaction, offering valuable insights for communication studies and sociology disciplines.

**Keywords:** *Chicago School, Sociology of Communication, Urban Ecology.*

## Chicago Okulu Kentsel Ekoloji Yaklaşımının İletişim Çalışmalarına Kuramsal ve Yöntembilimsel Katkısı

### ÖZET

Chicago Okulu, 1892'deki kuruluşundan 20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısına kadar sosyal bilimlerin birçok alanında etkili olmuş, özellikle 1930'lara kadar iletişim çalışmalarını etkilemiştir. İletişim alanındaki araştırmalar, genellikle kitle iletişimi ve basın üzerinden kent-toplum ilişkisini ele almıştır. Ancak Chicago Okulu, insan ekolojisi, kentsel ekoloji, pragmatizm ve etkileşim gibi kuramsal çerçevelerle iletişim çalışmaları açısından da bütünlüklü bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, iletişim çalışmalarında daha çok kitle medyası tartışmaları üzerinden ele alınan Chicago Okulu'nun kentsel ekoloji yaklaşımını iletişim-toplum ilişkisinin kavranması açısından bir kuramsal çalışma sahası olarak öne sürmektir. Çalışmada, literatür taraması ve tarihsel analiz yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Chicago Okulu'nun tarihsel bağlamı, araştırma konuları ve metodolojisi açıklanarak okulun önemli temsilcilerinden Robert Ezra Park ve Ernest Watson Burgess'in kentsel ekoloji ve ortak merkezli daireler kuramı tartışmalarının iletişim çalışmalarına katkısı irdelenmektedir. Bununla birlikte; kentsel ekoloji perspektifinin ve bu kapsamdaki kavram ve tartışmaların; iletişim çalışmaları açısından ve iletişim sosyolojisi perspektifiyle, modernite, kent ve toplumsal etkileşimin bütünlüklü olarak kavranmasında kuramsal ve yöntemsel bir yol haritası sunabileceği vurgulanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Chicago Okulu, İletişim Sosyolojisi, Kentsel Ekoloji.*

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: sbal@baskent.edu.tr, Assistant Professor, Başkent University, Faculty of Communication, ORCID: 0000-0002-2737-4745.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From the late 19th century to the second half of the 20th century, the Chicago School, which encompassed various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, economics, architecture, political economy, and psychology, emerged within the University of Chicago. It provided a theoretical and methodological evaluation of a wide range of phenomena, including urbanization, population density, migration, crime, and ghettoization, all of which were consequences of the rapid industrialization process following World War I. These phenomena were examined through an interdisciplinary perspective, with a particular focus on the city of Chicago, where these processes were most observable (Abbott, 1997; Parker, 2004). Moreover, the Chicago School played a significant role in the development of early American communication research tradition. In contrast to the quantitative and managerial research focus of communication studies conducted under the leadership of Lazarsfeld at the Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research during the same period, the Chicago School emphasized the qualitative and ethnographic examination of social and urban interaction forms. This shift has positioned it as an alternative theoretical and methodological approach in the field of communication studies. Within this framework, the phenomenon of communication and mass communication is addressed as a fundamental reference point in understanding and explaining modern life and urban existence. Therefore, the "urban ecology" debate is not viewed as a separate research area for communication studies within the Chicago School, but rather as a natural field of inquiry to investigate these very relationships. This discussion serves as a starting point for rethinking the Chicago School's role in the communication studies literature, moving beyond the narrow research focus defined by terms like communication, press, and mass media, and offering a broader examination of the concepts and methods encompassed by the urban ecology approach and its associated studies. Building on this discussion, the aim of the research is to propose the urban ecology approach of the Chicago School, which is typically addressed through mass media discussions in communication studies, as a theoretical field for understanding the communication-society relationship. The study explains the historical context, research topics, and methodology of the Chicago School, and examines the contributions of its prominent representatives, Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Watson Burgess, particularly their discussions on the "Urban Ecology Approach" and the "Concentric Zone Model" in relation to communication studies and sociology of communication.

In this study, the contribution of the urban ecology approach to communication studies at the intersection of communication sciences, sociology, and urban studies is built on a literature review and historical analysis methodology. Literature discussion and historical analysis methodology were preferred in the research. Historical analysis is a research method that aims to make inferences about the current situation by examining a phenomenon, event, information, or theory in the past period in the context of cause and effect. With the 19th century transition to the scientific approach to history, the modern concept of historical analysis offers an alternative framework for the present situation and

conditions, starting from a comprehensive discussion such as who, where, for what purpose, and when the subject or research unit under investigation was introduced (Thorpe & Holt, 2008). Marwick (2001) emphasized that these questions can be applied to many texts, such as historical documents, artifacts, maps, and statistical tables. Research in communication studies (Figaro, 2015); (Sloan & Stamm, 2017) has also explored this method by examining schools of thought and theories in the field. Therefore, in this study, the theoretical framework, historical context, concepts, and method of the Chicago School are evaluated as an object of historical analysis for communication studies.

Robert Ezra Park, a key representative of the Chicago School and the founder of the urban ecology theory, which focuses on the distribution of individuals, communities, and societies within urban space and the nature of social processes occurring there, shaped his theory and works by examining the urban-spatial structure in which modern society itself is embedded. He developed his theory, which addresses the social transformation process unfolding in various stages such as interaction, conflict, consensus, and assimilation, drawing on the ideas of many different theorists (Gieryn, 2006). Another key figure of this school, Ernest Burgess, contributed to these studies with the concentric zone theory, which he developed together with Park. The problematization of "urban space" as a subject of research and the emphasis on a field-oriented research perspective can be regarded as other significant contributions of the urban ecology theory proposed by the Chicago School. Along with Park's theoretical works, a methodological framework and research process that can be considered within the context of applied sociology studies, which focus more on the city, was developed. This approach, which emphasizes the spatial dimension of the city and seeks to understand its physiological and social dynamics as an integrated whole, is noteworthy. The development of the urban ecology theory has gained prominence in the sociology literature, particularly within the subfield of urban sociology, and holds significance as an inspiration for contemporary environmental studies. On the other hand, the evaluation of this theory from the perspective of both communication and sociology disciplines, particularly in the interface of communication studies, is regarded as the unique contribution of the study.

In the first section of the study, the general research orientation of the Chicago School is discussed alongside its historical development process. The second section examines the sociological approaches of Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Watson Burgess, two of the school's key representatives. The final section explains Park's urban ecology theory and the concentric zone theory developed by Park and Burgess. Within this framework, concepts such as "biotic-cultural level," "social control," "competition," "interaction," "contextuality," and "social change" are highlighted. The research subjects of the school, natural communication orientations in sociological perspectives, and the treatment of social order are discussed in the context of modern urban societies and communication issues. Understanding the Chicago School within such a context can contribute to forming an alternative perspective for research in communication studies.

## **2. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND RESEARCH ORIENTATION OF THE CHICAGO SCHOOL**

The Chicago School, established in 1892 as the first sociology department in the United States at the University of Chicago under the direction of the Sociology Chair, and the intellectuals gathered around this school, such as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Robert Ezra Park, Ernest Watson Burgess, Roderick McKenzie, and Louis Wirth, along with the ideas of Charles Cooley, were particularly focused on understanding and researching the great transformation of the city of Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century. In a general sense and this frame, particularly from the period after World War I to the 1930s, the comprehensive body of urban-centered social research and worldview, which included both scholars and students, is defined as the Chicago School (Abbott, 1997).

In order to better understand the purpose of the establishment of the Chicago School and the research conducted within this framework, it is important to address the historical conditions of the period in which the school was founded. After World War I, both Europe and America entered a rapid process of industrialization. The city of Chicago in the United States, becoming a significant industrial region during this period, faced intense migration from various regions of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, leading to a concentration based on cheap labor. Looking at the population statistics of Chicago, one can observe a substantial increase in the city's population, rising from four thousand to two million over a span of thirty years. Subsequently, as industrialization progressed, the development of mechanization as a step in the process reduced the need for labor and directly caused an increase in unemployment rates. Additionally, basic life needs, such as housing and healthcare, which were driven by economic inadequacies, as well as the emergence of slum settlements, land price increases driven by speculative profits, the resulting social polarization, and the formation of subcultures, along with the rise in organized crime rates, led to the emergence of significant social problems (Williams III & McShane, 2004). The emergence of the Chicago School can be expressed in such a historical context. The communication processes between the increasingly differentiated groups brought about by these developments, as well as the consequences of mass communication, became a subject of early communication studies in the context of the school's discussions on modern urban society.

This historical background led to a need for the scholars, whose names would later be associated with the Chicago School, to interpret and explain the changes and transformations occurring in the city of Chicago. Therefore, the primary source of inspiration for the work of the Chicago School was the city of Chicago itself. In this context, topics such as the city's physical growth and expansion, the nature and density of its population, and the consideration of urbanization as a "way of life" are prominent (Aslanoğlu, 1998; Wirth, 1938). On the other hand, the school also focused on identifying, defining, and categorizing social problems in the city, and explaining them. Chicago, in this regard, serves as an example that makes applied field research possible. In this context,

Park referred to the city of Chicago as a "laboratory". Accordingly, issues that had been less explored in urban studies and were difficult to study in the field, such as migration, crime, and the interactions of disadvantaged groups, were considered fundamental research problems by the school (Park, 2011, 2015; Turut & Özgür, 2018). For instance, one of the major topics in this context, the phenomenon of crime and its social and economic relationship within the urban context, contributed to the development of criminology studies in later periods, creating a body of literature. In this regard, the general tendency within the school was to treat the environmental conditions and relationships as the starting point, rather than explaining the factors that contribute to crime through individual and/or hereditary traits (Cullen & Agnew, 2006).

In the literature, early research focusing on the layered structure and relationships of modern urban life, which is often addressed in urban sociology and environmental studies, is seen to be grounded within the Chicago School. The three key theories expressed here are: the "Urban Ecology Theory" developed by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick Duncan McKenzie; and Ernest Burgess's "Concentric Zone Model" and Louis Wirth's ([1938]2002) theory of "Urbanization as a Way of Life," which builds upon the Urban Ecology Theory, emerged as a framework for defining the characteristics of urban life (Giddens, 2013). The common point of these theories is to reveal the ecological and social conditions of urban life and the problems identified as a result of these conditions (Karakuş, 2013). While Park and Burgess examined the urban phenomenon from a conceptual, theoretical, and methodological perspective influenced by the natural sciences, the process of problematizing the city within a cultural framework became a key issue more emphasized by Wirth (Serter, 2013).

From the perspective of the Chicago School, the order of social reality is explained through "collective behavior." In other words, the order of social reality is shaped based on collective behavior (Erdoğan & Alemdar, 2010). When the works within the Chicago School are examined, it is observed that the school positions social order a priori, while viewing conflict as disruptions within specific periods, with the order being grounded as a dominant norm in the social structure. In this regard, it can be said that the school implicitly developed a theoretical and conceptual framework aimed at ensuring the functional integrity of this order. Therefore, the school focuses on the study of modern urban communities and interaction processes as its research object; potential solutions are evaluated in terms of reaching the universal-evolutionary laws of individual-collective struggle and the regulation and control of unforeseen crises through harmonizing mechanisms.

For the Chicago School, the social characteristics of individuals, communities, and societies, in addition to the physical features of the environments in which they live, and the acceptance of the city as a natural space, as a realm of human nature, are the key factors that directed the thinkers and research methodology of this school towards experimental sociology. Conducting fieldwork and obtaining practical findings from the concrete world is, therefore, of significant importance. When examining the methodological orientations

of the Chicago School, the first technique used in their research can be described as life story and in-depth interview studies. The aim of these studies is to uncover the events that shape people's lives. Another commonly preferred research technique in the school is termed the "ecological research method," which integrates the individual's subjective life experiences with the social context (Abbott, 1997; Williams III & McShane, 2004). Based on this, the research objects in studies conducted within the framework of the Chicago School and the Urban Ecology Theory are the groups, institutions, and relationships in the city of Chicago that enable physical and cultural interactions. Within the framework of sociological approaches, it can be said that the school presents a research synthesis that encompasses both the individual and society. This is because in urban life, individuals are studied as components of the society in which they live, and from the societal perspective, individuals become consumers, citizens, and voters. Therefore, it is considered that both structures mutually and deterministically influence each other in an integrated manner.

The contributions of the Chicago School to the social sciences in general, and to the fields of sociology and communication in particular, as well as the conceptual and methodological opportunities it provided for subsequent research, are noteworthy. The role of the studies conducted by Park and Burgess in the establishment of applied sociology in the United States, particularly in its focus on social problems, is emphasized (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007). Moreover, the Chicago School not only brought together researchers with different social identities and research orientations within the school, benefiting from this diversity, but also succeeded in transforming the transformation of the city of Chicago into a sociological discussion area, making it their own research environment (Bottomore, 1997). The emphasis on spatial studies of the city, the inclusion of the perspectives of the subjects under study as an alternative to managerial research, the conduct of applied field research, and the production of qualitative, inclusive findings and works are among the other significant contributions that are detailed in the following sections of the study.

When criticisms of the Chicago School are considered, they generally focus on key issues such as its establishment with Rockefeller funding, the presence of certain economic and political "concerns" in the nature of its work, and its failure to incorporate some significant social events of the time into its studies. The Chicago School emerged during a period of significant social, political, and economic transformation and struggle. This period was marked by strikes and campaigns for shorter working hours, the deaths of workers, and uprisings that were harshly suppressed by state apparatus. Instead of addressing this context, the school focused more on the lives of ethnic groups and immigrants in Chicago, often avoiding points that could potentially threaten America, and emphasized a "social order" perspective (Therborn, 1976). This focus has been another point of criticism directed at the school. In conclusion, the detailed examination of the historical position of the Chicago School, along with the economic and social characteristics of the city of Chicago, the fundamental starting points of the researchers who gathered within this school, the units they considered as their research objects, the research techniques they used, and their analytical theoretical works, facilitates the understanding of the formation of Robert Ezra

Park's Social Ecological Approach and provides clarity regarding the theoretical framework he himself developed.

### **3. THE APPROACH OF ROBERT EZRA PARK AND ERNEST WATSON BURGESS IN THE CHICAGO SCHOOL**

Robert Ezra Park's academic perspective and theoretical orientation can be explained through a brief biographical assessment within the interface of communication studies. Born in 1864 into a middle-class family in Pennsylvania, it can be said that Park laid the foundations of his academic career after graduating from the University of Michigan in 1887, followed by approximately ten years of journalistic experience. Therefore, it is evident that Park's journalistic experience, gained through communication, played a significant role in shaping his methodological approach, particularly in the studies conducted during his time at the Chicago School. His emphasis on experimental sociology and field research, central to his social investigations, was strongly influenced by this experience (Thorns, 2004). Describing the social research process as a kind of reporting and considering communication as a natural component of understanding and examining the city, Robert Ezra Park's entry into the University of Chicago was facilitated by an invitation extended to him in 1914. From this point until 1936, he both engaged in academic work and provided academic training. Park's works include research articles related to journalism, a sociology book, and studies on urban issues, all of which were significant in his life. Mass media, the history of the press, and discussions on social control are among the key topics he addressed while studying the city. Examples of his works include "The Man at the Bottom", written as a result of a research trip; "Immigrant Press and Its Control"; "Introduction to the Science of Sociology", co-written with Ernest Burgess; "Characteristics of the Old World as Transferred", written with Thomas; "Human Communities"; and "The City" (Coser, 2008). One of the most significant contributions of Park to the field of sociology is his 1915 work "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in City Environments", which played a crucial role in the creation of the urban ecology theory, a fundamental contribution of the Chicago School (Wirth, 1945; Abbott, 1997). Given his works and contributions, it can be said that Park's concepts and theories in the literature were supported by field research, focusing on the identification and resolution of social problems through applied research, the impact of social environments on individual behavior, and the adoption of a research process aimed at an observable external world (Coser, 2008; Ritzer, 1996).

The approach, theory, and works of Ernest Watson Burgess were just as important as those of Robert Ezra Park in the formation and recognition of the Chicago School and the sociology tradition. Born in Tilbury, Ontario, in 1886, Burgess completed his education at Kingfisher University in Oklahoma before continuing his studies at the University of Chicago, where he became a professor in 1921. His work *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), co-authored with Robert Park, is considered one of the first and most influential sociology books, often referred to as the "Bible of Sociology" (Ritzer, 1996, p. 50). The key topics addressed in this book include sociology's history and human nature,

the process of social interaction, competition, conflict, assimilation, and the cycle of adaptation—issues that intersect with contemporary discussions in communication studies and communication sociology. Burgess, who served as the 24th President of the American Sociological Association (ASA), passed away in 1966.

As an extension of the urban ecology approach, he worked on topics such as family life, marriage, retirement, and aging policies in governments. In his 1939 book *Predicting Success or Failure in Marriage*, co-authored with Leonard Cottrell, he developed a scale to assess success and adaptation in marriage. In the book *Aging the Western Societies*, which he edited and published in three volumes, he presented a comparative analysis of issues like population structure, work, retirement, housing, and health insurance, alongside case studies on family relationships and upper-status groups in Europe. Along with Park, Burgess also developed a model conceptualizing the city through concentric zones/circles, which provides comprehensive insights into urban ecology. This model explains social phenomena such as central business districts, transition zones, economic positioning, and crime relations. It offers a set of concepts that allow for the examination of communication processes in urban societies, the role of mass media, and various dimensions of social interaction.

#### **4. URBAN ECOLOGY APPROACH AND THE CONCENTRIC ZONE MODEL**

The examination of the development of the city as a physical and social space of relationships was first explored in the research of the Chicago School and materialized through the Urban Ecology Theory. According to this theory, the structure of cities is a reflection of human nature, and the city serves as the natural habitat for civilized humans. The industrialization process of the modern city, along with the economic and social interactions it brings, and the problems associated with them, are the central themes of this theory, particularly through the works of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, who systematized and established the framework. Another distinctive feature of the Urban Ecology Theory, which serves as a reference point for subsequent urban theories, is its effort to define the "urban space." In this context, the focus is on the regional distribution, settlement, and organizational forms of individuals and institutions. The assumption of the Urban Ecology Theory is that individuals and groups adapt to both natural and social conditions within organized structures. In other words, the core research question of the theory is to understand how and why human communities in modern urban life are positioned in harmony with their environment (Aslanoğlu, 1998). This point represents the understanding of the relationships and interactions that emerge within urban life. Therefore, communication, in the discussions of distribution, settlement, organization, and adaptation covered by the Urban Ecology Theory, becomes an inherently implicit, yet naturally studied, part of this process. Although communication is not the primary research focus in the theory, it is intrinsic to it. Consequently, this theory provides a research framework that can be explored when conceptually restructuring the relationship between city, society, and communication/media, particularly in the fields of communication studies and communication sociology.



The industrial concentration in the city of Chicago and the resulting physical-spatial growth, along with the tendency to examine urban subcultures living in different patterns across various regions of the city, is addressed by Robert Park through two main research questions. The first of these is: How do identities and institutions such as race, ethnicity, family, and economy form in different urban spaces during the urbanization process? The second question is: How are the relationships between these spatial-social structures established? (Güneş, 2013). Therefore, Park's first research question focuses on physical-spatial and environmental factors, while his second question paves the way for identifying the mechanisms that form interactional and relational behaviors between individuals and groups. In terms of communication and mass communication practices, the exploration of environmental factors such as modern urban life, its structure, spaces, and institutions, and the process of explaining the interaction between communities based on these factors, makes the Urban Ecology Theory's framework of the "modern city" highly relevant not only to "urban communication" studies but also in providing a meaningful perspective for communication studies grounded in the approach of communication sociology.

While developing his city-centered theory, Robert Park was influenced by the concepts and theories of several thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Isaac Thomas, Charles Darwin, and Emile Durkheim (Cuff et al., 2005; Swingewood, 1998). In this context, particularly through the concepts of "biotic level" and "social level" within Urban Ecology, a theoretical framework is established, where Darwin's concept of "natural selection" is integrated, Spencer's influence is seen in discussions of evolutionary processes, and Durkheim's positivist and empirical approach is used to explain the methodological context, creating a synthesis (Park & Burgess, 1921; Freyer, 2015). A perspective that also incorporates elements of social psychology is encountered within Park's work. According to Park, humans are born with instinct, passion, and uncontrolled desires; civilization plays an important role as a balancing and regulating force for these primitive instincts. The freedom brought about by individual liberty, in contrast to the restrictive nature of social control mechanisms, creates a tension, and this dilemma occupies a crucial place in Park's conceptualization. Cities are described both as spaces invaded by masses, which are at risk of being driven by any kind of thought due to the breakdown of unity provided by the family, village, and church, and as areas where different social organizations emerge. Park explains this social process by combining Darwinian ideas of all living species' striving for natural equilibrium, fighting for survival under the most suitable environmental conditions, and the dominance of the superior species resulting from competition between different species, using ecological and natural terminology. From this point, Park incorporates terms such as "invasion," "conflict," "dominance," and "replacement" into his theory in an attempt to explain the transformation of modern cities (Güneş, 2013; McKenzie, 1925; Park, 2005; Saunders, 1981).

In this sense, Park's sociological perspective focuses on revealing the integrality of both an ecology related to human nature and a social process concerning society. In other words, through these two research questions, Park emphasizes not only a theoretical discussion

but also the practical responsibility of conducting research in line with these concepts. The ultimate goal, similar to his other works, can be expressed as the pursuit of discovering natural and universal social laws. Therefore, by grounding the study of urban positioning of individuals on the similarities between society and other natural systems, it would be possible to uncover the universal causes underlying these positions. One of Park's key contributions in this regard is the inclusion of the concept of space within the urban ecological approach, as well as his efforts to define space. Another is his development of conceptual definitions, advancing from basic classifications into an explanatory and analytical form that clarifies relationships between classified elements. The structure of cities is seen as "a reflection of human nature." Thus, the urban structure requires understanding and explaining a dilemma where individual freedoms are highlighted on one hand, while these freedoms are restricted by various regulatory mechanisms on the other.

Therefore, the city, as the space of contemporary life, should also be understood as the natural habitat of modern humanity. By focusing on the relationship between urban space and social organization, Park attempts to clarify this issue by borrowing concepts from Darwinian approaches (Freyer, 2015; Karakuş, 2013). Wirth (1945) suggests that concepts borrowed from plant and animal ecology are used within this framework. In the urban ecology approach, the focus is primarily on the biotic level of the city, with the cultural level being treated as a structure that rises upon the biotic level. In this way, concepts used in plant and animal ecology can also be applied to human ecology (Yörükan, 2005).

The fundamental assumptions in Park's theory can be summarized as: "the necessity of explaining the concepts of social harmony and balance in connection with evolution," "the existence of a reciprocal relationship between social equilibrium and social development," and "the importance of making a comparison between the biotic and cultural levels of the city and the concepts defined at these levels." In line with these assumptions, what Park tries to accomplish within his urban ecological theory is to explain that the mutual interdependence relationships established by all organisms within a process called the "web of life," which is central to Darwin's approach, and the resulting struggle and conflict due to the necessity of living in similar habitats, lead to a process of dominance. Park argues that such a process exists and operates similarly within human communities (Park & Burgess, 1921). In this context, the understanding of a natural space at the societal level, especially at the urban level, points to the competitive, conflictual, and dominative relationships that arise in a random and purposeless manner due to socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic reasons, where individuals live together (Aslanoğlu, 1998). The structure of the city must contain both elements that promote individual freedoms and boundaries that balance these freedoms. Therefore, the fundamental discussion points and concepts mentioned here require an examination of social equilibrium, social development, competition, and conflict relationships as a result of modern humans' positioning within the urban space when analyzing contemporary communication practices.

The focal point of the research within Park's urban ecology approach is the spatial distribution of the population. Park explains the dynamics of neighborhood units in cities

through the activities of living beings that strive to reach the most suitable living space in their natural environment and settle there. For example, the neighborhood unit he studied has itself become such a selective and segregative spatial environment (Park, 1952, p. 79). According to Park, the city is not an artificial or constructed form; it is a product of human nature, bringing with it natural processes that facilitate interaction (Tuna, 1987). The city is a living organism. In this sense, it is no different from the human body. While disruptions may occur at certain times within a systemic integrity, there is an overall order. Identifying and solving these problems is important for maintaining this order. In this theory, Robert Park's unit of research can be expressed as settled groups of people in a specific physical, geographical, and cultural living space (Aslanoglu, 1998). The unit under consideration consists of groups defined and categorized according to their settlement characteristics in the urban space, and it is essential to study these aspects in detail.

#### **4.1. Basic Concepts of Urban Ecological Approach**

The process defined by Park as the biotic level and the cultural level refers to two dynamic structures within urban life that are interconnected. The biotic level primarily describes the physical, geographical, and concrete characteristics of the city's natural environment and its scarce resources, which can be observed within the city's natural space. As such, the biotic level points to a state of competition and conflict based on scarce resources. For example, the need for affordable housing close to the city center during migration leads to competition among these groups, followed by conflict and a process of division of labor. The urban fabric that forms in this context—such as business and commercial centers, residential areas, and shopping malls—represents the "natural space" of the city and carries the characteristics of the city's topography (Park, 1925, p. 12-13).

The cultural level, built upon the biotic level, refers to social relationships such as kinship, customs, norms, and values, and the institutions that structure these relationships, such as the family, school, mosque, and church. Urban life, in this sense, encompasses both a biotic level centered on competition and a cultural level centered on cooperation (Park, 2005, p. 65-72). The location, position, and ecological dependency that define the biotic level of the city, as well as the hierarchical relations, control mechanisms, and societal differences that define the cultural level, serve as indicators for understanding urban dynamics. The relationship between conflict and consensus, in this context, is made possible through the temporary stabilization of the hierarchical order and its legal control (Coser, 2008). Park frames the concept of community within this biotic order across three levels. The first level refers to the community being "organized within an ecological environment," the second to the community becoming "settled in a particular space and thereby possessing a certain influence," and the third to the "symbiotic relationship between individuals" within the community. Similar to the biotic and cultural level dichotomy, Park also establishes the interrelation between these two levels as it pertains to societies. According to Park, human communities are, on one hand, in competition with one another for the economic and ecological conditions of life, but on the other hand, they also engage in collective actions, existing as part of a holistic process that requires mutual dependence. The competition

referred to here corresponds to displacement for one group and dominance for another (Coser, 2008).

At this point, Park defines the concept of "social control", which is central to his work, as a mechanism that determines the boundaries of actions within urban spaces, controls various situations that may involve negative outcomes, and manages the process of adaptation. According to Park, society is an organization of control in every case. It is a central social phenomenon. This concept also helps to make sense of the tension between conflict and consensus. For Park, who defines sociology through the lens of collective behavior, it is crucial to uncover the meanings that different groups attribute to objects and their relationships with those objects in order to understand the interaction processes between these groups (Morva, 2013, p. 187-188). In fact, communication, particularly mass communication through its tools, is also part of this discussion of social control as a form of social interaction. Park, known for his work on the press and newspapers, emphasizes that these communication tools shape the processes of social control within urban life.

Park explains his definitions of social processes within the cycles of competition, conflict, consensus, and assimilation. Focusing on the interaction element in his conceptualization of competition, Park argues that the starting point of the social process cycle, the first step in the mental and social life and development process, is "understanding." Here, Park emphasizes the connection between natural and ecological processes and social processes (Bottomore, 1997). For instance, according to the author, plant communities that benefit from sunlight and people fighting to access valuable metals can be seen as similar in this regard (Coser, 2008). According to Park, the process of social change emerges from the onset of dissatisfaction, which leads to contradictions and conflicts, and as various movements emerge, it creates new areas of order and consensus.

At the level of competition, an unconscious tendency that lacks the stage of contact is emphasized. Here, the individual's inherent and unactivated impulses are brought to the forefront. However, in the subsequent stage of conflict, competition gives rise to a conscious and concrete action-oriented phase of conflict. In this phase, competitive groups position each other as rivals, others, or enemies. Therefore, competition refers to the individual's position within the ecological community, while conflict refers to the individual's position within the group. After conflict, a phase of adaptation, beginning with a struggle and ending with reconciliation, emerges. In this sense, all social and cultural patterns can be seen as products of a process of harmonization. Conformity makes balance possible. The concept of assimilation is also addressed in parallel with the behavior of adaptation, as a process of integration where different groups come together around a common cultural axis (Coser, 2008). Such a process of change is linked to Park's critique of an absolute order. Social mobility forms a context with "natural history," and in order for the continuation of the adaptation phase, the institutionalization processes of organized structures must be addressed at both the biological and cultural levels. Accordingly, different groups will initiate a different conflict process in search of their own adaptation,

and a new phase of consensus, reached by these groups, will be transformed by another conflict. Thus, socialization is maintained through such a control-adaptation cycle.

In Park's urban ecology approach, the concept of "social distance," influenced by psychology and social psychology, highlights that the proximity of individuals positioned in different ethnic backgrounds and social statuses, and the increased use of shared spaces, results in one group's influence over the other. In explaining the concept of social distance, Park proceeds through the concept of "prejudice". Prejudice, which is inherent and universal to the individual and therefore should not be considered pathological or anomic, is defined as the process by which an individual places their perceptions of other groups within their own mental framework, influenced by the context of the status quo. The emphasis is placed on the fact that prejudice is a characteristic of the individual. According to Park, prejudice itself is defined as "a force that is not aggressive but conservative in nature."

Within the context of the concept of self, the discussions surrounding crowds, publics, and marginal individuals are also key concepts in Urban Ecology Theory. The notion of the self, which was also emphasized by other researchers in the Chicago School, particularly in the works of Mead, is explained by Park in relation to the behaviors within society and the social roles an individual occupies based on their societal status. The dilemma between crowds and publics is expressed as follows: Crowds, whose belief in order has been undermined, are seen as both liberated masses on the one hand and, on the other hand, groups that, especially within religious structures and social movements, transform into followership groups led by a charismatic leader. These crowds, however, evolve into publics through processes of discussion, expressing opinions, and inter-group moderation.

The transformation from crowds to publics is a significant topic for Park because, for him, public formation should be understood as a social control mechanism that, implicitly highlighted by him, helps prevent mass movements from reaching dangerous levels and institutionalizes them (Coser, 2008). On the other hand, the beginning of this conflict process also signifies the beginning of a new reconciliation process. Finally, the marginal individual is described as a higher human model to whom Park attributes significant roles, possessing the potential to bridge cultural patterns and convey social innovations. This individual represents the ideal type aimed at achieving a civilized social order, evolving from all of his analyses.

## **4.2. The Concentric Zone Model**

Developed from Urban Ecology Theory and contributing to this approach, the Concentric Zone Theory, also known as the Theory of Nested Regions, developed by Ernest Watson Burgess along with Robert Park, aims to explain the spatial organization of the city of Chicago and subsequently map a general tendency regarding the construction process of

cities. On the other hand, the theory also plays a crucial role in understanding and explaining the social origins of crime and its relationship with urban space. The central idea behind the formulation of this model is the assumption that both qualitative and quantitative growth in urban space leads to a social transformation that varies at the regional level, and that this process is not accidental but brings about a social pattern and chaos that clusters in residential areas. Therefore, the physical development of the city also affects and transforms the social development of the city at the regional level. According to Burgess' approach, which is also referred to as "concentration zones" (Dolu, 2010), the city of Chicago is composed of five zones that radiate outward from the center.

According to this model, the first zone is where business and commercial activities are conducted, forming the centers of economic structures and cultural spaces (e.g., sales stores, theaters, banks). In other words, the central business district is located in the heart of the city. The second zone is defined as the transition zone. This area is where the most recent immigrants first settle, characterized by low living standards and a high workforce potential, which are dominant due to the necessity of work. The third zone is occupied by industrial workers and early-generation immigrants. Compared to the previous zone, living standards are higher. The fourth zone consists of middle-class housing, and large-scale properties of the upper class are located here. Finally, the fifth zone consists of the suburbs<sup>2</sup> (Burgess, 1925, 2015, p. 20; Thorns, 2004).

In the context of urban-social determinism, individuals or communities positioned in the inner rings of the circle tend to move toward the outer rings as their conditions improve. As a result of this mobility, new immigrants settle in the inner rings of the city (Harris & Ullman, 2002). This implies a spatial, social, and interactive mobility that flows from the inner to the outer areas of the city. In this way, it can be said that Burgess (1925) spatially adapted the Urban Ecological Theory and provided an explanation for the process of urban growth. From another perspective, this theory focuses on the job sector and, through its determinative relationships, symbolizes the functioning of a competitive economic system.

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<sup>2</sup>Burke (2009) explains a similar division by "prioritizing the characteristics of social levels." According to this, the regions are expressed in five zones centered around a common core. These include: the business center zone, the Transition Zone (where workers live), the zone where families with divided or single-parent households predominantly reside, the zone with better residential areas, and the zone where wealthier families who generally commute between home and work by car live. The first zone, being both the industrial center and the city center, is not a residential area. The second zone, the transition area, is home to many factories and immigrant families who constitute the labor force for these factories. The housing here is suitable for families living in low-standard conditions. The third zone, the worker's housing area, is where relatively better-off workers live. The fourth zone, the residential area, is where the wealthier class and their properties are located. The outermost zone is the suburbs, where the most expensive homes are situated. Those who live here generally commute long distances daily between work and home (Burke, 2009).

The contribution of the concentric zone theory to the Chicago School, Urban Ecology Theory, and various disciplines is its comprehensive explanation of the economic and social structure of cities, based on meeting the basic needs of natural life. Accordingly, individuals settle in these areas according to their professional, economic, social, and physical conditions in line with their natural needs, such as food and shelter. When a change occurs in their conditions, they adapt to the new order of another zone that fits their situation. Therefore, this approach contributes to explaining the phenomenon of migration by conceptualizing it through the premises of social ecological theory, combining both biotic and cultural levels. Burgess emphasized that the concentric zone theory should be considered as an ideal type, noting that rather than a one-to-one correspondence, it provides an analytical framework (Bogue, 1974).

### **4.3. Critisms Against Urban Ecology Approach**

In conclusion, Urban Ecology Theory considers the city within a pluralistic, systematic, and interdisciplinary framework, encompassing relational contexts of various factors such as symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, organicism, cognitive processes, social structure, and control processes. The urban studies and sociology literature, as well as many other disciplines focused on space and its understanding—such as concepts and discussions on decay zones, luxury housing, cultural and biotic levels—find meaningful application in the fact that this theoretical framework provides an analytical toolkit that can be used by fields like communication studies to understand society and its interactions. Here, undoubtedly, the city as the space of modernity gains a new perspective through the synthesis of natural, physiological, and evolutionary, as well as social and cultural levels.

The criticisms directed at Urban Ecology Theory generally revolve around the inherited position of decay zones, the scope of cultural elements, the secondary role of economic determinism, the lack of consideration of the working-class struggle, the insufficient elaboration of the conceptual set in the social domain, and positivist reductionism (Güllüpnar, 2013; Lefebvre, 2013). In this context, Castells' (1977) critique can first be explained. According to Castells, Urban Ecology Theory fails to adequately explain the transformation of research questions over time. The theory is criticized for positioning decay zones or problematic residential areas within the city as static, unchangeable entities that cannot be improved (Castells, 1977). Furthermore, the criticism extends to the fact that the definition of space is limited to the city context, and that social phenomena are studied through the lens of urban ecology theory and reductionist positivism (Lefebvre, 2013).

Another criticism concerns the insufficient consideration of cultural factors in the formation of urban space and the need to place more emphasis on economic variables in the spatial distribution patterns of people and institutional structures (Davie, 1937; Firey, 1947). This critique should generally be associated with the Chicago School, as the school is criticized for neglecting the intense working-class struggles of the time and for offering a perspective that left the study of Chicago's cityscape incomplete in this regard (Güllüpnar, 2013).

The modern urban problems and dysfunctions within the scope of the Urban Ecological approach are explained through phenomena such as unemployment, poor working conditions, and poverty. One fundamental criticism that can be raised here is the lack of structural analyses addressing these issues or a critical evaluation of the existing economic system. For example, Park's conceptualization of the marginal man as an ideal type lacks a comprehensive analysis of which societal group this ideal type corresponds to, how this typology is formed in everyday life, and the social struggle process that it undergoes. There are no detailed definitions, explanations, or studies addressing these aspects. These approaches to the research object of society have led to the interpretation of both Park and Burgess, as well as the Chicago School in general, as reformist rather than sociological, resulting in criticism of their work.

Two main criticisms directed at the Concentric Zone Model are the insufficient attention given to the diverse effects of topographical and environmental conditions on spatial determinism, and the suggestion that the model may be inadequate when cities grow too large and cannot be explained by a single center (Keleş, 1972).

## **5. IN CONCLUSION: WHAT PERSPECTIVE CAN THE CHICAGO SCHOOL AND URBAN ECOLOGY APPROACH OFFER FOR COMMUNICATION STUDIES?**

The Chicago School, particularly within the context of communication studies in Turkey, is often examined within a mainstream and liberal framework; there is a limited number of studies that thoroughly explore its potential contributions to the field, and its foundational works are typically presented within a very narrow and reductionist perspective (Morva, 2013). On the other hand, existing studies primarily evaluate the Chicago School and its representatives through their works and assessments that can be directly associated with communication and mass communication tools. However, when viewed from another perspective, the sociology of the Chicago School, with its emphasis on symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, and its urban ecology theory, including concepts such as the concentric zone theory, the city as a way of life, the city as a laboratory, mobility, conflict, interaction, invasion, etc., as well as the natural, structural conditions of these relational concepts, the study of phenomena like crime, poverty, ghettos, ethnography, and the development of qualitative research approaches, each offers an alternative research perspective, critique, conceptual and theoretical contribution, and methodology for communication studies. Throughout this discussion, the school focuses on the interaction between individuals, communities, and society; thus, communication as a research object and the field of communication studies can be considered a reference point to be examined within this framework.

It is known that the research tradition of the school, its theorists, and/or their works did not treat communication as a direct research question or core area of interest, and they did not have an academic focus on communication or produce studies specifically about



communication<sup>3</sup> (Carey, 1989, 1996; Pooley & Katz, 2008). From the perspective of the school, communication, particularly mass communication (the press), is justified in terms of its role in understanding and constructing collective behavior, democracy, order, and harmony in modern urban life. In this context, its contributions to city life are expressed through knowledge transfer, public opinion formation, the circulation of moral consciousness and social norms, and the integration of social groups (Cooley, 1909; Park, 1938). However, the concepts and debates produced by this tradition, in line with the interdisciplinary approach of communication studies, both form an alternative tradition during the period when early field research emerged and offer a critical pragmatism framework in terms of theory, practice, philosophy, and methodology, providing a unique and critical perspective for the social sciences.

The process of transforming traditional and dispersed individuals and small communities into cohesive communities and societies that can coexist in modern cities, along with the establishment and maintenance of a common consciousness, has emphasized the integrative role and contribution of communication. In the ecological and urban ecology approach that stands out in this school, the reciprocal interactions of living beings in natural life, such as competition, adaptation, and invasion, are highlighted as continuing in a state of balance. Similarly, in urban life, the interaction, conflict, and reconciliation between different communities in spatial/regional areas, as expressed by Herbert Spencer's "biological society" and Robert Ezra Park's "biotic-cultural level," are emphasized (Giddens, 2013). Here, the dilemma between satisfying individual interests and norms suitable for the division of labor in modern urban life is underlined. Therefore, the Chicago School and Urban Ecology Theory provide indirect, yet original answers to the question "What is communication?" by addressing the relationship between individuals and society, and more specifically, to the question "What does communication do?" (Morva, 2011). The four social interaction processes—competition, conflict, adaptation, and assimilation—between urban areas classified as regions can also be explained in this context. According to Park and Burgess (1921), the competition unconsciously maintained with nature and the consciously carried out conflict stages result in adaptation, which then leads to a controlled process of assimilation and adjustment. For Park (2015), the city is not just a physical form consisting of structures, institutions, and spaces, but an active organizational interaction in which culture and social norms are constructed and shared. From this perspective, the urban ecology approach can be seen as possessing an inherent assumption of communication.

Similarly, in Burgess's Concentric Zone Model, there is a comparable communication pattern. The author defines a city center as the main business district, and at the boundary of this center, he adds a transition zone that facilitates intense interaction and supports trade.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the Communication Committee established within the university by the school in 1948 aimed to conduct and review research focusing on the effects of mass communication on human behavior. On the other hand, one of the key figures of the school, Park, has published numerous studies on newspapers and news topics. For a comprehensive discussion on this subject, see: (Morva, 2013, p 118-121, 124).

At the boundary of this zone, there is the worker settlement as the site of labor force. As one moves outward to the periphery of the zone, the physical fabric of the urban space becomes structured with economic, cultural, organizational, and interactional relationships, and a regional distribution/spread is observed in which higher welfare groups become more concentrated (Burgess, 2015). Therefore, a study conducted to understand the relational dynamics here, the tensions and integration processes between transition zones, and the explanation of social issues can be understood in terms of communication context and the potential effects of mass communication.

Through social interaction, communication, which is implicit and part of ecology, serves as a component that builds and reproduces the processes of integration of individuals living together into communities and societies by transmitting norms, beliefs, values, cultures, and behaviors (Park, 1938). In this context, Robert Ezra Park, who had experience in journalism, reporting, and editing, positions communication, particularly the press as the mass communication practice of the era, as an interactional form based on physical, social, and cultural conflict. In his work *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (1922), where he examined the assimilation processes of immigrants through the printed press, he emphasizes how social interaction, norms, and the equilibrium of assimilation are maintained through the press and its literate readers, highlighting the positive role of the press in the culturalization process and the power potential it carries. In his text *The Natural History of the Newspaper* (1923), Park stresses that the emergence of the newspaper in urban life is the result of the need for literacy and a product of the understanding of natural history. He explains the regulatory function of newspapers in transmitting information and rumors, enabling interaction related to urban life.

Therefore, in the context of communication studies and particularly the subdiscipline of communication sociology, the Chicago School's works, which address issues such as migration, urbanization, poverty, crime, spatial segregation, and many other social phenomena and the social problems that accompany them, represent a research tradition that integrates phases such as understanding these phenomena from the perspective of the subject, explaining them comprehensively, and addressing them through conceptual, theoretical, and applied studies. In this framework, the relationships of adaptation and control within the context of mass media actors and urban ecology theory are also explored (Hardt, 1994).

In addition to its conceptual and theoretical contributions to communication studies, the research methodology of the Chicago School should also be highlighted. When examining social phenomena, problems, and interactions in modern urban life, the preference for ethnography based on long-term and comprehensive field research can be considered an alternative and unique approach to the school's early administrative and quantitative research tradition. In this context, approaches such as the study of life histories, the use of observational techniques, and the collection of in-depth findings through neighborhood and city monographs have been adopted (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998). It should be noted here that there is also a methodological perspective that combines empirical, quantitative

research with Park's journalistic background in terms of documentation. The technique of event mapping, which allows the discovery, identification, and examination of locations with high incidences of phenomena such as census statistics, crime, suicide, poverty, etc., can be evaluated within this framework (Cavan, 1983; Park, 2011). It stands out as a technique that can be considered in communication studies, particularly due to its ability to present a comparative dataset for different ethnic groups and regions.

The scope and limitations of this study, while also being a relatively under-explored point in both international and national literature as a review discussion, highlight the need for further debate and field research on current issues such as neoliberal urbanization, digital communication, and smart cities, which can be addressed within the context of the Chicago School. Indeed, the European Sociological Association's (ESA) 2024 conference call titled "The City 1925-2025: Reading 'The City' A Hundred Years Later: The Continuing Relevance of The Chicago School" is meaningful in this regard. In this paper, with reference to Robert Park's work, it is emphasized that The City has transformed in the context of new technologies and globalization processes that are subjects of various disciplines, and the necessity for contemporary research in understanding this transformation is underscored<sup>4</sup>.

Earlier, but original work, the 2016 special issue<sup>5</sup> of the American Behavioral Scientist Journal titled "Communication in City and Community: From the Chicago School to Digital Technology" aimed to contribute to the literature with a similar objective. The issue included studies examining the contributions of the Chicago School to digital technology/communication from a theoretical perspective and current field research, such as "The Chicago School and Ecology in the Digital Age" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016), "Digital Streets in Harlem" (Lane, 2016), and "New Communication Technologies and the Future of Society" (Hampton, 2016). In Turkey, one of the very limited examples in the literature in this context is Oya Morva's study, which associates the ethnographic research tradition of the Chicago School's symbolic interactionism with the digital ethnography approach (Morva, 2017).

Katz and Hampton (2016, p. 3) highlight that the historical and contextual framework of communication and urban sociology research grounded in the Chicago School formed a holistic perspective addressing the social issues of the era, but from the mid-20th century onwards, as these two disciplines began to diverge, collaborative field studies based on ecological perspectives started to fade. The authors argue that communication and sociology approaches need to reconsider societal and technological transformation discussions with a holistic perspective, stating:

We cannot understand the opportunities and risks that individuals, families, and social groups experience as a result of increasing population diversity and social

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed information and the highlights of the call, see: <https://www.europeansociology.org/call/f7d1c9d3-e3b0-4dc2-bb71-8baf4ec5faa5>

<sup>5</sup> For the special issue of American Behavioral Scientist, see: <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/absb/60/1>

inequality, unless we explore the communities and places in which they are embedded and the media they use to communicate. We cannot understand how communication technologies connect people with diverse resources without understanding the ecological constraints inherent to the places where they interact. The role of media in the everyday lives of today's youth (or anyone, for that matter), should be contextualized among the many ways people interact online, in-person, and in-place. As new technologies become ever more integral to how individuals and collectives manage everyday interactions in an increasingly interconnected planet, let the role of communication in city and community once again guide our efforts to understand people and place (Katz & Hampton, 2016, p. 7).

Therefore, the analysis of phenomena at the intersection of communication/media studies, sociology, and urban studies—integrating discussions of digitalization in growth, organization, and interaction—and the development of appropriate methodologies and field studies can be seen as a key argument to be proposed for future research in the field.

In conclusion, despite numerous theoretical and methodological critiques, the distinctive approach of the Chicago School opens the discussion of examining not only the physical structure of modern urban life but also its various aspects of organizational interaction. In this context, communication is at the heart of this process as a reference point for social interaction. This interface necessitates a discussion in communication studies that revisits the current interaction possibilities of the modern city in the digital age, through the stages of segregation and integration. Future research is expected to benefit from a comprehensive research accumulation by revisiting the contribution of the Chicago School to communication studies in greater detail through the school's concepts and models, alongside the comparative findings that field studies can provide. Furthermore, there is a need to increase interdisciplinary applied studies supported by a sociological perspective in communication and adapt the urban ecology perspective of the school to contemporary technological trends.

### **Statement of Research and Publication Ethics**

In all processes of the article, the principles of research and publication ethics of the Manisa Celal Bayar University Journal of Social Sciences Institute were followed.

### **Authors' Contribution Rates to the Article**

The entire article was written by author.

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The author has no conflict of interest with any person or organization.

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