# Pluralism, Chicago School Style: Louis Wirth, the Ghetto, the City, and "Integration"

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Dick Wade recently suggested that the roots of both the "old" and the "new" urban history may be found in the Chicago school of sociology during the second quarter of the twentieth century. He also gave a very nondeterministic account of how it happened, a story of unlikely people gathered by an unlikely person in an unlikely place, people who did things unexpected of them that led to historical writing about cities with a social focus. His argument seemed intriguing, but the nondeterminism of it struck me with special force. So I wondered if I might find something about the origins of nondeterminism in social and historical thought and practice in the Chicago school, and if that might illuminate the origins of the old and new urban history, and perhaps suggest some common ground on which they might be said to stand.

I centered this search on the work of Louis Wirth, the member of the Chicago school most concerned with urbanism as a way of life, and I found what I sought, or at least I think I did. But I also discovered two Louis Wirths, even though he died in 1952 at the age of fifty-five, and even though he remained throughout his career a Chicago person and a relentless civic activist with an unflagging commitment to the solution of social problems, the promotion of metropolitan planning, and the creation of a democratic government for an emerging world community, one of the most recent products, in his view, of global urbanization.

The first Wirth thought that socially determined cultural-group pluralism in urbanizing societies encouraged "integration," or "assimilation," by which he meant the sharing of cultural traits among social groups, including ethnic and economic categories. In

this view social evolution could be nudged in the appropriately democratic and nonviolent direction if "experts" like Wirth could persuade policy makers to segregate cultural groups in separate but equal subcommunities. Here they could be educated in tolerance and mutual understanding and the necessity of trait sharing as preparation for the next step in the gradual engineering of a truly cosmopolitan and residentially integrated society.

The second Wirth, however, abandoned expertise-ism and socially determined cultural-group pluralism in favor of individual pluralism and the democratization of intellectual life, the notion that individuals should define their own cultures through maximum feasible participation in social and civic affairs to assure the continuation of trait sharing on a democratic basis. The second Wirth also jettisoned the gradualistic, separate but equal strategy to advocate civil rights legislation and court decisions for the promotion of the immediate residential mixing of diverse people, including races.

Wirth started on the road to these two sets of convictions in a cattle-raising and -trading family in a German agricultural village. There he received a Jewish and a secular primary education, and during his high school years he lived with an uncle in Omaha, Nebraska. Then Wirth decided to study medicine at the University of Chicago, where he had a lively time in the 1910s. He hung out at Hull House. He read *The Souls of Black Folk*. He protested America's entrance into World War I and flirted with socialism. He dropped medicine and took courses in sociology. And there, too, he met Mary Bolton, of Paducah, Kentucky, sent by her parents to Chicago for a safe Baptist education, and who, with her friend Wirth, engaged in radical protests on and off campus.

Wirth graduated in 1919, and stayed in the Windy City as director of the division of delinquent boys for the Jewish Charities of Chicago. In 1922 he returned to Germany to introduce his family to Mary Bolton, whom he married in 1923, and with whom he raised two daughters. He taught them, as one remembered it, "agnosticism with quite audible atheistic overtones," a "generalized minority ethnic identification," and always "to stand up and be counted whenever there were questions that we were Jews."

Wirth also, in the 1920s, decided on a career in sociology in America, returned to the University of Chicago as a graduate student, became an American citizen at the age of twenty-seven, and wrote his dissertation, which he published in 1928 as a book called simply *The Ghetto*. This volume laid out a history of the Jewish ghetto in Europe and the United States that attacked the idea of race-based cultural determinism, touted socially determined cultural-group pluralism, and treated the ghetto as a microcosm of the city. It began with the ancient diaspora, which turned Jews into nomads who carried with them their cultural baggage, including their experience as urbanites, and who, as they traveled, interacted so extensively with a broad range of peoples and shared traits that they became known for their cosmopolitanism. Gradually they settled in cities, where they formed voluntary ghettoes. Here Jews from a variety of places developed a broad range of interacting groups and personality types and shared traits among themselves and with outsiders, processes that continued even after the advent of compulsory ghettoes, complete with walls and badges. These processes also funneled ideas from the outside world—-rationalism, capitalism, nationalism—-into that pluralistic Jewish civilization for which the ghetto served as center. The same factors of intergroup contact eventually produced political emancipation, participation by Jews in civic affairs, and, by the twentieth century in Frankfurt, the dispersal of the ghetto, and the emergence of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and modern Jewish community, one carrying a "duplex culture . . . richer and more iridescent than its predecessors."

In the second part of the book Wirth presented a history of Jews in the United States which virtually recapitulated that in Europe. But in Chicago, as elsewhere, the ghetto persisted, both as a place and a symbol. It provided a richly human, diverse, and neighborly way-station for some, a symbol of poverty and humiliation for others, and a source of divisiveness that undermined the coherence of the pan-Jewish community. It also served as a symbol of Jewish haughtiness and clannishness that endangered all Jews by arousing among outsiders suspicions about the civic and national loyalty of the Jews as uniform race, or as a uniform social group, or as a uniform international community, ideas Wirth described as fantasies projected on Jews by out-

siders and as ideas that repressed in Jews and outsiders the willing-
ness and ability to share traits.

Wirth's analysis, then, depicted the Jewish problem as a problem
for outsiders, who could relieve it by abandoning fantasies and fol-
lowing integrationist policies to encourage the sharing of traits. Yet it
also provided a benign account of the ghetto. Here socially deter-
mined cultural groups built a pluralistic community, and through
their interaction with one another and diverse outsiders acquired
new traits and the resilience to devise flexible strategies for survival,
including a strategy of pluralistic integration, the success of which
depended on the willingness of dominant groups to facilitate the
trait-sharing process. This process had been completed in Frankfurt,
an outcome Wirth anticipated in Chicago for Jews and other
ethnic/racial groups if experts like himself prevailed in their espousal
of the temporary segregation of minority groups on a separate but
equal basis combined with programs of regulated intergroup contact
to facilitate the natural tendency toward trait-sharing and the cos-
mopolitanization of the urbanizing population.

By the mid-1930s, however, Wirth had visited Nazi Germany,
where he confronted the appalling consequences of what he called
"the myth of race," and had started to bring thirteen of his relatives
from Germany to Chicago. He had also read and translated Karl
Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia,* and concluded with Mannheim that
trait-sharing "integration" would not happen "naturally."

By the mid-1930s, that is, both Wirth and Mannheim had conclud-
ed that socially determined cultural-group pluralism had yielded
clashes of rigidified ideologies and utopias that prevented the shar-
ing of traits among groups and tempted the clashing parties, in their
mutual misunderstanding, to annihilate one another. Mannheim
thought that intellectuals, because of their tenuous connection with
social groups, might broach alternative visions of the future that
would erode the appeal of contemporary ideologies and utopias, and
foster group interaction and a continuing process of trait-sharing. But
Wirth, by this time, regarded most intellectuals as merely another
social group, too isolated from society and civic affairs to envision
anything except rigidified ideologies and utopias. So the second
Wirth decided to undermine socially determined cultural-group plu-

ralism as a way out of the potentially murderous situation of uncompromising conflict.

The second Wirth posited a new social dynamic, an individual pluralism of choice in which all persons defined their own cultures, a social dynamic that rested on the democratization of intellectual life. The second Wirth contended that sociologists should abandon grand theory and spend more time as civic activists and in training students for service in community organizations. The second Wirth argued for legislation and court decisions to foster widespread occupational and residential mobility to break up the rigid identification of individuals with particular social groups and to facilitate the process of self-identification. He also advocated the maximum feasible participation of citizens in policy making for social and civic organizations and in planning and plan implementation, tasks that would engage everybody in the "intellectual" game of developing democratic visions of community and urban society as alternatives to deadlocked ideologies and utopias, whose proponents, he insisted, should not suffer suppression. And the second Wirth also advocated world government based on the pluralistic principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as he interpreted those documents. For without a consensus on individual pluralism and occupational and residential mobility, argued the second Wirth, conflicting groups would lack a measure of the public welfare around which to forge compromises. And without compromises the process of sharing traits would cease and the various self-constructed groups would stand at loggerheads, with no recourse except to the courts, or endless and perhaps violent conflict, a process encouraging to antidemocratic movements and the scapegoating of minorities, a process that had yielded such political monstrosities as the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian dictatorships, a specter in his view that haunted all mid-twentieth-century societies.

The second Wirth's quest for a politics of consensus and compromise without repressing "heretical" ideas and their advocates produced some of his most memorable work. This includes his famous essay on urbanism as a way of life, widely regarded still as an anti-urban jeremiad but in fact an apotheosis of the city as the dynamic factor in history which led to the interaction of people that produced

the progress spelled out in *The Ghetto*, and which led ultimately to the discovery of the possibility of individual pluralism and the necessity of the democratization of intellectual life. This work also includes his denunciation of what he called some "tender-hearted, if not tender-minded romanticists" who "seek to escape the city" and "find refuge in pastoral pursuits or 'rurban' settlements," proposals condemned by the second Wirth for their assumption that "human satisfactions could be increased by dismantling our great cities."

The second Wirth also gave short shrift to those inclined to impose democracy on others by psychological manipulation. He argued in 1949 that modern civilizations and planners faced three alternatives, "change the attitude and character of our people . . . , change the situation under which we are working . . . , or . . . alter the rules of the game." Wirth preferred to change conditions and alter the rules, and ridiculed propositions to tinker psychologically with people in a thinly veiled reference to contemporary talk about the "authoritarian personality" and ways of engineering democratic personalities. "To paraphrase Vice-President Marshall's famous saying," declaimed the second Wirth, some people think that what this country needs "is a good five-cent psychiatrist; but psychiatrists . . . are not available in the quantity and quality and at the prices the masses of people can afford. We must work superficially and in large groups, altering the conditions of life and improving the rules of the game."

The second Wirth also asserted that a politics of consensus and compromise could incorporate, sustain, and flourish on a lively conflict of ideas. As he put it after Harry Truman's dramatic comeback victory in 1948, "liberal forces have already yielded . . . on the ground that higher strategy demands compromise. I, too, favor compromise, when one can foresee that the consequences of the battle will be more costly than the actual victory. But to compromise before the battle, during the battle, and after the battle is to squander one's moral heritage and in the end to gain nothing but remorse. The measures that are now before the American people for wider coverage of health, education, recreation and other forms of insurance against the vicissitudes of life that the individual cannot control are now the uncompromisable agenda of our society. And on this agenda goes the item of civil rights."

In the final analysis, then, the second Wirth sought to put whimsy into social thought, to detach ideas from social and psychological determinism in the interest of nurturing democratic visions of new urban futures. For him the key rested in human nature, its capacity for empathy and the trait-sharing integration that produced cosmopolitans capable by definition of thinking and acting in new ways. And the second Wirth's advocacy of the democratization of intellectual life and of immediate legal steps toward occupational and residential integration marked not only a rejection of short-sided pragmatism and a retreat from expertise-ism, determinism, and gradualism, but also a shift from a focus on groups to individuals as the basic units of society. But this new approach stressed in addition the importance of a consensus on a pluralism of ever-expanding visions of "better" and different communities, not only as a way out of the deadlock of socially determined ideologies and utopias but also as a means of preventing individuals engaged in the self-absorbing task of constructing their own cultures from pursuing merely self-fulfillment without regard for the public welfare.

From this angle the second Wirth may be seen as symptomatic of a major tendency in American civilization and historical writing since 1940. This analysis proposes nondeterministic, trait-sharing, individual pluralism as the vision of the so-called consensus school and questions the suspicion that its adherents longed for homogeneity or sought to homogenize the American past. It also suggests the nondeterministic character of both the "old" and the "new" urban history, and of the other "old" and "new" specializations as well. Both, that is, look for ways in which various persons have sought liberation from social or other "forces" to create for themselves a vision of who they wanted to become, and the social and physical environments in which that becoming might take place.

Finally, this analysis of the two Wirths suggests that most historical writing since the 1920s has consisted of a commentary on the delights and dilemmas of pluralism, an implicit and sometimes explicit exploration of the cultures of the past intended as an exploration of what the cultures of the present might be and might become. This we may safely celebrate, if we remember the persistence since 1952 of ghettoes, racial, social, and intellectual, as facts, symbols, and states of

mind, here and around the world. That remembering should remind us of our responsibility as historians to understand the persisting ghettoes and to lay out the dangers and opportunities their persistence offers for the various communities in which we live. And such studies, in the spirit of Louis Wirth, might benefit from our social and civic activism as well as from research and thinking as aspects of the pursuit of history as a way of life.

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Zane L. Miller, Professor of History and Co-Director of the Center for Neighborhood and Community Studies at the University of Cincinnati, delivered this talk as his presidential address to the Urban History Association at its annual dinner, December 29, 1991, in Chicago during the convention of the American Historical Association. A longer version, including documentation, is available in the Spring, 1992 issue of the *Journal of Urban History*. Much of the most significant work of Louis Wirth is conveniently available in two books: Elizabeth Wirth Marvick and Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *Community Life and Social Policy: Selected Papers by Louis Wirth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), and Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *Louis Wirth: On Cities and Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). For a complete list of Wirth's work and a helpful biographical essay about him see Roger A. Salerno, *Louis Wirth: A Bio-Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987). Wirth's study of the Jewish ghetto, on which this essay draws heavily, first appeared as *The Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928). Now recognized as a "classic" in urban and ethnic studies, it has been reprinted many times in various editions.