<u>Institute for Policy Research Working Paper</u>

**Alone in the City?
An Intellectual History of Social Isolation**

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Abstract

During the last one hundred years "social isolation" has been one of the key concepts and core problems in American sociology, but an intellectual history of its curious life reveals strong conflict over its status. There are three specific purposes for this effort at conceptual clarification. First, to show how distinct generations of urban scholars have developed, deployed, and debunked the idea of social isolation and to chart its return to prominence in recent years. Second, to consider the methodological and theoretical sources of the term's longevity, and to raise questions about the status of an urban poverty paradigm based on the isolation thesis. Third, to consider the social and sociological consequences of research focusing on the social isolation problem. This article documents how conventional uses of the category have muddled important social scientific debates about inequality and the city, and calls for a new vocabulary for the study of urban social processes.

Word Count: 8,912

Introduction

During the last one hundred years "social isolation" has been one of the key concepts and core problems in American sociology, but an intellectual history of its curious life reveals both deep confusion over the meaning of the term and strong conflict over its significance. Contemporary sociologists and poverty scholars are most familiar with the latest version of social isolation: William Julius Wilson's adaptation of the category as the key theoretical concept and causal element in his explanation of entrenched urban poverty, particularly for African-Americans (1987, p. 61). But other conceptions of the self-contradictory idea have dominated public and scientific debates about cities, poverty, communities, and civil society during earlier periods of American intellectual history. Diverse concerns about social isolation generated much of the pioneering urban research by the early Chicago School sociologists such as Robert Park, Louis Wirth, and Harvey Zorbaugh. Subsequent generations of urban and social problems scholars, including St. Clair Drake, Horace Cayton, and Herbert Gans, continued the inquiry. This interest in isolation has hardly been confined to specialized subfields, and it has not been merely academic. According to Gans (1997), studies that assess and account for some form of social isolation rank among the best selling American sociology books of all time, including five of the six most popular: The Lonely Crowd, Tally's Corner, The Pursuit of Loneliness, The Fall of Public Man, and Habits of the Heart. More recently, the vigorous academic, journalistic, and political debates sparked by Robert Putnam's "bowling alone" thesis (1995) helps to show that to talk about social isolation is to touch a central nerve of American intellectual culture.

The resilience of the social isolation question is puzzling, though, because each generation of sociologists to organize its work around the isolation problematic has ultimately given up the concept in the face of trenchant criticisms of its analytic status and empirical significance. Yet this trajectory of the debates over social isolation is not well known, and it is likely that the cycle of deconstruction and resurrection that characterizes the term's intellectual life will continue so long as social scientists do not reflexively scrutinize both the category and the dispositions of those who reproduce it.[1] There is good precedent for this kind reflexive attention in the contemporary sociology, with work that clarifies the concepts, challenges the loaded myths and preconceptions, and deepens theories playing a particularly important role in the contentious and politically charged debates over race, poverty, and urban life.[2] Most notably, in 1975 Morris Janowitz explored the intellectual history of "social control" for the American Journal of Sociology, charting the usage and diffusion of the loaded term and explaining how the idea had generated numerous confusions in and outside the discipline (Janowitz 1975). Social scientific debates about isolation deserve similar scrutiny. For although emerging studies are beginning to report "hard evidence" for the prevalence and consequences of certain forms of social isolation (c.f. Tigges, Brown, and Green 1998), it is important to remember George Canguilhelm's cautionary note: "A fact proves nothing so long as the

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[1] Such work of reflexivity does not simply require scholars to understand their particular or individual positions and perspectives. More importantly, it demands studying the history of the field, including the mental structures and categories that organize the ways we see and do not see the world. For an account of this "triple reflexive sociology," see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

[2] See, among others, Gould (1999), Young (1999), Wacquant (1997), and Gans (1995), as well as the many articles analyzing the theoretical and empirical status of another key concept in sociology, "social capital."

concepts which state it have not been methodically criticized, rectified, and reformed" ((1941) 1991, p. 203).

There are three specific purposes for this effort at conceptual clarification. First, to show how distinct generations of urban scholars have developed, deployed, and debunked the idea of social isolation and to chart its return to scholarly and political prominence in recent years. The intellectual history of social isolation shows that it has been a productive, durable, and mutable category of analysis, a term with enough metaphorical power to attract authors from different eras but also enough substantive slipperiness to elude all of them in the end. What is consistent in its history, however, is that it has rendered invisible or irrelevant the roles of economic exploitation, political conflict, or social abandonment as agents of metropolitan segmentation, thereby marginalizing political economy from the urban dynamic. Second, to consider the methodological and theoretical sources of the term's longevity, and to raise questions about the status of an urban poverty paradigm based on the isolation thesis. Here we find that sociological research methods – particularly the conventional practice of isolating a "neighborhood" or "community" as the object of urban or ethnographic analysis; refusing to consider exogenous forces, agents, or agencies, that affect local social life; and then "discovering" the social isolation of the area and its residents – play a generative role in the history of the concept. This "method effect" played a powerful role in reproducing the isolation idea, even during periods when social isolation theories came under attack. Third, and finally, to consider the social and sociological consequences of research and policy focused on the social isolation problem. For social isolation is hardly a neutral scientific category, and its prevalence in debates about social

problems and urban life has structured much of American "poverty knowledge" (O'Connor 2000) around the popular but fuzzy notion that dominant and dominated groups exist in separate worlds and are functionally unrelated to each other. The challenge for sociology is to develop a more refined set of conceptual resources to define and explain the various forms of sociospatial division, differentiation, and domination that structure urban life. This article documents how conventional uses of the social isolation category have compromised the rigor of this longstanding intellectual project, and calls for a new vocabulary for the study of urban social processes.

The Symbolic Significance of Social Isolation

The most fundamental and surprising feature of the social isolation concept used by American sociologists is that it has rarely referred to the literal meaning of the phrase: the personal isolation of individuals from one another. Instead, <u>sociologists have used the concept of isolation to describe the relationships among rather than within communities</u>, a semantic technique that achieves its effect by drawing upon the idea of literally isolated individuals and extending it metaphorically to the neighborhood or group level.[3] With few exceptions (most notably Fischer 1982; Fischer and Phillips 1982), urban sociologists and poverty scholars who use the term isolation do not mean to say that the people or communities they are describing lack social contacts in general, but that they have limited contacts with *certain* people, groups, or institutions. This usage has caused considerable confusion in public discussions

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[3] To foreshadow my argument about social isolation, it is worth noting that, despite its metaphorical appeal, the "bowling alone" thesis does not refer to a literal increase in the prevalence of Americans who bowl on their own, but to the decline in bowling leagues. As Putnam explains, "only poetic license authorizes my description of non-league bowling as 'bowling alone.' Any observant visitor to her local bowling alley can confirm that informal groups outnumber solo bowlers" (Putnam 2000: 113).

as well as within the social sciences, where scholars frequently overlook the differences between the general and the technical definitions of isolation, and often conflate them in their own research and writing.[4] Indeed, the concept of social isolation has become what Gaston Bachelard would deem a significant "epistemological obstacle" in the study of urban social problems. Sociological debates about, for example, the respective roles of spatial segregation or ghettoization, discrimination, human capital, and access to job networks in determining the nature and extent of poverty would surely benefit were the key participants to develop a more specified vocabulary.

The category of social isolation has become an entrenched and central concept in sociology not because of its descriptive precision but because it evokes a dramatic tension between the mass society of the modern metropolis and the putatively alienated individual who inhabits it.[5] The specter of the lonely and atomized modern individual has haunted some of the discipline's foundational texts, including Emile Durkheim's Suicide (though of course no individuals appear therein) (1897), Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) and "The Stranger" (1908), Robert Park's "The City: Suggestions for the Study of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment" (1916) and Louis Wirth's "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938). With roots in the French, German, and American traditions of research, concern over the purported slackening of social bonds in

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[4] One recent example of this confusion is in an otherwise carefully constructed study of literal social isolation in Atlanta conducted by Leann Tigges, Irene Brown, and Gary Greene. Attempting to frame their project within the terms established by Wilson, the authors summarize the key pages of Wilson's The Truly Disadvantaged (61-2) in their claim that, "Wilson's theory of social isolation argues that the urban poor have fewer social contacts because of the deterioration of ghetto neighborhoods." In fact, (as we shall see) Wilson does not make this claim in the text, but his terminology avails itself to this misreading. See Tigges, Brown, and Green (1998) and Wilson (1987).

industrial capitalist societies helped motivate, legitimate, and institutionalize the emerging science of society in the early twentieth century. Many strains of social science have emphasized the importance of social ties among individuals, which are commonly viewed as the essence of society, the building blocks that support all collective action and beliefs. But inquiries into the nature of isolation and the density of civil society have played a particularly generative role in the American social sciences, giving rise to the community studies on which urban sociology was established as well as to social network studies and the social capital debates that are ubiquitous in both the academic and political fields today.

Social Isolation and the Chicago School

Chicago has a played a special part in the continuing process of constructing and reconstructing social isolation as a category of experience and analysis. The city served as the primary research site in which sociologists from the University of Chicago launched and developed a specifically urban sociology designed, as the subtitle to Robert Park's landmark article put it, "for the investigation of human behavior in the urban environment" ((1916) 1969). In and through Chicago, sociologists developed a biotic vocabulary and organic conceptual scheme for understanding the culture and structure of cities. Their famous framework cast the metropolis as a physical, social, and psychological organism constituted by a complex anatomy of places, natural or ecological areas, whose relations with each other operated in patterned, decipherable ways.[6] Chicago sociologists drew upon the concept of isolation as they built a

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[5] This tension has been one of the dominant themes of American popular culture as well, particularly in the tradition of film noir and neo-noir cinema. In these films the alienated urban male is the typical protagonist, and the society around him is represented as corrupt, deceptive, and dangerous.
[6] Among the best of the many overviews of the Chicago School approaches are Sennett (1969), Hannerz (1980), and Abbott (1997).

new urban grammar. On the one hand they employed it as a literal description of the condition of individual residents. On the other hand they reinvented it to describe the relationship between neighborhoods, or places, rather than relations (or lack of them) among people. By assigning two distinct meanings to the same term Park and his students were also creating a conceptual scheme for urban sociology that would confound the heirs to their mode of inquiry.

Park was the first of the Chicago sociologists to argue that "certain urban neighborhoods suffer from isolation." He was particularly concerned about the "colonies and segregated areas" because, he claimed, "physical and sentimental distances reinforce each other," contributing to pathological forms of social order at the city level, a natural symptom of a body politic in which some parts receive no sustenance from the rest of the system ((1916) 1969, pp. 97-99). Park understood, however, that <u>residents of the isolated areas were not themselves socially isolated</u>; in fact, he made the opposite claim: "the isolation of the immigrant and racial colonies of the so-called ghettos and areas of population segregation tend to preserve and, where there is racial prejudice, to intensify the intimacies and solidarity of the local and neighborhood groups" (98). This assessment stands in marked contrast with Park's view of the rest of the modern city, in which "It is probably the breaking down of local attachments and the weakening of the restraints and inhibitions of the primary group, under the influence of the urban environment, which are largely responsible for the increase of vice and crime" (112). Park's view implies that isolation from other neighborhoods actually protects residents from some of the "disintegrating influences of city life" (111), an idea that would resurface in the work of later Chicago sociologists.

Park never pinpoints precisely how and why the "segregated populations" in the so-called "evil neighborhoods" (98) "suffer from isolation" (97), nor does he explain how much of this suffering is attributable to isolation and how much is due to other forms of exclusion and stigmatization. Working at a moment when neither ethnographic nor survey research methods were well refined, Park did not use an analytic approach that would allow him to empirically establish (in a way that would satisfy contemporary social scientists) that the marginal neighborhoods and their residents were actually isolated. Rather, Park *presumed* that they lacked contact with other neighborhoods and residents in the city, and he was so confident about this social fact that he did not even propose studying it in any of the long series of research questions that end each section of his programmatic essay.

In The Gold Coast and the Slum (1929), Park's student Harvey Zorbaugh made a different claim about isolation within and among urban communities that, in Park's words, "touch but do not interpenetrate." Zorbaugh found that social worlds living side-by-side in the center of the metropolis were internally active. But whereas the residents of bohemian and impoverished regions cannot help but recognize and make contact with the rarified world of the downtown and Gold Coast, the elites concentrated in affluent neighborhoods represented the truly isolated. "For the great majority of the people on the Gold Coast," Zorbaugh argues, "the district west of State Street exists only in the newspapers" (13). Beyond the newspaper reports, which represent ethnic regions outside the Gold Coast as places "of feuds, flashing knives, flying chairs, and shattering glass… little is known of the world west of State Street" (15). Zorbaugh's move was not merely rhetorical. In fact his words can be interpreted as a call to

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rethink the direction of differentiation that segmented the city, a provocation to recognize how the affluent buffer themselves from people and problems they would rather put out of sight. As we will see, sociologists and historians do adopt this perspective in later generations, but none cite Zorbaugh as an inspiration for the shift. The absence of Zorbaugh's position in other publications from his time also suggest that Zorbaugh's ideas about isolation made little impact.

The more influential theory of urban isolation in the 1920s and 1930s came from Zorbaugh's colleague Louis Wirth, who devoted much of his career to looking more closely at the causes and consequences of segmentation in the city. Wirth's two best known and most influential works, *The Ghetto* (first published in 1928) and "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (first published in 1938), advanced a general theory of urbanism that gave special attention to the isolating influences of city life as well as to the effects of isolation on city residents. "Urbanism as a Way of Life" is the classic formulation of the thesis that the structure and culture of cities weaken social bonds, producing relationships that are "impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental," "characterized by secondary rather than primary contacts," and forming a profane social universe that "gives rise to loneliness" and "constitutes essentially the social anomie, or the social void, to which Durkheim alludes in attempting to account for the various forms of social disorganization in technological society" (1938, pp. 153, 156). City living, in Wirth's view, does not merely set residents free from the social bonds and systems of meaning in which individuals and communities had been traditionally rooted, it also fosters "a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation" and an "acceptance of instability and insecurity" (156) that reduce

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the possibilities for collective life, dividing the urban community and individuating the urbanite. Following Weber (1905), Wirth claims that in the diverse and heterogeneous city, "The bonds of kinship, of neighborliness, and the sentiments arising out of living together for generations under a common folk tradition are likely to be absent' (152); and concludes that ultimately the city will obliterate folk traditions, creating a hybrid, secular urban culture in which the family, the neighborhood, and other historical bases of social solidarity lose significance (160) and formal institutions and civic associations become the centers of social organization and control.

There is, however, an important caveat in Wirth's theory. Groups that are excluded from the common arenas and institutions of the city, particularly those groups that are segregated or ghettoized, will be spared many of the corrosive influences of urban life. The ghetto, which Richard Sennett has called "the urban condom" because it served to seal off stigmatized groups from the mainstream urban communities that feared the infectious consequences of contact (Sennett, 1994), is for Wirth also a prophylactic that protects the marginalized community from the deleterious cultural consequences of urbanization and preserves traditional forms of solidarity.[7] Taking the Jews and the Jewish ghetto as a typical but prolonged case of sociospatial exclusion in the modern city (but also

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[7] The legacy of such "fear of touching" extended to the relationship between white American city dwellers and black American ghettos that they helped to make as well. According to David Levering Lewis, the Pennsylvanian elites who brought W.E.B. DuBois to Philadelphia to conduct the first major American neighborhood study, University of Pennsylvania provost Charles C. Harrison and social reformer Susan Wharton, "were prey to eugenic nightmares about 'native stock' and the better classes being swamped by fecund, dysgenic aliens. The conservative CSA [College Settlement Association] gentry thought of poverty in epidemiological terms, as a virus to be quarantined...to be 'prevented, if possible from accumulating too rapidly or contaminating the closely allied product just outside the almshouse door'" (quoted in Anderson 1996). Recent work in urban sociology, such as Jonathan Crane's epidemic theory of neighborhood social problems such as dropping out and teen childbearing, shows traces of such an approach (Crane 1991).

arguing that the ghetto is a universal and ubiquitous instrument of social division), Wirth organized *The Ghetto* around the question: "How has the isolation of the Jews produced results that hold good, not only for the Jew, but for the Negro, the Chinaman, the immigrant, and a number of other isolated groups in the modern world?" ((1928) 1956, 9-10).

Turning the study of urban exclusion away from common questions about the social pathologies of ghetto communities and residents, Wirth focuses instead on how extreme forms of separation facilitate the survival of social types, cultural groups, ritual practices and interpersonal relations that might otherwise have been destroyed in and by the city. Surveying the Jewish experience in modern Europe, Wirth concludes that "The Jews owe their survival as a separate and distinct ethnic group to their social isolation" (288). The ghetto, in Wirth's assessment, produced an isolation that "has not been merely of a physical sort," but also "has been the type of isolation produced by absence of intercommunication through difference in language, customs, sentiments, traditions, and social forms" (287). Note, here, the way that Wirth has fleshed out the social dimensions of isolation that Park had outlined, reconstructing the term so that it contains an explicitly social dimension. Social isolation, as Wirth portrays it, extends beyond spatial segregation to include the "absence of intercommunication" between organized groups, and even group members. According to Wirth, the ghetto walls and drawbridges that limit physical mobility extend into social space as well, precluding the possibilities for social exchange and creating a "closed community" among the locked-in group. Although numerous critics of Wirth's theory, particularly David Matza (1969), Claude Fischer (1976; 1982), and Ulf Hannerz (1980) have argued that the early

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Chicago sociologists "tended rather to exaggerate the isolation of the social world they studied" (Hannerz, 1980, p. 54), the issue here is not whether or not Wirth and his contemporaries were accurate in their claims. Rather, for our purposes Wirth's work is important because his conception of social isolation not only established the meaning of the category for several decades of urban research, but placed it at the heart of American urban studies.

Tellingly, what contemporary urbanists tend to forget about Wirth's conception of isolation is that in his analysis isolated groups had a flourishing collective life, one marked by strong social solidarity, resilient families and traditional institutions, and active street life. Ghetto residents, Wirth insisted, often refused to leave the ghetto even when they were no longer legally restricted to it, and those who did "get a taste in the freer world outside" found that they were "torn by the conflicting feeling" that they had abandoned themselves and their histories (288). Isolation, in other words, implied social saturation in a certain community, which is to say that it had the opposite meaning that it held in the general vocabulary and took new life as a technical term used to describe group relations. It would end, Wirth argued, only when the mental structures of ghetto residents transformed and long isolated groups perceived assimilation as a desirable choice. This part of Wirth's analysis would not be lost on the generation of ethnographers who, having studied with or been influenced by Chicago sociologists, studied ghettos, slums, and mixed poor and working class white ethnic neighborhoods in the 1940s and 1950s. Gans, for example, found that Italian Americans in Boston's West End were so deeply embedded in the social world of their "urban village" that the "outside world," as they saw it, appeared antagonistic, cold, and unappealing. The Italians with

whom Gans lived did not lack contacts with "outsiders," yet the family, the peer group, and the community, Gans showed, had not been destroyed by the mass culture of the city.[8] Not until the city and federal government collaborated in an urban renewal program that physically demolished much of the neighborhood and forcibly removed the residents would the community be displaced and diminished (Gans 1962). Thus although The Urban Villagers is often read as a critique of Wirth's general theory of urbanism (Fischer 1984), Gans's analysis is in fact consistent with Wirth's isolation thesis.

In the 1970s, though, Claude Fischer used survey research to show not only that there was little or inconsistent empirical basis for Wirth's general theory of urbanism, but also that the social solidarity that Wirth found primarily in the ghetto was present throughout the metropolis and not only in areas of exclusion. Although city life may destroy some traditional forms of solidarity and organization, Fischer demonstrated that the net effect of urbanism is to create and strengthen social groups and not to undermine them. Cities, unlike rural areas, offer a critical mass of residents necessary to support subcultural groups, meaningful social worlds which city dwellers enter to cultivate bonds of affiliation with similarly disposed agents (Fischer (1976) 1984; Fischer 1975). According to Fischer, subcultural groups are based on common interests rather than geography or tradition. In the modern city, the neighborhood is neither the sole nor even the primary basis of social networks.[9] Social isolation, as Park and Wirth had conceived it, makes little sense in this scheme. Yet Fischer

[8] In his own classic ethnographic study of young men in Boston, William Whyte also found that they had more contact with outsiders, especially the teachers, social workers, and politicians, than Wirth would have predicted (Whyte 1943).

[9] Barry Wellman has done the most work to show that communities are not necessarily tied to neighborhoods. See, in particular, "Who Needs Neighborhoods?" (Wellman 1972).

complicated the category of research by restoring a literal meaning for the term. In his framework, isolation referred to people with <u>relatively few</u> social contacts. Fischer found, much to the surprise of social scientists who argued that deprivation breeds solidarity and support,[10] that isolated respondents tended to be poorer, older, and formerly married, yet he said nothing about the relationship between ghettoization, spatial segregation, and social contact (Fischer 1982, Chapter 5). The individual-level focus that guided Fischer's network approach narrowed and refined the meaning of isolation. But it did so at the expense of the institutional-level analysis that had historically motivated the sociology of cities, and thereby neglected to engage with the meta-theoretical propositions about urban life established by the Chicago sociologists.

Social Isolation and the Black Metropolis

There is, however, a distinct genealogy of research and writing on the significance of isolation for the African-American ghetto, one that also has its roots in Wirth's work. Wirth was both a mentor for and a sponsor of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, whose landmark account of the Chicago Black Belt in the 1940s, <u>Black Metropolis</u>, ((1945) 1993) remains the most comprehensive and fine-grained sociological analysis of the American ghetto. Drake and Cayton's multi-method study of "Bronzeville" was the largest and most empirically rich of the early Chicago projects, combining ethnographic observations with interviews, mapping, archival research, and surveys of literature from the community and community press. The authors took four years, and employed over twenty research students as assistants, to probe the social structure of the ghetto, determine its place with the larger metropolis, and understand the

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[10] The most prominent of these being Carol Stack, author of <u>All our Kin</u> (1974).

relationships between residents of the two social worlds. Doing this, they recognized, required shifting the scope of the community study so that it took the city as well as the neighborhood into consideration and showing how the two were integrated and segregated in everyday life. Drake and Cayton broke from earlier Chicago sociologists not only in the depth of their research but in their focus as well, adding politics and political economy to the ecological approach of their predecessors.[11] Planting themselves in the "city within the city," researchers on the project found evidence for social as well as spatial segregation. They were particularly impressed by the strength of informal social controls (among whites and blacks) that reduced contact and restricted intimacy between the groups and ensured that they would remain endogamous, and by the rigidity of the color line in the labor and housing markets, where the life chances and choices of Chicagoans were largely determined.[12] Yet they also recognized several realms of social and economic life in which blacks, whites, and their separate cities were in fact imbricated, where the color line was challenged and violated (see 126), or where social and demographic pressures were redrawing it. While largely in agreement with Wirth's view of social isolation,

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[11] Parts Two and Three, which include chapters such as "The Job Ceiling," "Business Under a Crowd," "Democracy and Political Expediency," "Democracy and Economic Necessity: Black Workers and the New Unions," as well as the series of chapters on the different class groups in the black metropolis, were genuine breakthroughs in the Chicago School approach.

[12] The particular history, severity, and durability of these divisions, the authors emphasized, distinguished the black ghetto from the other zones of ethnic relegation that Park and Wirth had conflated. It was, Drake and Cayton showed, a specific form of social containment and closure, and black ghetto residents faced a set of barriers to integration and assimilation that no other American ethnic group confronted. Among the principal contributions of the Bronzeville chroniclers was to demonstrate that the social, spatial, and economic barriers that constrained ghettoized African Americans, the "'hard' facts of material existence" that Wirth had de-emphasized (Wirth 1938: 288) were in this case more influential than, and to some extent determinative of, the sentiments, dreams, and ideals of a people that Wirth believed to "matter most" to marginalized groups.

Drake and Cayton initiated a more qualified assessment of the relations between the groups and their neighborhoods.

More importantly, by incorporating an analysis of the labor market and the local political structure into their community study, Drake and Cayton were able to explicitly demonstrate how economic and political exclusion structured the experiences of ghetto residents, and therefore to place social isolation within a broader context in which its influences could be specified. In an analytic move that has received little recognition from subsequent generations of sociologists, Drake and Cayton reconstruct the object of urban analysis from the specific neighborhood or local institution to the city, and then the city within the city, as complex social systems.[13]

This theoretical and methodological advance established the foundations for the next generation of sociological, anthropological, and historical accounts of the ghetto, including Kenneth Clark's Dark Ghetto (1965), Allan Spear's Black Chicago (1968), Ulf Hannerz's Soulside (1969), Gilbert Osofsky's Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (1963), and Elliot Liebow's Tally's Corner (1967). These studies, conducted before the political economy perspective of the new urban sociology was introduced to the field, already reflected concerns for political and economic issues that fell outside the purview of the early Chicago scholars.[14]

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[13] Sudhir Venkatesh has explained the shortcomings of Drake and Cayton's "city within a city" approach. "In this view, the ghetto was a separate place – that is, a quasi-independent 'city' – where residents were at once removed from the rest of society, actively evading that society, and creating life-styles at odds with that society." Venkatesh shows that even the most segregated public housing projects, "however isolated they may appear, are nevertheless managed, subsidized, and administered by a number of social actors, including government and philanthropic agencies…As such, they should not be seen as completely different or separate from the rest of American society" (Venkatesh 2000: 8-9).
[14] The timing of this emerging concern with political economy is consistent with other trends in American sociology. As Janet Abu-Lughod explains, "It was not until after World War II that Marxist analysis and ideas from the Frankfurt school began to infuse the subfield of political economy, adding a

Moreover, they agreed with Drake and Cayton that, although social and spatial segregation were among the elementary forms of ghetto life, "the ghetto," as Clark starkly put it, "is not totally isolated (1965, p.12). According to Hannerz, isolation of the ghetto "community" (a term Hannerz called into question) was impossible because ghetto residents were deprived the means to be self-sufficient. "Ghetto people support themselves through relationships with outsiders and are dominated by them. Every morning brings white non-residents into ghetto territory and black people out of it, for a day's work" (1969, p. 12). How, Hannerz was asking, could an "urban colony" (to recall Park's language as well as the 1960s "inner-colonialism" rhetoric) not be closely tied to colonizers? How could there be exploitation without social relations? Relationships between ghetto residents and outsiders were likely to be impersonal or professional, Hannerz argued, yet he recognized that "cultural influences from the outside, rather than only economic and political pressures" (13) are a constitutive part of the "human side" of the ghetto condition that he explored.[15]

Clark put a different spin on the isolation question, one that we now recognize as rooted in Zorbaugh's work as well as Gunnar Myrdal's observation that America's race problem was, in fact, a problem with whites (1944). The privileged white community, he argued, "is at great pains to blind itself to the conditions of the ghetto, but the residents of the ghetto are not themselves blind

structural appreciation of the operation of capitalism and its unique culture to the insights of historically minded and globally oriented thinkers" (Abu-Lughod 1999: 3).
[15] On this point Georg Simmel, whose work was so influential for the early Chicago School urbanists, would have been instructive. "Interaction," Simmel writes, "prevails even where it often is not noted. It exists even in those cases of superordination and subordination – and therefore makes even those cases *societal* forms – where according to popular notions the "coercion" by one party deprives the other of

to life as it is outside the ghetto" (Clark, p. 12). Ghetto residents have a deep practical knowledge about the outside world; it is the white city outside the black that is truly isolated, as its residents refuse to see the world they have helped to create. Implicitly dismissing conventional understanding of the dynamics of urban culture, Clark represents well the position of his generation of scholars. For them, social isolation was no longer the core problem of urban life, but an epiphenomenon of more fundamental divisions at best, and possibly even a figment of the sociological imagination. This position would only be strengthened by the emergence of social network studies, such as Fischer's (1982), which returned questions of isolation to the individual rather than the community level and rendered the Park's understanding of social isolation a coarse conception of urban social relations.[16]

Unfortunately, though, the ethnographers of the 1960s and 1970s did not do the empirical research necessary to address the theoretical problems of urbanism that become apparent once the object of analysis shifts to the set of political and social relations that constitute metropolitan life. Hannerz (1969), Liebow (1967), Rainwater (1970), Suttles (1968), and Stack (1974) remained committed to the community study style of research that, as a methodological technique, isolates the local neighborhood from the city in which it is embedded, and then forgets its own role in constructing the segmentation it uncovers. In the Introduction to <u>Behind Ghetto Walls</u>, for example, Rainwater writes: "This book, in short, is about intimate personal life in a particular ghetto setting. It does not analyze the larger institutional, social structural, and ideological forces

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every spontaneity, and thus of every real "effect," or contribution to the process of interaction" (1908: 98).

that provide the social, economic, and political context in which lower-class Negro life is lived" (1970, pp. 1-2). Shortly thereafter, Rainwater entitles a subsection of the chapter, "The Autonomy of the Slum Ghetto," and proceeds to identify the characteristics of the "slum Negro" subculture.

According to Michael Burawoy, this style of research was typical of ethnographers trained at the University of Chicago at the time. (Rainwater was among them.) "William Kornblum's <u>Blue Collar Community</u>…considered the relation between work and community on the South Side of Chicago, but it ignored history and context. Kornblum did not reach beyond the workplace…nor beyond the neighborhood…Similarly, Gerald Suttles's <u>The Social Order of the Slum</u> – the other minor classic of this period – cordoned off his community with geographic barriers, the tracks of elevated railway, freeway construction, and the like" (Burawoy 2000, p. 22). In retrospect, there is an identifiable disconnect between the theoretical advances made by urban scholars and the methodological principles that continued to guide urban ethnographic research. Most scholars understood that "forces" and "connections" originating or extending outside the regions they observed were helping to structure the local environment. The trouble was figuring out how to study them.

The Truly Isolated? Wilson and the New Poverty Thesis

Ironically, however, the period in which new theories began to displace social isolation from the conceptual toolbox of urban social science turned out to be the very time when the category advanced to the forefront of urban research and became one of the central issues in poverty debates. Without explicitly referencing or taking a position on the intellectual history of the term he

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[16] See Hannerz (1980: Chapter 5) for a useful review of the urban network literature in anthropology.

invoked, William Julius Wilson single-handedly resurrected social isolation by making it the theoretical foundation of his influential book, <u>The Truly Disadvantaged</u> (1987). For Wilson, social isolation means "the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (60). In his view, social isolation is "a cultural condition that arises out of structural constraints;" it "makes it much more difficult for those who are looking for jobs to be tied into the job network" (60), limits the life chances and work opportunities for social mobility among the truly disadvantaged, and effects an extreme form of social closure around ghetto residents. Social isolation is the crucial and causal element in Wilson's explanation of recurring and extreme poverty; it is "the key theoretical concept" (61) in his argument because it is the mechanism that mediates the effects of neighborhood characteristics on residents and establishes barriers to economic opportunity. It is impossible to assess Wilson's urban poverty thesis without examining how he constructs the category and demonstrates its impact. Yet, despite intensive scrutiny of other parts of Wilson's conceptual apparatus and heated debates about his empirical findings, sociologists have done little critical analysis of social isolation as a category of analysis.[17]

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[17] A notable exception is the volume of articles on drugs, crime, and social isolation edited by Adele Harris and George Peterson (Harrell 1992), particularly the article by Roberto Fernandez and David Harris that assesses social isolation and Wilson's underclass thesis. According to Roberto Fernandez and David Harris, who have done the most work to refine the concept of isolation used in urban research, there are several meanings of the term implied in Wilson's thesis. By social isolation, they show, Wilson refers to (i) "a lack of personal contact between members of the underclass (sic) and mainstream society;" (ii) "isolation from institutions, conceived as a lack of participation in local organizations;" and (iii) marginalization from thick, extensive social networks that extend beyond the local community (Fernandez and Harris 1992). One problem in Wilson's work, they argue, is that it is not always clear which of these meanings he is using at any given time. The work of Lean Tigges and colleagues (Tigges, Brown, and Green 1998) includes a more thorough empirical test of the social isolation thesis, and they too find mixed support for the claim.

For Wilson, writing about social isolation was a way of challenging the validity of the culture of poverty thesis that was widely accepted in the political field and much of the academic field in the 1980s (Murray 1984;Wilson 1987).[18] Frustrated with the liberal as well as the conservative explanations of why poverty was increasingly concentrated and reproduced in poor black urban neighborhoods, Wilson (elaborating John Kasarda's analysis of the spatial mismatch between poor urban blacks and the regions in which new jobs were concentrated) mobilized an array of economic and demographic evidence to show that black communities had been the primary victims of industrial transformation in the Rust Belt and the Northeast and had also been excluded from the new job growth in the suburbs and in higher skill labor market (Kasarda 1985). Wilson initially eschewed a single explanation for these forms of dislocation and argued instead that it was the combination of discrimination, migration, the youthfulness of the black population, and deindustrialization that proved so devastating for poor urban blacks. Unlike other poor city dwellers, Wilson argued, black residents of the ghetto in the 1980s suffered from "concentration effects" of an all-encompassing poverty. "The social transformation of the inner city," which included the flight of middle class blacks from the most degraded urban areas and the consequent class segregation of African Americans, "has resulted in a disproportionate concentration of the most disadvantaged segments of the urban black population, creating a social milieu significantly different from the environment that existed in these communities

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[18] Wilson's book was largely directed at the researchers and policy makers who had been influenced by Charles Murray's book, Losing Ground (1984), and the tradition of attributing poverty and related social problems to government programs and putative cultural deficiencies that Murray represented. See Wilson (1987 16-18). Wilson's use of the category isolation was likely related to the rise of the

several decades ago" (58). Social isolation, in Wilson's view, was the most

consequential of these concentration effects.

　　　Wilson rejected the arguments that extreme segregation (or hyper-

ghettoization, as Loïc Wacquant (1994) has called it) by race and class, or the

discrimination behind it and other forms of exclusion, are adequate to explain the

nature and extent of black urban poverty. There was, he suggested, a property

or characteristic of ghetto dwellers themselves which, though not a problem of

their own making, was the analytical missing link between the structural

conditions in which they lived and their exclusion from decent work in the labor

market: social isolation.[19] Wilson's unique conception of social isolation is an

intellectual hybrid that bears the marks of both the social network and the

Chicago School formulations of the category. According to Wilson, social

isolation is "defined in this context as the lack of contact or of sustained

interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society"

(60). Insofar as it posits that ghetto residents are personally cut off from certain

social ties it is an individual-level conception of social relations akin to those of

network analysts; yet insofar as it refers to the relationship between individuals

in a marginalized part of the city and institutional representatives of mainstream

society, and in as much as it connotes no internal or interpersonal isolation of

ghetto residents, it reflects the early Chicago School definition of the term.

Wilson, in other words, does not use social isolation to claim that ghetto

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"spatial mismatch" hypothesis, which posited that black and Latino urban residents lacked access to employment because most new jobs were in suburbs or edge cities far from the central city, in the 1980s.
[19] It is notable that Wilson's reconstruction of the social isolation term marked a shift in his own conceptual thinking. In his previous book, The Declining Significance of Race (1978: 35), Wilson had been explicitly critical of Stanley Elkins's thesis about the social isolation of slaves. According to Wilson, slaves had more interaction with others than Elkins recognized, and isolation was an inadequate term to capture their condition.

residents have limited social ties and supports, but to say that they have contact

with the wrong people (i.e., people who cannot help them find work) and that

they are out of the loop when it comes to accessing information about and

informal connections to jobs. This is social isolation in only the most technical

and restricted sense, a category whose meaning depends on a precise usage but

that, as we have seen before, has a metaphorical and symbolic power that opens

it up to alternative interpretations – most notably the literal notion that socially

isolated people have relatively few social ties.[20]

      Wilson's isolation thesis is a network argument, but he does not reference

or engage with the debates about social ties and labor market access enough to

specify why either casual contacts or sustained interactions with mainstream

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[20] Wilson's conception of isolation is at least partly indebted to the tradition of social network studies, yet a core element of his theory – that the lack of sustained interaction between ghetto residents and mainstreamers keeps them out job networks – appears to be at odds with the major finding in studies of job networks: that, as Mark Granovetter has shown, "weak ties," or casual relations, are more important for getting people work and information about work than are sustained or intimate relations, who are likely to draw from the same sources of news about opportunities (Granovetter 1973; Granovetter 1974). There is, however, a debate within the network literature on whether weak ties are more useful for communicating information about professional jobs (Granovetter's original research was on civil engineers), and strong ties are, in fact, more important for blue-collar and low-wage service sector jobs, the kind of which ghetto residents are more likely to get. For while professionals can use their resumes to prove their qualifications for jobs, blue collar and low wage workers are often hired because their close relations are willing to vouch for them to their employees. The networks for lower-wage jobs thus depend on lines of trust between first, employers and the employees on whom they depend for recruiting labor, and second, employees and their relation, who must be responsible enough not to perform poorly and jeopardize the status of the friend who helped them get the job.

      There is ample evidence to show that networks of information and support are often bounded by axes of division such as ethnicity or race, class, gender, and place (Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994; Tilly 1994; Waldinger 1996), and even to show that poor people are likely to have smaller general friendship and support networks than non-poor people (Fischer and Phillips 1982). Highlighting the significance of job networks is an important contribution to the debate over urban poverty, yet conceptually Wilson obscures the specificity of the network problem by labeling it as a matter of social isolation, narrowly construed. It is logical to expect that individuals in social groups with restricted access to middle class neighborhoods, jobs, and institutions will have more contact with people in their group than with the middle class. But the considerable variation in the status of ghetto residents, the exposure that ghetto residents have to other city dwellers and working people, and the well-founded sociological insight that communities are often rooted in shared affiliations rather than place, calls into question the simple correlation between spatial segregation by race or class and social isolation.

individuals and institutions should matter so much for ghetto residents.[21] The

presentation of the social isolation thesis leaves it unclear whether Wilson is

arguing that people living in concentrated poverty areas do not have sustained

contact with people who work in the low levels of the labor market, or if he is

claiming that they don't have weak ties with mainstream workers and

institutions. This makes it difficult to determine precisely what social isolation

looks like in practice. Wilson's own students, most notably Mary Pattillo (1999)

and Sudhir Venkatesh (2000), have conducted ethnographic research in

(respectively) middle class and extremely poor African American communities,

and both find substantial interaction between blacks of different class groups.[22]

Finally, Wilson's focus on the relationship between ghetto residents and

mainstream society suggests that he de-emphasizes the importance of ties to the

working class. As Martín Sánchez-Jankowski has argued, though, working class

contacts are more likely to provide the poor with information about working

class jobs than mainstreamers (Sánchez-Jankowski 1999). So the puzzle of

isolation remains unsolved.

The Problems of Isolation

Tracing the genealogy of this charged analytic concept makes it clear that social

isolation is, in fact, a problem for social science research as well as for the subjects of

social scientific inquiry. But what is to be done? It would be presumptuous to think

that an intellectual history of an idea as resilient, mutable, and productive as social

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[21] In their case study of Red Hook, Philip Kasinitz and Jan Rosenberg show how weak network connections compromise the job prospects of people already stigmatized by race, residence in a poor place, and poverty (Kasinitz 1996).

[22] Pattillo's research (1999) is especially instructive here, since she finds that contact with poor people from extremely poor neighborhoods is *precisely* what makes young middle class blacks so vulnerable. From their side of the "black picket fence," then, network ties with the putatively isolated represent a

isolation can clear up all the uncertainties related to the term. Yet we can identify a series of confusions generated by the category, and illustrate the specific ways that research organized around the isolation question has shaped the study of social problems and urban life.

First, the conceptual blurring between social and spatial segregation – a trend that originates with the early Chicago School efforts to map the social ecology of the city – has led generations of social scientists to <u>presume</u> that, and not to <u>examine whether</u>, residents of poor and stigmatized areas (be they "ethnic neighborhoods," "ghettos," or "slums") lack social ties to people and institutions in other parts of the metropolis. Few would question whether an urban dweller's residential location creates and constrains possibilities for establishing social ties. And – despite the pervasive argument that contemporary social ties are decreasingly place-based – perhaps residents of segregated or ghettoized neighborhoods are generally less likely than others to be connected to people and institutions outside their local environment. But this is an empirical question that social scientists are just beginning to explore, and it is already clear that the answer will vary depending on the city, the relations between different class or ethnoracial groups, the labor market, the quality or quantity of local services (such as transportation and education), and the age and gender of the residents.[23] Any generic theory proposing a causal relationship between spatial segregation and "social isolation," however defined, is likely to overstate the disconnection of purportedly isolated residents.

In fact, such theories have already done damage by supporting the second major confusion related to the social isolation category: a sweeping exaggeration of the extent

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pressing social problem. Also see the Introduction of Venkatesh's <u>American Project</u> (2000) for an account of the inadequacies of the isolation concept.

to which people living in stigmatized neighborhoods are or have been cut off from other residents of and institutions in their home city. As Venkatesh (2000) and Wacquant (1997) have shown, notions about the social isolation of African-Americans, in particular, have supported the exoticization of both blacks and "the ghetto," legitimating the fuzzy idea that African-Americans live in another America, a separate world that has not been constituted or influenced by the rest of society. As we have seen, Harvey Zorbaugh called attention to the faulty reasoning behind this idea during the first wave of Chicago urban sociology, and his challenge – that the dominant groups, rather than the dominated, are the isolated – was repeated by Clark and others. Most scholars have dismissed these arguments as merely rhetorical. But there are deep comparative questions about the forms of urban sociability remaining to be explored. Just how do stigmatized and segregated neighborhoods or people fit into the social, cultural, economic, or political life of the metropolis? What features of a city or a group might explain the variations that we would expect to find? And how might we organize an inquiry into these matters? Until we begin to address these questions, the "pernicious premise" (Wacquant 1997) that social isolation generates a separate, alien, impoverished culture is likely to remain one of the prevailing myths in American sociology.

The conflation of spatial segregation with social isolation also helps to generate the third confusion related to the term: the under-specification of the ways in which urban segmentation separates people, institutions, and resources. The methodological tool-kits shared by social scientists contain powerful instruments for measuring forms of contact in different spheres of city life. But only sharper concepts and theories can

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[23] See Fernandez and Harris (1992) and Tigges, Brown, and Green (1998) for some early evidence about the variation in levels of social contact for different groups.

establish productive applications of these research techniques. The coarse category of social isolation has not only worked to blunt the conceptual resources that scholars and journalists use to understand social relations, but has also occluded more precise accounts of the mechanisms through which residential segmentation makes an impact on city dwellers. Consider, for example, how the slippery term has been employed to explain access to jobs, networks for social support, cultural differences, and possibilities for forging political coalitions based on shared interests. Social scientists could easily develop a more precise vocabulary for addressing each of these issues, but social isolation is so apparently powerful and readily available that there is little incentive to do so.

The fourth problem fostered by debates about the putative social isolation of urban residents concerns the relationship between method and theory in sociological research. Urban ethnographers, beginning with the early Chicago sociologists directed by Park and continuing today, have consciously and consistently constructed isolated "neighborhoods" or "communities" as discrete, observable objects of analysis, and then "discovered" the social isolation of the same neighborhood or group. The solution to a pragmatic research problem in the study of urban social processes – the question of how to construct a coherent object of analysis that a scholar could study firsthand and describe with confidence – effectively created another set of problems: By carving a particular urban area out of the system of social and political relations in which it was embedded, sociologists exaggerated the various forms of segregation and segmentation that divide the metropolis. Ethnographers observed isolation, but they also refused to develop a theoretical framework that could account for social contact between insiders and the rest of the city. If there were interaction, if the people and institutions of so-called isolated areas and those of the city around them intersected in

regular, recurrent ways, would the observers have noticed? Here Bachelard's notion

that, "for science…the qualities of reality are functions of our rational methods"

(Bachelard (1934) 1984, p. 171), offers insight into the epistemological problem at work.

"Phenemena must be selected, filtered, purified, shaped by instruments." But beware,

the philosopher of science cautions, "it may well be that the instruments that produce

the phenomenon in the first place" (13).   Reflexive attention to this "method effect"

could have helped social scientists to retrospectively redress the bias built into their

studies, but (as we have seen) even ethnographers who were critical of isolation

theories had difficulty breaking from them in practice or conceiving new techniques for

urban research. Today, as Burawoy (2000) and Abbott (1997) have argued, the

challenge for sociology is to recontextualize people, places, and institutions within the

thick social environments they inhabit, to observe and assess the forces and connections

– be they urban, regional, national, or global – that help constitute the local. The

concept of social isolation is poorly suited for such a project.

This brings us to the fifth and final confusion related to the idea of social

isolation: Despite the efforts of individual scholars to assign a narrow definition to the

term, in public discourse *and* social scientific debate there remains great confusion over

what it means. Regardless of the various theoretical defenses for the concept that its

authors have developed, in academic, journalistic, and folk practice the metaphorical

suggestiveness of social isolation has rendered the term uncontrollable, and thereby

unmanageable as an analytic category. It is tempting to argue that social scientists

should recover a more literal concept of social isolation, one restricted to the relative

density of a person's network ties. For, as gerontologists (Krause 1993), psychologists

(LaVeist et al. 1997), and urban sociologists (Klinenberg 1999; 2002) are beginning to

show, the literal social isolation of Americans, particularly the elderly poor and frail

residents of violent or abandoned neighborhoods, is an emerging trend in contemporary cities. But there is little reason to believe that the history of the term will not be repeated (again), and scholars who engage with and in turn reproduce the social isolation debate will likely find themselves mired in the many confusions noted here. Are individuals or neighborhoods cut off from the outside world, and precisely how are they marginalized? Can someone be isolated and yet immersed in a dense web of social ties? Are the dominant or the dominated the "truly isolated"? And, given the complexity of everyday cultural exchanges and social processes, how could we know? Alas, the contradictory concept of social isolation is destined to muddle the study of urban social life so long as it remains in the sociological vocabulary. It is time to abandon the idea, and to develop a set of analytic tools that does not win findings about the city and its people at the expense of deeper, more complex knowledge.

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