

· HERBERT J. GANS ·

PEOPLE, PLANS, AND POLICIES

Essays on Poverty, Racism, and
Other National Urban Problems



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· F O U R ·

URBANISM AND
SUBURBANISM AS
WAYS OF LIFE:
A REEVALUATION
OF DEFINITIONS

THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL conception of cities and of urban life is based largely on the work of the Chicago School and its summary statement in Louis Wirth's essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life."¹ In that paper, Wirth developed a "minimum sociological definition of the city" as "a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals." From these prerequisites, he then deduced the major outlines of the urban way of life. As he saw it, number, density, and heterogeneity created a social structure in which primary-group relationships were inevitably replaced by secondary contacts that were impersonal, segmental, superficial, transitory, and often predatory in nature. As a result, the city dweller became anonymous, isolated, secular, relativistic, rational, and sophisticated. In order to function in an urban society, he or she was forced to combine with others to organize corporations, voluntary associations, representative forms of government, and the impersonal mass media of communications. These replaced the primary groups and the integrated way of life found in rural and other preindustrial settlements.

Wirth's paper has become a classic in urban sociology, and most texts have followed his definition and description faithfully.² In recent years,

however, a considerable number of studies and essays have questioned his formulations.³ In addition, a number of changes have taken place in cities since the article was published in 1938, notably the exodus of white residents to low- and medium-priced houses in the suburbs and the decentralization of industry. The evidence from these studies and the changes in American cities suggest that Wirth's statement must be revised.

There is yet another and more important reason for such a revision. Despite its title and intent, Wirth's paper deals with urban-industrial society, rather than with the city. This is evident from his approach. Like other urban sociologists, Wirth based his analysis on a comparison of settlement types, but unlike his colleagues, who pursued urban-rural comparisons, Wirth contrasted the city to the folk society. Thus, he compared settlement types of preindustrial and industrial society. This allowed him to include in his theory of urbanism the entire range of modern institutions which are not found in the folk society, even though many such groups (for example, voluntary associations) are by no means exclusively urban. Moreover, Wirth's conception of the city dweller as depersonalized, atomized, and susceptible to mass movements suggests that his paper is based on, and contributes to, the theory of the mass society.

Many of Wirth's conclusions may be relevant to the understanding of ways of life in modern society. However, since the theory argues that all of society is now urban, his analysis does not distinguish ways of life in the city from those in other settlements within modern society. In Wirth's time, the comparison of urban and preurban settlement types was still fruitful, but today, the primary task for urban (or community) sociology seems to me to be the analysis of the similarities and differences between contemporary settlement types.

This paper is an attempt at such an analysis; it limits itself to distinguishing ways of life in the modern city and the modern suburb. A reanalysis of Wirth's conclusions from this perspective suggests that his characterization of the urban way of life applies only—and not too accurately—to the residents of the inner city. The remaining city dwellers, as well as most suburbanites, pursue a different way of life which I shall call "quasi-private." This proposition raises some doubt about the mutual exclusiveness of the concepts of city and suburb and leads to a yet broader question: whether settlement concepts and other ecological concepts are useful for explaining ways of life.

THE INNER CITY

WIRTH ARGUED that number, density, and heterogeneity had two social consequences which explain the major features of urban life. On the one hand, the crowding of diverse types of people into a small area led to the segregation of homogeneous types of people into separate neighborhoods. On the other hand, the lack of physical distance between city dwellers resulted in social contact between them, which broke down existing social and cultural patterns and encouraged assimilation as well as acculturation—the melting-pot effect. Wirth implied that the melting-pot effect was far more powerful than the tendency toward segregation and concluded that, sooner or later, the pressures engendered by the dominant social, economic, and political institutions of the city would destroy the remaining pockets of primary-group relationships. Eventually, the social system of the city would resemble Tönnies' *Gesellschaft*—a way of life which Wirth considered undesirable.

Because Wirth had come to see the city as the prototype of mass society, and because he examined the city from the distant vantage point of the folk society—from the wrong end of the telescope, so to speak—his view of urban life is not surprising. In addition, Wirth found support for his theory in the empirical work of his Chicago colleagues. As Greer and Kube⁴ and Wlensky⁵ have pointed out, the Chicago sociologists conducted their most intensive studies in the inner city.⁶ At that time, it consisted mainly of slums recently invaded by new waves of European immigrants and rooming-house and skid-row districts, as well as the habitat of Bohemians and well-to-do "Gold Coast" apartment dwellers. Wirth himself studied the Maxwell Street Ghetto, a poor inner-city Jewish neighborhood then being dispersed by the acculturation and mobility of its inhabitants.⁷ Some of the characteristics of urbanism which Wirth stressed in his essay abounded in these areas.

Wirth's diagnosis of the city as *Gesellschaft* must be questioned on three counts. First, the conclusions derived from a study of the inner city cannot be generalized to the entire urban area. Second, there is as yet not enough evidence to prove—or, admittedly, to deny—that number, density, and heterogeneity result in the social consequences which Wirth proposed. Finally, even if the causal relationship could be verified, it can be shown that a significant proportion of the city's inhabitants were, and are, isolated from these consequences by social structures and cultural patterns which they either brought to the city or developed by living in it. Wirth conceived

the urban population as consisting of heterogeneous individuals, torn from past social systems, unable to develop new ones, and therefore prey to social anarchy in the city. While it is true that a not insignificant proportion of the inner-city population was, and still is, made up of unattached individuals,⁸ Wirth's formulation ignores the fact that this population consists mainly of relatively homogeneous groups, with social and cultural moorings that shield it fairly effectively from the suggested consequences of number, density, and heterogeneity. This applies even more to the residents of the outer city, who constitute a majority of the total city population.

The social and cultural moorings of the inner-city population are best described by a brief analysis of the five major types of inner-city residents. These are: 1. the "cosmopolites"; 2. the unmarried or childless; 3. the "ethnic villagers"; 4. the "deprived"; and 5. the "trapped" and downward-mobile.

The "cosmopolites" include students, artists, writers, musicians, and entertainers, as well as other intellectuals and professionals. They live in the city in order to be near the special "cultural" facilities that can be located only near the center of the city. Many cosmopolites are unmarried or childless. Others rear children in the city, especially if they have the income to afford the aid of servants and governesses. The less affluent ones may move to the suburbs to raise their children, continuing to live as cosmopolites under considerable handicaps, especially in the lower-middle-class suburbs. Many of the very rich and powerful are also cosmopolites, although they are likely to have at least two residences, one of which is suburban or exurban.

The unmarried or childless must be divided into two subtypes, depending on the permanence or transience of their status. The temporarily unmarried or childless live in the inner city for only a limited time. Young adults may team up to rent an apartment away from their parents and close to job or entertainment opportunities. When they marry, they may move first to an apartment in a transient neighborhood, but if they can afford to do so, they leave for the outer city or the suburbs with the arrival of the first or second child. The permanently unmarried may stay in the inner city for the remainder of their lives, their housing depending on their income.

The "ethnic villagers" are ethnic groups which are found in such inner-city neighborhoods as New York's Lower East Side, living in some ways as they did when they were peasants in European or Puerto Rican villages.⁹ Although they reside in the city, they isolate themselves from significant contact with most city facilities, aside from workplaces. Their way of life differs sharply from Wirth's urbanism in its emphasis on kinship and the

primary group, the lack of anonymity and secondary-group contacts, the weakness of formal organizations, and the suspicion of anything and anyone outside their neighborhood.

The first two types live in the inner city by choice; the third is there partly because of necessity, partly because of tradition. The final two types are in the inner city because they have no other choice. One is the "deprived" population: the emotionally disturbed or otherwise handicapped; broken families; and, most important, the poor-white and especially the nonwhite population. These urban dwellers must take the dilapidated housing and blighted neighborhoods to which the housing market relegates them, although among them are some for whom the slum is a hiding place or a temporary stopover to save money for a house in the outer city or the suburbs.¹⁰

The "trapped" are the people who stay behind when a neighborhood is invaded by nonresidential land uses or lower-status immigrants, because they cannot afford to move or are otherwise bound to their present location.¹¹ The "downward-mobiles" are a related type; they may have started life in a higher class position, but have been forced down in the socioeconomic hierarchy and in the quality of their accommodations. Many of them are old people, living out their existence on small pensions.

These five types may all live in dense and heterogeneous surroundings; yet they have such diverse ways of life that it is hard to see how density and heterogeneity could exert a common influence. Moreover, all but the last two types are isolated or detached from their neighborhood and thus from the social consequences that Wirth described.

When people who live together have social ties based on criteria other than mere common occupancy, they can set up social barriers, regardless of the physical closeness or the heterogeneity of their neighbors. The ethnic villagers are the best illustration. While a number of ethnic groups are usually found living together in the same neighborhood, they are able to isolate themselves from one another through a variety of social devices. Wirth himself recognized this when he wrote that "two groups can occupy a given area without losing their separate identity because each side is permitted to live its own inner life and each somehow fears or idealizes the other."¹² Although it is true that the children in these areas were often oblivious of the social barriers set up by their parents, at least until adolescence, it is doubtful whether their acculturation can be traced to the melting-pot effect as much as to the pervasive influence of the American culture that flowed into these areas from the outside.¹³

The cosmopolites, the unmarried, and the childless are *detached* from

neighborhood life. The cosmopolites possess a distinct subculture which causes them to be uninterested in all but the most superficial contacts with their neighbors, somewhat like the ethnic villagers. The unmarried and childless—who may also be cosmopolites—are detached from the neighborhood because of their life-cycle stage, which frees them from the routine family responsibilities that entail some relationship to the local area. In their choice of residence, the two types are therefore not always concerned about their neighbors or the availability and quality of local community facilities. Even the well-to-do can choose expensive apartments in or near poor neighborhoods, because if they have children, these are sent to special schools and summer camps which effectively isolate them from neighbors. In addition, the childless and unmarried are often transient. Therefore, they tend to live in areas marked by high population turnover, where their own mobility and that of their neighbors creates a universal detachment from the neighborhood.¹⁴

The deprived and the trapped do seem to be affected by some of the consequences of number, density, and heterogeneity. The deprived population suffers considerably from overcrowding, but this is a consequence of low income, racial discrimination, and other handicaps and cannot be considered an inevitable result of the ecological makeup of the city.¹⁵ Because the deprived have no residential choice, they are also forced to live amid neighbors not of their own choosing, with ways of life different and even contradictory to their own. If familial defenses against the neighborhood climate are weak, as may happen among single-parent families and downward-mobile people, parents may lose their children to the culture of "the street." The trapped are the unhappy people who remain behind when their more advantaged neighbors move on; they must endure the heterogeneity which results from neighborhood change.

Wirth's description of the urban way of life fits best the transient areas of the inner city. Such areas are typically heterogeneous in population, partly because they are inhabited by transient types who do not require homogeneous neighbors or by deprived people who have no choice or may themselves be quite mobile. Under conditions of transience and heterogeneity, people interact only in terms of the segmental roles necessary for obtaining local services. Their social relationships may thus display anonymity, impersonality, and superficiality.¹⁶

The social features of Wirth's concept of urbanism seem, therefore, to be a result of residential instability, rather than of number, density, or heterogeneity. In fact, heterogeneity is itself an effect of residential instability, resulting when the influx of transients causes landlords and realtors

to stop acting as gatekeepers—that is, wardens of neighborhood homogeneity.¹⁷ Residential instability is found in all types of settlements, and presumably its social consequences are everywhere similar. These consequences cannot, therefore, be identified with the ways of life of the city.

THE OUTER CITY AND THE SUBURBS

THE SECOND effect which Wirth ascribed to number, density, and heterogeneity was the segregation of homogeneous people into distinct neighborhoods¹⁸ on the basis of "place and nature of work, income, racial and ethnic characteristics, social status, custom, habit, taste, preference and prejudice."¹⁹ This description fits the residential districts of the *outer city*.²⁰ Although these districts contain the majority of the city's inhabitants, Wirth went into little detail about them. He made it clear, however, that the sociopsychological aspects of urbanism were prevalent there as well.²¹

Because existing neighborhood studies deal primarily with the exotic sections of the inner city, very little is known about the more typical residential neighborhoods of the outer city. However, it is evident that the way of life in these areas bears little resemblance to Wirth's urbanism. Both the studies which question Wirth's formulation and my own observations suggest that the common element in the ways of life of these neighborhoods is best described as *quasi-primary*. I use this term to characterize relationships between neighbors. Whatever the intensity or frequency of these relationships, the interaction is more intimate than a secondary contact, but more guarded than a primary one.²²

There are actually few secondary relationships, because of the isolation of residential neighborhoods from economic institutions and workplaces. Even shopkeepers, store managers, and other local functionaries who live in the area are treated as acquaintances or friends, unless they are of a vastly different social status or are forced by their corporate employers to treat their customers as economic units.²³ Voluntary associations attract only a minority of the population. Moreover, much of the organizational activity is of a sociable nature, and it is often difficult to accomplish the association's "business" because of the members' preference for sociability. Thus, it would appear that interactions in organizations, or between neighbors generally, do not fit the secondary-relationship model of urban life. As anyone who has lived in these neighborhoods knows, there is little anonymity, impersonality, or privacy.²⁴ In fact, American cities have sometimes been described as collections of small towns.²⁵ There is some truth to this

description, especially if the city is compared to the actual small town, rather than to the romantic construct of antiurban critics.²⁶

Postwar suburbia represents the most contemporary version of the quasi-primary way of life. Owing to increases in real income and the encouragement of homeownership provided by the F.H.A., families in the lower middle class and upper working class can now live in modern single-family homes in low-density subdivisions, an opportunity previously available only to the upper and upper-middle classes.²⁷

The popular literature of the 1950s described the new suburbs as communities in which conformity, homogeneity, and other-direction are usually rampant.²⁸ The implication is that the move from city to suburb initiates a new way of life which causes considerable behavior and personality change in previous urbanites. My research in Levittown, New Jersey, suggests, however, that the move from the city to this predominantly lower-middle-class suburb does not result in any major behavioral changes for most people. Moreover, the changes which do occur reflect the move from the social isolation of a transient city or suburban apartment building to the quasi-primary life of a neighborhood of single-family homes. Also, many of the people whose life has changed report that the changes were intended. They existed as aspirations before the move or as reasons for it. In other words, the suburb itself creates few changes in ways of life.²⁹

A COMPARISON OF CITY AND SUBURB

If OUTER-URBAN and suburban areas are similar in that the way of life in both is quasi-primary, and if urban residents who move out to the suburbs do not undergo any significant changes in behavior, it is fair to argue that the differences in ways of life between the two types of settlements have been overestimated. Yet the fact remains that a variety of physical and demographic differences exist between the city and the suburb. However, upon closer examination, many of these differences turn out to be either spurious or of little significance for the way of life of the inhabitants.³⁰

The differences between the residential areas of cities and suburbs which have been cited most frequently are:

1. Suburbs are more likely to be dormitories.
2. They are further away from the work and play facilities of the central business districts.
3. They are newer and more modern than city residential areas and are

designed for the automobile rather than for pedestrian and mass-transit forms of movement.

4. They are built up with single-family rather than multifamily structures and are therefore less dense.
5. Their populations are more homogeneous.
6. Their populations differ demographically: they are younger; more of them are married; they have higher incomes; and they hold proportionately more white-collar jobs.³¹

Most urban neighborhoods are as much dormitories as the suburbs. Only in a few older inner-city areas are factories and offices still located in the middle of residential blocks, and even here many of the employees do not live in the neighborhood.

The fact that the suburbs are farther from the central business district is often true only in terms of distance, not travel time. Moreover, most people make relatively little use of downtown facilities, other than work-places.³² Many downtown stores seem to hold their greatest attraction for the upper-middle class;³³ the same is probably true of typically urban entertainment facilities. Teenagers and young adults may take their dates to first-run movie theaters, but the museums, concert halls, and lecture rooms attract mainly upper-middle-class ticket buyers, many of them suburban.³⁴

The suburban reliance on the train and the automobile has given rise to an imaginative folklore about the consequences of commuting on alcohol consumption, sex life, and parental duties. Many of these conclusions are, however, drawn from selected high-income suburbs and exurbs and reflect job tensions in such hectic occupations as advertising and show business more than the effects of residence.³⁵ It is true that the upper-middle-class housewife must become a chauffeur in order to expose her children to the proper educational facilities, but such differences as walking to the corner drugstore and driving to its suburban equivalent seem to me of little emotional, social, or cultural import.³⁶ In addition, the continuing shrinkage in the number of mass-transit users suggests that even in the city many younger people are now living a wholly auto-based way of life.

The fact that suburbs are smaller is primarily a function of political boundaries drawn long before the communities were suburban. This affects the kinds of political issues which develop and provides somewhat greater opportunity for citizen participation. Even so, in the suburbs as in the city, the minority who participate routinely are the professional politicians, the economically concerned businesspeople, lawyers, and salespeople, and the

ideologically motivated middle- and upper-middle-class people with better than average education.

The social consequences of differences in density and house type also seem overrated. Single-family houses in quiet streets facilitate the supervision of children; this is one reason why middle-class parents who want to keep an eye on their children move to the suburbs. House type also has some effects on relationships between neighbors, insofar as there are more opportunities for visual contact between adjacent homeowners than between people on different floors of an apartment house. However, if occupants' characteristics are also held constant, the differences in actual social contact are less marked. Homogeneity of residents turns out to be more important than proximity as a determinant of sociability. If the population is heterogeneous, there is little social contact between neighbors, either on apartment-house floors or in single-family-house blocks; if people are homogeneous, there is likely to be considerable social contact in both house types. One need only contrast the apartment house located in a transient, heterogeneous neighborhood and exactly the same structure in a neighborhood occupied by a single ethnic group. The former is a lonely, anonymous building; the latter, a bustling micro-society. I have observed similar patterns in suburban areas: on blocks where people are homogeneous, they socialize; where they are heterogeneous, they do little more than exchange polite greetings.³⁷

Suburbs are usually described as being more homogeneous in house type than the city, but if they are compared to the outer city, the differences are small. Most inhabitants of the outer city, other than well-to-do homeowners, live on blocks of uniform structures as well; for example, the endless streets of row houses in Philadelphia and Baltimore or of two-story duplexes and six-flat apartment houses in Chicago. They differ from the new suburbs only in that they were erected through more primitive methods of mass production. Suburbs are, of course, more predominantly areas of owner-occupied single homes, though in the outer districts of most American cities homeownership is also extremely high.

Demographically, suburbs as a whole are clearly more homogeneous than cities as a whole, though probably not more so than outer cities. However, people do not live in cities or suburbs as a whole, but in specific neighborhoods. An analysis of ways of life would require a determination of the degree of population homogeneity within the boundaries of areas defined as neighborhoods by residents' social contacts. Such an analysis would no doubt indicate that many neighborhoods in the city as well as the suburbs are homogeneous. Neighborhood homogeneity is actually a result of factors

having little or nothing to do with the house type, density, or location of the area relative to the city limits. Brand new neighborhoods are more homogeneous than older ones, because they have not yet experienced resident turnover, which frequently results in population heterogeneity. Neighborhoods of low- and medium-priced housing are usually less homogeneous than those with expensive dwellings because they attract families who have reached the peak of occupational and residential mobility, as well as young families who are just starting their climb and will eventually move to neighborhoods of higher status. The latter, being accessible only to high-income people, are therefore more homogeneous with respect to other resident characteristics as well. Moreover, such areas have the economic and political power to slow down or prevent invasion.

The demographic differences between cities and suburbs cannot be questioned, especially since the suburbs have attracted a large number of middle-class child-rearing families. The differences are, however, much reduced if suburbs are compared only to the outer city. In addition, a detailed comparison of suburban and outer-city residential areas would show that neighborhoods with the same kinds of people can be found in the city as well as the suburbs. Once again, the age of the area and the cost of housing are more important determinants of demographic characteristics than the location of the area with respect to the city limits.

CHARACTERISTICS, SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, AND ECOLOGY

THE PRECEDING sections of the paper may be summarized in three propositions:

1. As concerns ways of life, the inner city must be distinguished from the outer city and the suburbs; and the latter two exhibit a way of life bearing little resemblance to Wirth's urbanism.
2. Even in the inner city, ways of life resemble Wirth's description only to a limited extent. Moreover, economic condition, cultural characteristics, life-cycle stage, and residential instability explain ways of life more satisfactorily than number, density, or heterogeneity.
3. Physical and other differences between city and suburb are often spurious or without much meaning for ways of life.

These propositions suggest that the concepts "urban" and "suburban" are neither mutually exclusive nor especially relevant for understanding

ways of life. They—and number, density, and heterogeneity as well—are ecological concepts which describe human adaptation to the environment. However, they are not sufficient to explain social phenomena, because these phenomena cannot be understood solely as the consequences of ecological processes. Therefore, other explanations must be considered.

Ecological explanations of social life are most applicable if the subjects under study lack the ability to *make choices*, be they plants, animals, or human beings. Thus, if there is a housing shortage, people will live almost anywhere, and under extreme conditions of no choice, as in a disaster, married and single, old and young, middle and working class, stable and transient will be found side by side in whatever accommodations are available. At that time, their ways of life represent an almost direct adaptation to the environment. If the supply of housing and of neighborhoods is such that alternatives are available, however, people will make choices, and if the housing market is responsive, they can even make and satisfy explicit *demands*.

Choices and demands do not develop independently or at random; they are functions of the roles people play in the social system. These can best be understood in terms of the *characteristics* of the people involved; that is, characteristics can be used as indices to choices and demands made in the roles that constitute ways of life. Although many characteristics affect the choices and demands people make with respect to housing and neighborhoods, the most important ones seem to be *class*—in all its economic, social, and cultural ramifications—and *life-cycle stage*.³⁸ If people have an opportunity to choose, these two characteristics will go far in explaining the kinds of housing and neighborhood they will occupy and the ways of life they will try to establish within them.

Many of the previous assertions about ways of life in cities and suburbs can be analyzed in terms of class and life-cycle characteristics. Thus, in the inner city, the unmarried and childless live as they do, detached from neighborhood, because of their life-cycle stage; the cosmopolites, because of a combination of life-cycle stage and a distinctive but class-based subculture. The way of life of the deprived and trapped can be explained by low socioeconomic level and related handicaps. The quasi-primary way of life is associated with the family stage of the life cycle and the norms of child-rearing and parental role found in the upper working class, the lower-middle class, and the noncosmopolite portions of the upper-middle and upper classes.

The attributes of the so-called suburban way of life can also be understood largely in terms of these characteristics. The postwar suburbia is

nothing more than a highly visible showcase for the ways of life of young, upper-working-class and lower-middle-class people. Kitsanes and Reissman have aptly described it as "new homes for old values."³⁹ Much of the descriptive and critical writing about suburbia assumes that as long as the new suburbanites lived in the city, they behaved like upper-middle-class cosmopolites and that suburban living has mysteriously transformed them.⁴⁰ The critics fail to see that the behavior and personality patterns ascribed to suburbia are in reality those of class and age.⁴¹ These patterns could have been found among the new suburbanites when they still lived in the city and could now be observed among their peers who still reside there—if the latter were as visible to critics and researchers as are the suburbanites.

Needless to say, the concept of "characteristics" cannot explain all aspects of ways of life, among either urban or suburban residents. Some aspects must be explained by concepts of social organization that are independent of characteristics. For example, some features of the quasi-primary way of life are independent of class and age, because they evolve from the roles and situations created by joint and adjacent occupancy of land and dwellings. Likewise, residential instability is a universal process which has a number of invariate consequences. In each case, however, the way in which people react varies with their characteristics. So it is with ecological processes. Thus, there are undoubtedly differences between ways of life in urban and suburban settlements which remain after behavior patterns based on residents' characteristics have been analyzed and which must therefore be attributed to features of the settlement.⁴²

Characteristics do not explain the causes of behavior, however; rather, they are clues to socially created and culturally defined roles, choices, and demands. A causal analysis must trace them to the larger social, economic, and political systems which determine the situations in which roles are played and the cultural content of choices and demands, as well as the opportunities for their achievement.⁴³ These systems determine income distributions, educational and occupational opportunities, and, in turn, fertility patterns and child-rearing methods, as well as the entire range of consumer behavior. Thus, a complete analysis of the way of life of the deprived residents of the inner city cannot stop at indicating the influence of low income, lack of education, or family instability. These must be related to such conditions as the urban economy's "need" for low-wage workers and the housing-market practices which restrict residential choice. The urban economy is in turn shaped by national economic and social systems, as well as by local and regional ecological processes. Some phenomena can be explained exclusively by reference to these ecological pro-

cesses. However, it must also be recognized that as human beings have gained greater control over the natural environment, they have been able to free themselves from many of the determining and limiting effects of that environment. Thus, changes in local transportation technology, the ability of industries to be footloose, and the relative affluence of American society have given ever-larger numbers of people increasing amounts of residential choice. The greater the amount of choice available, the more important the concept of characteristics becomes in understanding behavior.

Consequently, the study of ways of life in communities must begin with an analysis of characteristics. If characteristics are dealt with first and held constant, we may be able to discover which behavior patterns can be attributed to features of the settlement and its natural environment.⁴⁴ Only then will it be possible to discover to what extent city and suburb are independent—rather than dependent or intervening—variables in the explanation of ways of life.

This kind of analysis might help to reconcile the ecological point of view with the behavioral and cultural one and possibly put an end to the conflict between conceptual positions which insist on one explanation or the other.⁴⁵ Both explanations have some relevance, and future research and theory must clarify the role of each in the analysis of ways of life in various types of settlement.⁴⁶ Another important rationale for this approach is its usefulness for applied sociology; for example, city planning. Planners can recommend changes in the spatial and physical arrangements of the city. Frequently, they seek to achieve social goals or to change social conditions through physical solutions, having been attracted to ecological explanations because these relate behavior to phenomena which they can affect. For example, many planners tend to agree with Wirth's formulations because they stress number and density, over which the planner has some control. If the undesirable social conditions of the inner city could be traced to these two factors, the planner could propose large-scale clearance projects which would reduce the size of the urban population and lower residential densities. Experience with public housing projects has, however, made it apparent that low densities, new buildings, or modern site plans do not eliminate antisocial or self-destructive behavior. The analysis of characteristics will call attention to the fact that this behavior is lodged in the deprivations of low socioeconomic status and racial discrimination and that it can be changed only through the removal of these deprivations. Conversely, if such an analysis suggests residues of behavior that can be attributed to ecological processes or physical aspects of housing and neighborhoods, the planner can recommend physical changes that can really affect behavior.

A REEVALUATION OF DEFINITIONS

THE ARGUMENT presented here has implications for the sociological definition of the city. Such a definition relates ways of life to environmental features of the city qua settlement type. But if ways of life do not coincide with settlement types, and if these ways are functions of class and life-cycle stage rather than of the ecological attributes of the settlement, a sociological definition of the city cannot be formulated.⁴⁷ Concepts such as "city" and "suburb" allow us to distinguish settlement types from each other physically and demographically, but the ecological processes and conditions which they synthesize have no direct or invariable consequences for ways of life. The sociologist cannot, therefore, speak of an urban or suburban way of life.

CONCLUSION

MANY OF the descriptive statements made here are as time bound as Wirth's.⁴⁸ In the 1940s Wirth concluded that some form of urbanism would eventually predominate in all settlement types. He was, however, writing during a time of immigrant acculturation and at the end of a serious depression, an era of minimal choice. Today, it is apparent that high-density, heterogeneous surroundings are for most people a temporary place of residence; other than for the Park Avenue or Greenwich Village cosmopolites, they are a result of necessity, rather than choice. As soon as they can afford to do so, most Americans head for the single-family house and the quasi-primary way of life of the low-density neighborhood, in the outer city or the suburbs.⁴⁹

Changes in the national economy and in government housing policy can affect many of the variables that make up housing supply and demand. For example, urban sprawl may eventually outdistance the ability of present and proposed transportation systems to move workers into the city; further industrial decentralization can forestall it and alter the entire relationship between work and residence. The expansion of urban-renewal activities can perhaps lure a significant number of cosmopolites back from the suburbs, while a drastic change in renewal policy might begin to ameliorate the housing conditions of the deprived population. A serious depression could once again make America a nation of doubled-up tenants.

These events will affect housing supply and residential choice; they will

households of all types, rather than mainly young families with young children. I did mention the decentralization of industry, but did not think that it might one day become a flood. Now, about two-thirds or more of those living in the suburbs also work there, and even fewer than a third need to come to the city's central business district, except perhaps for high culture, since museums and concert halls have by and large not decentralized (yet). Professional sports teams have, however, even if they are still called by the name of the city nearest to where they play.

I should also have thought about the possibility that when the suburbs became more popular, the mainly urban essayists and intellectuals who criticized them—and by implication their middle-American residents—for undue conformity, homogeneity, and other sociocultural diseases would have to end the suburban critique. This they did, shortly after I published this article, but they found new targets with which to continue the cultural class war. Such targets are always available, however, beginning and still ending with television viewing and television programming.

Having underestimated the extent of the suburban move, I also failed to consider the likelihood of a city inhabited increasingly by the very rich and the poor. Nor did I consider that black ghettos would also be found in what I called the outer city, even if they are ghettos of the black working class and lower middle class more than of the black poor, and are thus not altogether different than when they were inhabited by the white working and lower middle classes. It did not even occur to me that housing might one day become expensive, so that most American home buyers could no longer afford either a new or a secondhand single-family house, that suburbia would be filling up with row houses and condominiums—and that the major housing problem of the poor was the inability to pay high rents, which was one cause of the tragic increase in homelessness exacted by the Reagan administration on the poor, the cities, and even many suburbs.

Actually, my prediction of the yuppies was partly luck, for while I expected more young people to come into the inner city after college, some having done so already in the 1950s, I did not expect the large number who came and for whom old neighborhoods near the central business district and elsewhere were gentrified. They have come largely because of the dramatic increase in *professional* service employment in the central business districts of many cities, although because they spend so much time on the streets and in expensive "boutiques," their visibility is greater than their actual number. Moreover, that number could decline sharply in the 1990s, not only because when they marry and have children many move to

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frustrate, but not suppress, demands for the quasi-primary way of life. However, changes in the national economy, society, and culture can affect people's characteristics—family size, educational level, and various other concomitants of life-cycle stage and class. These in turn will stimulate changes in demands and choices. The rising number of college graduates, for example, is likely to increase the cosmopolite ranks. This might in turn create a new set of city dwellers, although it will probably do no more than encourage the development of cosmopolite facilities in some suburban areas.

The current revival of interest in urban sociology and in community studies, as well as the sociologist's increasing curiosity about city planning, suggests that data may soon be available to formulate a more adequate theory of the relationship between settlements and the ways of life within them. The speculations presented in this essay are intended to raise questions; they can be answered only by more systematic data collection and theorizing.

· P O S T S C R I P T ·

WHEN I reread this essay again after many years, I was struck by how much the first sentence remains largely true. While no single school, including the ecological school, is now dominant in urban sociology, Louis Wirth's "Urbanism as a Way of Life" remains the most often cited article and probably the most often read one as well. It still supplies the simplest and seemingly most accurate definition of the city, and a rationale, not to mention an outline, for studying urban sociology—all the research and writing questioning Wirth's ideas notwithstanding. In fact, although over half of all Americans now live in the suburbs, urban sociology courses remain resolutely urban, although often because they deal with the urban sociology of the poor and the minorities who remain stuck in the city. Whatever the merit of that approach (which I use myself), we still do not have a sociology of the suburbs or even a respectable sociological literature on suburbia.

I pointed out in my article, originally published in 1962, that it was as time bound as Wirth's, and I was by and large right. Even though I seem to have predicted the yuppies in my penultimate paragraph, I did not consider the possibility that someday suburbia would be the majority form of residence, and that it would then be inhabited by people of all ages and

the suburbs, but also because if the boom times in professional service employment end, their number—and visibility—will shrink quickly and considerably.

I could list other ways in which the 1962 article was time bound; for example, it paid no more attention than Wirth's article to the various political battles—about race, or class, or just property values—that take place in cities and suburbs, and thus could not consider that as all resources became scarcer, these battles would increase in number and intensity. Still, in its basic conception, the article remains accurate as I write this postscript in the spring of 1990. The basic differences are not between city and suburb, but between the inner city and the rest of the metropolitan area, and the major reasons are more or less as I stated them.

Even the five types of inner city residents can still be found, if not solely in the inner city, in the poorer parts of the outer city as well. I should have begun my list of types with those who are in the city by necessity, especially the poor; also, some of my labels seem a bit archaic now, notably because the people who are in the city mainly because of its high culture facilities—and whom I called cosmopolites—have been joined by the aforementioned yuppies. The ethnic villages are now largely *barrios* or Southeast Asian areas, because the white ethnic villages left over from the European immigration are mainly in the outer city and to a lesser extent in the suburbs. (In New York, Bensonhurst, Canarsie, and Howard Beach are among the best known at the start of the 1990s, though unfortunately for tragic reasons.)

Most of the inner city ethnic enclaves were either displaced by an enlarged central business district, were gentrified, or became slums for a later wave of immigrants. Thus, a part of New York's Jewish Lower East Side became a middle-class Jewish area, another is being gentrified for young people, and the rest of it became Loisada, which is the "Puerto Ricanization" of the old neighborhood name. Likewise, New York's Little Italy has become part of the rapidly growing Chinatown, although so far many of the retail stores remain Italian; they are restaurants, food stores and giftshops for the Italians who come back for a visit from the suburbs. Meanwhile, the Chinese immigration has been so large that most Chinese now live in Queens, the prototypical outer city borough.

From here on in, writing about the cities will be even more time bound, because as I note in the next chapter, America is part of the world economy now, and what economic changes will affect it, and its cities, will vary and be unpredictable. This may lengthen the life of Wirth's classic article even

further, because it transcends economic conditions and thus provides a seemingly timeless definition of the city that is never totally inaccurate. It may even become a bit more accurate as, in growing metropolitan areas, areas we now call suburbs become larger in population, higher in density, and more diverse in population.