Leading figure in the Chicago School of urban sociology

Born in Gemunden, Germany, in 1897, Wirth emigrated to the United States in 1911 with an uncle and enrolled at the University of Chicago, the first U.S. academic institution to have a sociology department. After completing both his undergraduate and graduate studies in Chicago, Wirth held a temporary lectureship at Tulane University in New Orleans and a social science research fellowship in Germany. During the summer of 1930, he was offered a permanent position at the University of Chicago, where he remained until his unexpected death in 1952. During his career, Wirth was president of the American Sociological Society (1947) and first president of the International Sociological Association (1949–1952). Many of his contributions to the discipline of sociology, such as the volume *The Ghetto* (1928) and the journal article “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938), have become sociological classics. Throughout his life and career, Wirth negotiated between the opposing demands of leftist social activism and dispassionate academic research.

Wirth focused an important part of his sociological inquiry on the life of his own ethnic community, urban Jews, and on the institution of the ghetto. Wirth's volume *The Ghetto*, based on his graduate studies, is an ambiguous statement on the future of the ghetto and the Jewish community in an urban context. After chronicling the history of the ghetto, Wirth proceeds to analyze the case study of the Chicago ghetto. As in the case of many essays focusing on urban ethnic communities by Chicago sociologists, Wirth finds that the promise of upward mobility dissolves ethnic ties; the transition from ethnic subaltern to U.S. citizen is brought about by economic success. After their arrival in the United States, the Jews' relationship to the ghetto was so organic that “they were unaware of its existence” (Wirth 1928/1998, pp. 242–243). Yet Wirth's Jews become increasingly fascinated by the achievements of modernity, which make the ghetto “begin to shrink, then to bore, and finally to disgust” (Wirth 1928/1998, p. 243). Parents usually yield to their children's demands to get out of the ghetto, and this is when “the exodus begins” (p. 243). Tellingly, Wirth uses here the word *exodus*, which connotes Jewishness, to illustrate the process through which Jews should leave the ghetto. As he claimed later in his study, “the path that leads out of the ghetto is neither straight nor unobstructed” (Wirth 1998, p. 263). Once Jews left the ghetto for the neighborhood of Lawndale, or Deutschland (as the area was called disparagingly by ghetto Jews),
they still found themselves in “an area of transition,” where “the character of the ghetto is being remolded under the influences of wider contacts and a larger world” (p. 250). The characters who populate the transitional area still exhibit signs of Jewishness. Little by little, the area of second settlement becomes “predominantly Jewish, although it is not the Jewishness of the same intensity as that of the ghetto itself” (Wirth 1928/1998, p. 254). So “a new exodus” has to begin, since the plans of those “who fled from the ghetto … have been frustrated by the similar plans of the others,” resulting, essentially, in the founding of a new ghetto. “The new frontier” in Wirth's narrative of upward mobility is therefore the area of third settlement, as exemplified by “Rogers Park, Ravenswood, Albay Park, the North Shore, and the South Shore, and finally the suburban regions” (p. 255).

Wirth's migrating Jew is here described in terms similar to those used to fellow Chicago sociologist Robert Park to describe marginal man and moves on the same concentric chart of urban space as that elaborated by another of Wirth's colleagues, Ernest Burgess. One of Wirth's case studies actually ends with the speaker declaring “so here I am—nobody, a dual personality—a man with two souls, a man without a country” (Wirth 1928/1998, p. 267). Jewish immigrants flee from their coreligionists to become independent of them and free from their traditions, which are perceived as restrictive. Yet this striving toward freedom is given an almost endless dimension, since other Jews have identical desires, which “lead them to adopt the same course … such that in the end [one] must either keep on moving or else find the very objective toward which [one] is moving disappear on the horizon” (Wirth 1928/1998, p. 261). By suggesting that Jews can never truly flee Jewish community, Wirth affirmed the permanence of that community.

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Further Readings

