Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life"

In this piece, the famous sociologist Louis Wirth theorized that there is a distinctively urban kind of personality marked by cold, instrumental rationality, individual isolation alongside rich organizational complexity, and a 'segmented self' of multi-faceted roles in complex divisions of labor. Wirth's article is an undisputed classic, but often the most influential ideas receive the most harsh criticism. As LeGates and Stout (2011, 96) note, some contemporary experts attack Wirth's claim as "nothing more than the social scientific verification of the obvious," while others maintain that "there is no such thing as an 'urban personality' or an 'urban way of life.'" But keep in mind when Wirth was writing: in the 1930s, in a fast-growing city of the industrial age in the mid-continent in the United States. Barely a generation had passed since the emergence of the first majority-urban country (the United Kingdom, around 1900). Some of what is obvious today was not quite so clear back in the 1930s.

Questions

1. Can you identify one sentence or section of Wirth's essay that seems relevant to our experience in cities today?

2. If you're having trouble with #1, consider these bold statements Wirth offers. What is Wirth trying to say about "urbanism as a way of life"? What makes a distinctively 'urban' personality?

> The city "is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos..."

> "...increasing the number of inhabitants in a settlement beyond a certain limit will affect the relations between them and the character of the city. Large numbers involve ... a greater range of individual variation. Furthermore, the greater the number of individuals participating in a process of interaction, the greater is the *potential* differentiation between them. ... Increase in the number of inhabitants of a community beyond a few hundred is bound to limit the possibility of each member of the community knowing all the others personally. ... The increase in numbers thus involves a changed character of the social relationships."

> "The multiplication of persons in a state of interaction under conditions which make their contact as full personalities impossible produces that segmentalization of human relationships which has sometimes been seized upon by students of the mental life of the cities as an explanation for the 'schizoid' character of urban personality. . . . Characteristically, urbanites meet one another in highly segmental roles. . . . Our acquaintances tend to stand in a relationship of utility to us in the sense that the role which each one plays in our life is overwhelmingly regarded as a means for achievement of our own ends. Whereas, therefore, the individual gains, on the one hand, a certain degree of emancipation or freedom from the personal and emotional controls of intimate groups, he loses, on the other hand,

the spontaneous self-expression, the morale, and the sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society."

"Being reduced to a stage of virtual impotence as an individual, the urbanite is bound to exert himself by joining with others of similar interest into organized groups to obtain his ends. This results in the enormous multiplication of voluntary organizations directed towards as great a variety of objectives as there are human needs and wants."

3. Consider the quote below:

"In the face of the disappearance of the territorial unit as a basis of social solidarity we create interest units. Meanwhile the city as a community resolves itself into a series of tenuous segmental relationships superimposed upon a territorial base with a definite center but without a definite periphery and upon a division of labor which far transcends the immediate locality and is world-wide in scope. The larger the number of persons in a state of interaction with one another the lower is the level of communication and the greater is the tendency for communication to proceed ... on the basis of those things which are assumed to be common or to be of interest to all.

It is obviously, therefore, to the emerging trends in the communication system and to the production and distribution technology that has come into existence with modern civilization that we must look for the symptoms which will indicate the probable future development of urbanism as a mode of social life. The direction of the ongoing changes in urbanism will for good or ill transform not only the city but the world."

Do you see any connections between what Wirth is describing, and the way we communicate today and live our lives within a sophisticated 'production and distribution technology' that can speedily deliver goods and services around the world?
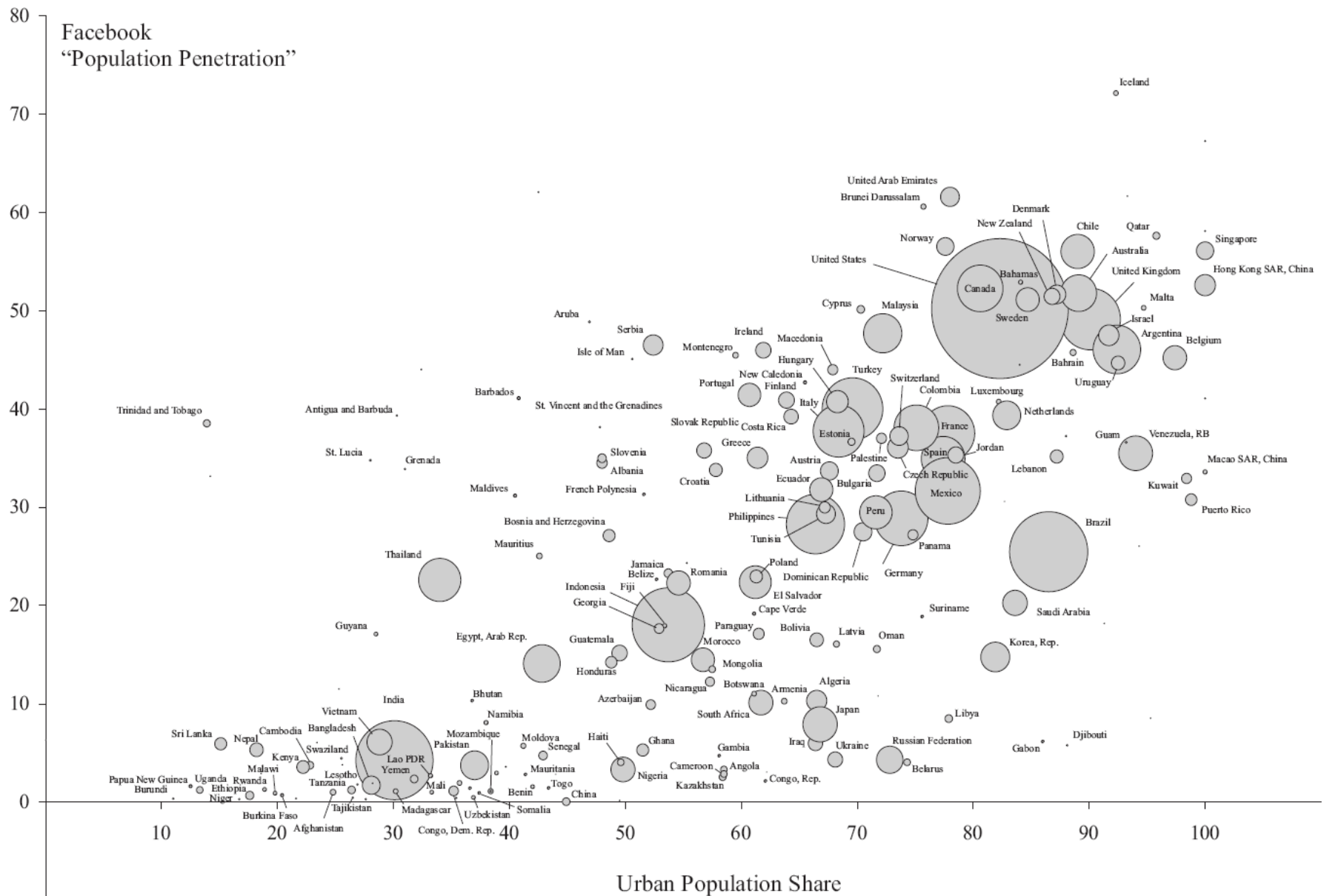
Facebook
"Population Penetration"

Urban Population Share

Figure 1. Facebook World City. The city is "the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos" (Wirth, 1938, p. 2). Replace "city" with "Facebook" (980 million estimated users), "Qzone" or "Sina Weibo" (480m and 300m, respectively, mostly in mainland China), "Vkontakte" (112m, Russia and former Soviet Republics), or any of dozens of other growing online communities. An urbanizing world is a socially-networked world. Urbanization rates account for 39 percent of the cross-national variance in Facebook's market penetration. Circle areas are proportional to the number of active Facebook users. *Data Sources:* site registered user estimates from various sources compiled and distributed via Wikipedia; Facebook country figures from publicly distributed estimates of users over previous three months as of July 1, 2012, from Social Bakers (2012); urbanization rates from World Bank (2011). Note: not all countries are labeled, and 32 countries or territories are omitted due to missing information either on Facebook users or urbanization rates.