

Nicole P. Marwell and Michael McQuarrie
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People, place and system: organizations and the renewal of urban social theory

Nicole P. Marwell

Baruch College and Graduate Center, City University of New York

Michael McQuarrie

University of California, Davis

ABSTRACT: This paper offers a theoretical framework for thinking about how organizations matter for the production, reproduction, and amelioration of urban poverty. We draw on the classical concept of *integration*, in both its social and systemic versions, as an important tool for advancing urban social theory. A key challenge for urban organizational analysts is to keep within view the processes of both social and systemic integration, while empirically investigating how they are connected (or not). Too many urban researchers focus on one or the other, with little conceptualization of the importance of linking the two. We argue that urban organizations of all kinds provide a strategic site for observing processes of both social and systemic integration, and that urban organizational research should examine many of them in order to better understand the multiple urban transformations currently in process.

This paper offers a theoretical framework for thinking about how organizations matter for the production, reproduction, and amelioration of urban poverty. Much social science research has addressed these issues by focusing on individual behaviors, family dynamics, neighborhood processes, and social networks. In the last few years, however, researchers have become more interested in the role that formal organizations play – or might play – in anti-poverty work (Allard 2009; Briggs 2008; Marwell 2007; Sánchez-Jankowski 2008; Small 2009; Watkins-Hayes 2009). This growing interest has followed a similar growth in studies of urban organizations more generally, as researchers have documented the importance of organizations for the monumental social changes found in cities over the last twenty-five years: renewed large-scale immigration, the globalization of labor and capital, the creation of real estate bubbles, the diversification of racial and ethnic solidarities, the privatization of public services, and many more (e.g., Allard 2009; Clarke and Gaile 1998; Delgado 1997; Eisinger 1988; Galaskiewicz 1985; 1997; Gotham 2006; Guthrie and McQuarrie 2008; Marwell 2004; McRoberts 2003; Perrow 2002; Scott, Reuf, Mendel, and Caronna 2000; Small and McDermott 2006; Squires 1989; Wolch 1990).

While we have learned many things from these studies, the fragmented perspectives employed by their authors have made it difficult to draw out broad theoretical lessons. This in turn has contributed to the ongoing scattershot nature of current urban analysis. Our paper aims to locate the theoretical coherence and innovation emerging from the many interesting and important organizational studies of recent developments in cities. By doing so, we hope to contribute to a more productive conversation among scholars examining different facets of the relationship between organizations and urban poverty.

Many urban poverty studies that focus on organizations ask key questions about how these organizations work, how they affect the individuals involved with them, how they impact the communities where they are located, and how effective they are at achieving the goals they set for themselves. We argue, however, that the importance of urban organizations goes beyond these kinds of concerns. Urban organizations also matter tremendously because, in our organizational society (Perrow 1992), they are key sites for understanding how *society* works. Urban organizations are not just interesting empirical objects in their own right, nor are they simply proxies for other social processes with which analysts are concerned. Rather, they are central to illuminating the pathways by which broad societal changes germinate, evolve, and solidify.

In order to elucidate the power of organizational analysis for seeing these broader societal changes, we turn to a classical social theoretical concept: integration. By integration, we mean the process of building society across lines of difference. In classical social theory, these lines of difference are conceptualized at the individual level: how will individuals agree to live together according to a set of mutually agreed-upon social rules that provide, at minimum, freedom from fraud and force? In later approaches to the question of integration, the lines of difference take on group form, and are myriad: family, language, religion, profession, class, race, and many more. The central question, however, endures: how to build society across difference? In defining integration, it is useful to think about what happens if lines of difference cannot be bridged. At the extreme, this state of affairs brings the Hobbesian “war of all against all.” In more tempered versions, a lack of integration leads to forms of exclusion: those whose differences cannot be bridged find themselves outside of society, with all the struggles this

position brings.

This basic insight is familiar to urban poverty scholars. From Chicago School ideas about “social disorganization” (Shaw and McKay 1969 [1942]; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918), to the discussion of the urban “underclass” (Auletta 1982; Wilson 1987), to concerns about “neighborhood effects” on individuals’ life chances (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Sampson 2011), the theme of exclusion from “mainstream society” underlies many analyses of the urban poor. This view often leads to calls for policy interventions that aim at greater integration of the poor into the mainstream, often via organizational pathways such as schools (Raudenbush, Fotiu, and Cheong 1998; Raudenbush and Willms 1995), churches (Warren 2001), daycare centers (Small 2009), bowling leagues (Putnam 2000), and similar groups. As we will argue in the next section, however, this view of integration – and the role of organizations in creating it – is only partial. It privileges the solidarity that arises from face-to-face interaction in relatively small-group settings, identifying a critically important, but nevertheless circumscribed piece of the integration puzzle.

In contrast to the idea that integration comes from face-to-face interaction stands a view of integration as a property of social structure. From this perspective, societies are always riven by conflicts over group interests, and social structures systematically benefit certain interests while disadvantaging others. Poverty and other forms of exclusion thus become fundamental properties of society, which is always marked by winners and losers, sometimes in the extreme (e.g., Harvey 1973; Wacquant 2008). In this view of integration, organizations are key sites of structural advantage and disadvantage, channeling individuals and groups in predictable patterns that are often difficult to change. As such, policy interventions are often

viewed as futile, with grassroots action outside formal organizations the only authentic antidote. Again, however, this understanding of integration and its organizational dimensions is only partial. A fixed view of social conflict and a grand historical sweep limit this approach's ability to see the variable pathways towards integration that are viable at different points in time and in different organizational configurations.

Readers will recognize these two distinctive views of integration as corresponding to the two sides of a longstanding theoretical divide in urban sociology, sociology more broadly, and even social analysis as a whole. The consensus-based view of societal stability and change clashes with the conflict-based one. We see organizations as a critical site for empirically examining this alleged divide, as well as for understanding the possibilities for bridging it. In what follows, we elaborate on the distinction between these two forms of integration, discuss their organizational dimensions, and then weave together some important empirical studies of urban organizations in light of our theoretical perspective.

Social Integration and Systemic Integration in Urban Social Theory

As sketched briefly above, the theoretical divide between consensus-driven and conflict-driven visions of integration has its roots in distinct conceptions of how society is organized. We distinguish these conceptions as *social integration* and *systemic integration*. By *social* we mean integration based on face-to-face interaction. By *systemic* we mean integration mediated through impersonal mechanisms, such as bureaucratic rules, money, or the written word. Social theory has long considered these two modes of integration as standing in opposition. Indeed, modernity usually is defined as an epochal shift in which systemic integration has come

to increasingly replace social integration. The “cash nexus” replaces interpersonal exchange, formal bureaucracies marginalize associations, professions substitute for communities of propinquity (Marx, Tocqueville, and Durkheim, respectively). This understanding of modernity produces two broad categories of societal organization across much of the social theoretical landscape, for example: *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tonnies 1957 [1887]), organic and mechanical solidarity (Durkheim 1984 [1893]), primary and secondary relations (Cooley 1909), cultural and biotic order (Park 1967 [1936]), and lifeworld vs. system (Habermas 1984).

The opposing categories of social and systemic integration run along the most prominent fault lines in thinking about cities as well. Indeed, as we have argued in prior work (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009), urban scholars working on questions of social and systemic integration are rarely in dialogue. This is primarily because the theoretical paradigms that organize the work of these two groups call for distinct objects of analysis, and secondarily due to the political and ideological commitments that have traditionally accompanied the two types of work. Only a few scholars have attempted to keep both social and systemic dynamics in their field of vision when addressing key urban questions such as the production of poverty and other forms of exclusion.

On one side, the first modern social analysts to take the city as their object of analysis – members of one flank of the Chicago School of sociology – privileged the question of social integration as they grappled with the newly “large, dense, and heterogeneous” city that was early twentieth-century Chicago. How could society hold together in the midst of mass immigration, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and other social forces that upended traditional forms of integration? How was civility to be produced in a city that contained

people from a variety of locations and cultures? In other words, how could society be made across the many lines of difference that characterized the modern city?

While Louis Wirth (1938) bemoaned what he saw as the inevitability of alienation and strangerhood, W.I. Thomas, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and their students observed and documented the emergence of new forms of integration in the city: coherent “little worlds that touch but do not interpenetrate,” scattered across the urban geography (Park 1915; 1967 [1936]; Park, Burgess, and Mackenzie 1925; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918). Each of these little worlds re-humanized the massive city, allowing the kind of repeated, face-to-face interactions that recalled the lost world of rural villages. New immigrants settled near one another, reproducing key aspects of their prior modes of social relations through common language, religious practice, workingmens’ associations, burial societies, and other mechanisms (Breton 1964; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918). Social integration (in the Chicago scholars’ parlance, “community”) maintained a foothold in the city after all, a bulwark against the much-feared specters of widespread alienation and the crumbling of social order.

At the same time, however, the limits of these new enactments of social integration were on display. Unemployment, alcoholism, family abandonment and juvenile delinquency also flourished in the early twentieth-century city, symptoms, the Chicago sociologists argued, of failures in the new modes of social relations (Park 1915; 1967 [1936]; Thomas and Znaniecki 1918). Despite much successful adaptation to the new conditions of urban living, all was not well in the “little worlds.” Importantly, the Chicago sociologists diagnosed the drunken husbands, juvenile delinquents, wayward girls, and similar social types as being insufficiently socially integrated, and prescribed renewed efforts to rebuild their face-to-face connections in

the communities from whence they came. They argued that once these social outcasts returned to an orientation where the regard of others (Cooley 1909) motivated their actions (and controlled their transgressions), they would be properly socially integrated. Of course, the persistence of these social types led other students of Park to point out that hobos (Anderson 1923), taxi dance-hall girls (Cressey 1932), juvenile delinquents (Shaw and McKay 1969 [1942]) and other maladjusted types had communities of their own, where social integration was provided – just to a different set of social rules.

The systemic perspective on cities pointedly takes issue with the fundamentals of the social integrationist approach. Sociological discussions of systemic social relations usually refer to relations that connect people to one another through formal organizations, representative systems, information flows, economic production, or markets. Access to medical care, for example, generally is mediated by large bureaucracies that mind the entrances to doctors' offices and hospitals via various bureaucratic rules and money. Similarly, modern citizenship is enabled not just by formal legal rights (which are institutionally, rather than interpersonally defined), but by access to complex systems that deliver food, shelter, employment, and various forms of hard infrastructure including running water and electrical power.

Harvey (1973), for example, has roundly criticized the urban social integrationist tradition for persisting in its interest with interactions at the community scale: by the 1970s, he argued, it was becoming clear that such interactions were heavily organized by larger political and economic processes, such as national-level institutions and the way that capitalism took specific form in urban space. Many other urban political economists agreed, and turned their attention to this type of systemic analysis (Castells 1977; Saunders 1981; Soja 2000). In the

same vein, contemporary scholars of a more Weberian bent have argued that the position of cities in systems of market exchange are producing urban hierarchies that govern the context in which many interpersonal interactions take place; it is thus the systemic level that is most worthy of investigation (Sassen 1991). All of this highlights the importance of connections to the various impersonal systems charged with ensuring well-being and inclusion. Individuals and groups differ in their access to these systemic pathways, however, and this is a primary mechanism in the production of inequality.

A key challenge for advancing urban social theory thus is to keep within view the processes of both social and systemic integration, while empirically investigating how they are connected (or not). The classic treatises on modernity notwithstanding, both modes of societal organization are alive in cities today. Regrettably, too many urban researchers focus on one or the other, with little conceptualization of the importance of linking the two. This is particularly true of policy-oriented urban poverty researchers, who tend to emphasize the social integrationist perspective. We believe that urban organizations of all kinds provide a strategic site for observing processes of both social and systemic integration, and that part of an organization's inherent process lies in the articulation of the two. The organizational setting provides a coherent framework within which to examine the relationship between social and systemic integration. It also avoids the need to specify *a priori* which social integrative process is linked to which systemic one, instead leaving this as an empirical question. We see numerous organizational sites in which social and systemic integration can be examined in tandem – local political structures, corporate board rooms, civil society organizations, global financial markets – and believe that urban organizational research should examine many of them in order to

better understand the many urban transformations currently in process.

Organizational Duality and Urban Poverty

We apply a core principle of organizations theory to the contemporary study of cities: the idea that organizations are “dual” (Scott 2004; Selznick 1949). We believe the recognition of organizational duality opens up fertile ground for urbanists interested in the study of poverty and other forms of urban social exclusion, and that this ground has only begun to be tilled by scholars of urban organizations. In most organizational research, the duality principle is expressed in the recognition that organizations are not unitary objects engaged in clear goal-seeking behavior governed by rational decision-making. Rather, organizations are viewed as both “technical production systems” and “adaptive social entities” seeking survival within ever-changing environments (Scott 2004: 2). These dual needs of organizations mean they are nearly always beset by competing agendas, limited by the bounded rationality of their inhabitants, and engaged in a critical search for legitimacy in the eyes of multiple constituents.

Analyzing the duality of organizations presents considerable methodological and theoretical challenges, especially when we are used to thinking of organizations as rational, goal-seeking actors easily controlled by their personnel. At its most basic level, the approach we advocate here requires us to treat organizations not as “things” with indivisible essences, but as agglomerations of interests, actors, and practices that are held together using various incentives, modes of authority, and types of social solidarity. This agglomeration, admittedly complex, is produced by an organization’s relationships to other organizations and actors in a variety of institutional settings, and over time. Organizations both reflect these connections –

through processes such as isomorphism – and organize those connections in socially productive ways – these are the practices by which individual organizations compile their identities and distinguish themselves from others. In other words, organizations are not simply empty containers upon which instrumental goals are projected or in which community is constituted through interpersonal interaction. Rather, they are active producers of both themselves and other societal elements via their interactions with the organizational, institutional, and geographic settings in which they operate. A study of urban organizations thus tells us not only about the particular organizations under analysis, but also about a wider set of social processes at play in the world.

This approach contrasts sharply with many extant studies of urban organizations, which tend to treat organizations as exemplars of specific social processes that make up a larger theoretical apparatus. Among social integrationist urbanists, organizations often are treated as containers for producing the interpersonal relations required for social integration. Many of these studies see organizations as one piece of the true object of inquiry: the social organization of neighborhoods (e.g., Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001; Peterson, Krivo, and Harris 2000; Sampson 2011; Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999). For urban scholars utilizing the conflict perspective, the object of interest usually is class conflict or capital accumulation, with market and bureaucratic organizations viewed as the impersonal source of such processes, and small-scale civil society organizations as authentic antidotes to be celebrated.

We argue that both of these approaches compromise the explanatory power that organizational analysis can offer for understanding cities. We propose that by taking

organizations more seriously as our object of analysis, the principle of organizational duality allows us to see and connect the divergent urban processes that have been of primary interest to analysts from these distinct theoretical traditions. Whereas integration-style analysts have been most interested in the production of local social contexts built from inter-personal interaction (primarily neighborhoods, but more recently organizations as well), conflict-oriented scholars have focused on the production of macro-level relations of production and class conflict. Few studies have embraced the idea of organizational duality as a theoretical gateway to understanding how these and other forms of social and systemic integration relate to one another. In the following section, we lay out our conceptual approach in greater detail.

Integration as a Framework for Organizational Research

An empirical focus on organizations allows us to keep both socially and systemically integrative processes in view. This means critically observing how organizational practice constitutes particular versions of community (social integration), as well as how organizations link to other organizations and modes of authority (systemic integration). For example, among organizations nominally of the same type (e.g., block associations, community development corporations, corner stores, day care centers, etc.), it is not a foregone conclusion what sort of social or systemic integration will be produced – if any. Instead, research should seek to understand how particular organizational practices create or reinforce specific forms of social and systemic integration.

Our basic view is that organizations are potential producers of both social integration and systemic integration. We treat as empirical questions (1) whether specific organizations in

fact produce either form of integration and (2) how those forms of integration are produced in daily organizational life. For example, in her study of two Massachusetts welfare offices after welfare reform, Watkins-Hayes (2009) shows how workers in the suburban office she studied were more likely to forge caring bonds with applicants than were workers at the study's inner-city office. Thus, while both offices engaged in the work of systemic integration – connecting needy applicants to a key source of state assistance, while also policing the behaviors required as a condition of that assistance – only the suburban office produced some measure of social integration as well. Watkins-Hayes suggests that not only were the experiences of applicants in the suburban office more tolerable, but also that their outcomes may have been better than those of the inner-city applicants. This attention to processes of both social and systemic integration allows Watkins-Hayes to illustrate the complexity of organizational action. While both of her research sites were in some sense “the same” – i.e., they were both charged with the same tasks, populated by the same types of workers, and accountable to the same authorities – they produced distinct forms of integration, thereby impacting workers, applicants, and their local communities differently.

Figure 1 provides a heuristic representation of the organizational perspective we are advocating, with an eye towards providing a clearer guide for empirical research. Onto the basic notion of organizations as mediators of both social and systemic integration, we add two key concepts from organizations theory. The first is the idea of the “field” (Bourdieu 1985; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Fligstein and McAdam 2011; 2012); the second is the concept of “mode of authority” (Friedland and Alford 1991; Weber 1946 [1918]). We discuss each in turn.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Fields designate a set of inter-organizational relationships, sometimes collaborative, sometimes antagonistic, in a particular area of action. Because organizations are always in relation with other organizations, we must take those relationships into account when we consider explanations for organizational behavior. The field concept allows the analyst to specify the relevant set of inter-organizational relationships when examining particular outcomes of interest. Figure 1 uses the example of what we call the “social welfare field” to illustrate the various components of our approach.

A set of organizations is identified in Figure 1 as constituting the social welfare field, i.e., as being important actors in the provision of various social welfare resources to individuals and groups. This set includes economic sector organizations – e.g., unions, which offer social welfare benefits to members, such as pensions and medical care – as well as civil society organizations that often provide social service resources – e.g., philanthropies, nonprofit service providers, churches – and state sector organizations – e.g., government agencies responsible for funding and administering public social welfare benefits, like Social Security. We do not suggest that the organizations named in Figure 1 are the *only* organizations that constitute the social welfare field; other organizations from economy, polity, civil society, or other institutional domains may also be part of the field. In a field approach, analysts specify the set of domains and inter-organizational relationships that pertain to their outcome(s) of interest.

The inter-organizational relationships that constitute the social welfare field in a particular setting at a particular time produce a range of social welfare practices. These

practices then impact different communities in distinctive ways (hence the three kinds of arrows used to represent the relationships between the social welfare field and the three communities represented in Figure 1). The community impacts may then lead to changes in practices of community formation (i.e., social integration), and that process feeds back into the ongoing dynamics of the social welfare field. For instance, when the U.S. government implemented welfare reform in 1996, it shifted the social welfare field in some dramatic ways, and different communities felt those impacts differently. As just one example, immigrants faced different consequences than the U.S.-born, because the new law prohibited non-citizens from receiving certain benefits (such as food stamps) to which they had previously been entitled. This new reality prompted different immigrant groups to see the common interest now stretching across the divide of national origin, and led to the formation of a broader immigrant community that lobbied government agencies to return legal non-citizen residents to certain kinds of benefit eligibility. (As a result of these efforts, in 1998, food stamp eligibility was restored for about one-third of previously eligible non-citizens, and in 2003 most other previously eligible non-citizens also saw food stamp benefits restored.)

The top row of Figure 1 identifies institutional domains in which the organizations that constitute fields are situated. We turn to the concept of “mode of authority” to explain this aspect of our conceptual diagram. A mode of authority refers to the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that characterize an institutional domain (cf. Friedland and Alford 1991; Jepperson 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Figure 2 refers to three modes of authority – economy, civil society, and polity – each of which projects a set of assumptions and practices onto organizations operating within its mode of authority. For example, the economic mode of

authority projects assumptions about pricing, exchange, contract, and other forms of market activity onto the organizations in its domain. As organizations become part of particular fields, they carry those assumptions into their inter-organizational relationships. Often, multiple modes of authority are at play in fields, and this may lead to conflict or transformation within the field.

In our example of the social welfare field, unions have seen their ability to provide social welfare benefits to their members erode as the economic mode of authority insists that firms no longer can afford to pay for these benefits. This development has prompted various responses from social welfare organizations operating under civic and political modes of authority. For instance, nonprofit service providers now regularly attempt to demonstrate their worthiness in economic terms, using measures adopted from the economic mode of authority such as “return on investment” or “value-added.” The longstanding civic ethic of charity or communal care no longer serves as adequate justification for nonprofit social welfare work. On the governmental side, the political mode of authority that created the pillars of the nation’s social safety net in the 1930s and 1960s is increasingly yielding to the pressures of the economic mode of authority as well. Both the 1996 welfare reform and the slow rise of the retirement age for Social Security have been based on an economic calculus that appears more compelling than political ideas about guaranteed public support for the needy. In these and other ways, the increasing dominance of the economic mode of authority, translated into specific actions by organizations, is transforming the social welfare field. In turn, these changes have profound impacts on how individuals, families, and communities find themselves exposed to poverty and grapple with its challenges.

Take Allard's excellent (2009) study of the spatial distribution of social service-providing organizations. He shows us the significant and growing mismatch between where poor people live and where the social welfare services that might improve their quality of life and life chances can be accessed. If it is challenging to reach these services, Allard argues, it makes it that much more difficult to move towards gainful employment through job training, find a reliable childcare provider that enables work, or visit a doctor regularly to keep mental illness in check. Each of these processes – and many other similar ones – has important consequences for individuals' current conditions and life chances. But Allard's work tells us much more than this. In tracing the story of the location of social service providers, he also reveals a major transformation in how public assistance to the poor is made available. The U.S. welfare state, we realize, has increasingly replaced cash assistance with services. While this approach may accord better with national views on what poor people need, it also drives home the point that the integration of the poor has become significantly linked with the systemic processes driving both the geographic redeployment of poverty, and the location-stickiness of service-providing organizations.

Using Organizational Research to Understand Urban Transformation

The foregoing has described a framework that captures what we believe is the real benefit of organizational research for urban poverty scholars: to understand how society is changing in ways that matter for the production, reproduction and amelioration of poverty. By observing organizations as they engage each other in the dynamic formation of fields, we gain important insight into the ways that processes of social and systemic integration are shifting. Below, we

discuss several examples of recent urban organizational research that demonstrate how an empirical focus on organizations and integration can help us see and understand larger social changes that are relevant for urban poverty scholars.

McQuarrie (2007) shows how community development corporations in Cleveland produce two different forms of systemic integration by virtue of their distinct organizational practices and orientations to modes of authority. One group of CDCs integrates low-income residents with credit markets by focusing on the production of low-income housing using the latest financial instruments. These CDCs' view of success – validated by other organizations in the community development field that provide financial support and other forms of legitimacy – turns on their orientation to markets as ultimate arbiter of value. In contrast, a second group of CDCs integrates low-income residents with representative politics by becoming involved with a larger set of neighborhood issues besides the production of housing (e.g., crime control, youth development, etc.). This approach entails treating relations with elected officials and other neighborhood-based actors as forms of organizational success, with aspects of social integration a key byproduct.

The implications of these two different forms of systemic integration are important not just for the CDCs themselves, but also for the low-income people they serve and the wider society. The housing foreclosure crisis, which has hit Cleveland especially hard, demonstrates that integration into credit markets has turned out to be far riskier than anticipated, both for individual creditors and for neighborhoods now staggering under concentrated foreclosures. Integration into representative politics, however, may not prove much better. If efforts currently underway to move the city of Cleveland into a regional governance arrangement

succeed, changes to electoral boundaries will render many existing political relationships worthless. For both groups of CDCs, then, daily organizational practices – a technocratic focus versus a political one – can be understood only in a larger context of the mode(s) of systemic integration to which those practices are oriented. From a social theoretical perspective, this type of organizational study thus helps illuminate societal stakes much larger than the organizations themselves.

In a different way, Small's recent (2008) writing on "the ghetto" shows us how a focus on organizations can illuminate a larger truth about cities in transformation. Small argues that the systemic account of African American marginalization offered by the idea of "the ghetto" no longer holds as a uniform description of the conditions found in black urban neighborhoods. He points to the repopulation and "re-institutionalization" of many of these neighborhoods as evidence of the changing circumstances (and life chances) of urban blacks since Wilson's famous analysis of "the truly disadvantaged." We find Small's analysis illuminating from an organizational perspective because his view of the inner city is based on organizational data from 20 years later than Wilson's, and it does indeed reveal significant changes in the systemic integration of black neighborhoods over this period.

We would note, however, that this re-integration has primarily been achieved through very different systemic pathways than the ones whose demise Wilson observed. Indeed, the disconnection from labor markets of the inner-city black poor remains a major issue, even as neighborhood revitalization has been achieved largely through organizational interventions in real estate and credit markets. As we already have noted, this latter form of systemic integration has proven very unstable. The creation of housing assets is not the same as the

creation of income through employment. Thus, what Small has phrased as a question of whether “the ghetto” persists also can be productively viewed as a question about how forms of systemic integration have shifted over time, and what the stakes of such shifts are for the social and economic choices society makes available to individuals.

As these two examples show, studies of urban organizations can provide this wider set of substantive and theoretical insights if their research designs allow for the observation of organizational variation. This cannot be achieved in studies of single organizations, by multiple observations of a single organizational characteristic (e.g., organizational size), or through tabulation of organizational presence (versus absence). Had McQuarrie’s study not focused on the entire population of Cleveland CDCs, nor paid attention to multiple dimensions of CDC organizational practice, it is unlikely that he would have found the clear distinctions in forms of systemic integration that exist in the field. His study thus allows us to see how organizations named “community development corporations” are not unitary either in their practices or in the ways they influence (and are implicated in) larger societal trends. In another version of the importance of research design for organizational studies, Small captures important variation over time in the landscape of black urban neighborhoods. This approach allows us to read the starkly visible changes in these neighborhoods’ population and organizational infrastructure as indicative of changing pathways of systemic integration in the society at large.

On the question of social integration, Marwell’s (2007) study details the widely variant forms produced by New York City community based organizations (CBOs). In the eight organizations she examined, social integration efforts ranged from intensive to targeted to non-existent. In a church, the pastor actively cultivated and supported over many years small

communities of faith explicitly designed to replace the close ties of immigrant villagers who had migrated to the city. At a community development corporation, local residents were regularly incentivized to turn out in displays of political power by the promise (and delivery) of public funds to support the jobs and social services on which they relied. In a Head Start center, organizational practice focused on meeting prescribed programmatic standards, with little interest in cultivating relationships among families or between families and staff.

Why did these organizations make such different choices about how (or whether) to foster social integration? In part, organizational leadership mattered. Just as importantly, however, these choices served as an expression of the mode of authority to which each organization was oriented: for the church, to a particular (and unusual) Catholic ethic of communal relations; for the CDC, to the electoral arena that serves as gateway to public resources; for the Head Start center, to expert modalities of “best practice” in child development, aimed at families lacking such elements at home. Each of these organizations operated in dialogue with a selected set of others, co-producing practices and beliefs that held greater or lesser legitimacy for different audiences. The church, for example, was criticized by the CDC for shying away from strong positions in favor of consensus building. In turn, the CDC was disdained by philanthropic donors on the grounds that it was “too political.” And the long-time director of the Head Start center pined for the organization’s original incarnation, a parent co-operative that she felt had fostered strong social bonds among its families, even as the newer fidelity to “expertise” clearly aimed towards the future systemic integration of its young charges.

Conclusion

Our argument about the importance of organizational research for scholars of urban poverty contains two strong assumptions. First, we take a relational perspective. Organizations are considered as components of larger collectivities – fields – whose greatest analytical importance lies in illuminating larger processes of social stability and change. An empirical focus on organizations allows us equal opportunity to pay attention to the processes of social integration occurring at the local scale, and the relations of systemic integration articulated at multiple scales. As new arrangements unfold over time, they often become visible first in the practices of organizations and the constitution of fields. A relational perspective on organizations thus offers a unique window onto the emerging urban order.

Our second assumption is that we are more interested in revealing dynamic processes of social co-production than we are in specifying fixed causal mechanisms. This is a theoretical choice that we recognize will be distasteful to some, but we prefer its limitations to what we see as those of other analytical stances. Among other things, this approach allows us to bridge a longstanding and unproductive theoretical divide in urban analysis (Jaret 1983; McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Walton 1993). The privileging of interpersonal interaction carried out at a highly local scale leads to a treatment of organizations as actors carrying out strategic efforts based on the conditions presented by their neighborhoods, the interests of the people involved, and sometimes, in the case of social service providers, the mandates of external funders.¹ The concern is with how organizations affect neighborhood circumstances and people, with little attention paid to either: (1) how organizational action is conditioned by practices and developments within the fields in which organizations are embedded; or (2) how

organizational action at the local scale might play a role in the structuring of those fields. Attention to either of these processes would allow studies of urban organizations to better capture their possibilities for social integration while also providing a window onto evolving modes of systemic integration.

Similarly, the emphasis on systemic processes as determinative leads to organizational studies that cast organizations in one of two ways: as furthering various relations of exploitation in pursuit of profit accumulation, or as potentially providing authentic resistance to processes of alienation and dehumanization. This binary opposition, however, diagnoses the problem purely at the systemic level. In doing so, it elides the complexity of many formal organizations, whose daily life often creates integrative practices at both the social and systemic levels, even while being pulled towards impersonality, rigidity, and the placing of organizational interests over the interests of those they claim to represent. As noted earlier, organizations produce many forms of social integration – some of them exclusionary – and thus cannot be treated as uncomplicated torch-bearers on one side of a systemic divide. A more productive approach is to use organizational analysis to clearly articulate the range of practices, relationships, and modes of authority at play. This in turn brings us closer to an understanding of urban change.

In closing, two cautions seem prudent. The first is that the genuine drive to ameliorate the conditions of the poor and improve their life chances often leads to an intellectual bias in favor of practical, policy-oriented research. This approach seeks to define “best practices” in anti-poverty work, and then to evaluate existing anti-poverty efforts in relation to these standards, and push future work in this direction. Too often missing from this isomorphic

process, however, is the recognition that whatever it is that is going on among poor people, in poor neighborhoods, and inside the organizations that attempt to provide the poor with assistance, it is intimately related to a larger set of social processes towards which policy intervention rarely is aimed. The economic crisis of 2008, nearly unprecedented in U.S. history, jolted many into a clearer recognition of the systemic connections between the rising economic insecurity of many individuals, the willingness of government to absorb certain forms of risk, and the vast profits reaped by private interests in banking, manufacturing, and other industries. One important lesson for scholars of urban poverty should be to keep processes of systemic integration in view when designing policy interventions at the local scale.

A second caution regards the longstanding fascination with social integration as an all-purpose antidote to a range of systemically-generated problems (including poverty). Studying formal organizations can offer real insight into how individuals imagine themselves as collectivities; in the best-case scenario, organizations emerge to channel authentic collective commitment. At the same time, however, many studies of organizations make plain the highly-bounded forms of participatory activity that organizations create and actively manage. Eliasoph (2011), for example, shows how nonprofit youth empowerment programs have responded to government mandates to incorporate volunteers into their efforts, presumably as a way to forge social integration among community members who otherwise would not interact. She argues that the difficulties presented by these volunteers, however, far outweigh the benefits that most provide. In response, organizations treat volunteer participation as so much “myth and ceremony” (Meyer and Rowan 1977), fulfilling a bureaucratic requirement while creating little in the way of social integration. Studies like these remind us of the importance of a critical

perspective on the realities and possibilities of face-to-face relations.

Urban organizations of all kinds engage in processes of integration and exploitation, operating at both the social and systemic levels. It is not analytically useful to pose organizations, or certain types of organizations, as a priori practitioners of one process or the other, at one level or the other – a position that is necessarily sustained by treating organizations as coherent unities with unproblematic essences, or by posing some subcategory of organizations as equivalent for the purposes of analysis. Instead, we argue for an approach to urban organizations that empirically examines their practices, cultures, histories, and social relations – their duality – in order to understand how organizations participate in the production of authoritative modes of societal organization, and create urban social change. To do otherwise is to give up one of the strongest tools in the social analyst's toolkit.

Nicole P. Marwell is Associate Professor of Public Affairs and Sociology at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her research examines the intersection of government, politics, and nonprofit organizations. She is the author of *Bargaining for Brooklyn: Community Organizations in the Entrepreneurial City*.

Michael McQuarrie is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Davis and Poiesis Fellow at the Institute for Public Knowledge. His research is on urban governance and urban civil society. With Michael Peter Smith he recently edited *Remaking Urban Citizenship: Organizations, Institutions, and the Right to the City*.

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Endnotes

¹ For example, Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) on the funding constraints of public housing; Small (2009) on government regulation of class size in childcare centers.