



Walter Isard

April 19, 1919 – November 6, 2010

Walter Isard, Professor Emeritus of Economics and City and Regional Planning at Cornell University, died at age 91 on November 6, 2010 at his home in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania.

Isard was the founder of the fields of Regional Science and Peace Science. In the case of the former, he encouraged economists, geographers, sociologists, urban and regional planners, and civil engineers to ignore disciplinary boundaries, construct theories of urban and regional phenomena and apply diverse methods of analysis to the emerging urban, regional, transportation, and environmental policy issues of the mid and late 20th century. In the case of the latter, he encouraged economists, political scientists, psychologists, decision theorists, game theorists and negotiators and mediators to collaborate in the study and practice of conflict management and resolution.

Quoting from an obituary, written by Professor David Boyce (Department of Civil Engineering, Northwestern University), “Walter Isard was born on April 19, 1919 in Philadelphia to immigrant Jewish parents. Majoring in mathematics, he graduated with distinction from Temple University in 1939, and then enrolled in the Economics Department of Harvard University as a graduate student. His early research concerned building construction, transportation development, the location of economic activities, and the ensuing cycles of growth and stagnation that characterized the 1920-1940 period. During 1941-42, he studied at the University of Chicago, where his interest in mathematics was rekindled; there he met another graduate student, Caroline Berliner, whom he married in 1942. Isard was affiliated with the National Planning Resources Board during 1942-43, while completing his Harvard Ph.D. During 1944- 1945, he served in the Civilian Public Service as a conscientious objector to World War II. He was assigned to a state mental hospital; while on the night shift, he translated into

English the works of leading German location theorists, including Lösch, Weigman, Engländer, and Predöhl and others.”

After the war, Isard pursued his interests in industrial location theory as a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard from 1946 to 48 and then served as a research associate in Wassily Leontief’s interindustry research project from 1949 to 1953. Over this period he developed his teaching skills in part-time appointments, which included the first course on location theory and regional development taught at Harvard. In December 1950, Isard organized a meeting of researchers from numerous fields with interests in urban and regional analysis. He later considered this meeting to have given birth to the field of regional science. The Regional Science Association was formed four years later at the meetings of the Allied Social Science Association (RSA). Selected papers from this and subsequent meetings were published in the *Papers and Proceedings of the Regional Science Association*, a journal that now continues as *Papers in Regional Science*.

Over the period of the Association’s formation, Isard was an Associate Professor of Regional Economics and Director of the Section of Urban and Regional Studies at M.I.T. In 1956, he joined the Economics faculty of the University of Pennsylvania as Professor and formed the Graduate Group in Regional Science. Two years later, he founded Penn’s Regional Science Department, the Regional Science Research Institute (with Ben Stevens) and the *Journal of Regional Science*, which then became and still remains the flagship journal in the field.

In the two decades after moving to Penn, Isard undertook major institution-building initiatives in Europe and Asia, organizing national sections of the RSA. So successful were his efforts that international meetings are now held annually in North America and Europe and biannually in the Pacific region. In light of its growing international membership base, the RSA was reorganized in 1989 and renamed as the Regional Science Association International (RSAI). Membership of the RSAI now numbers about 4,500.

In the early 1960s, Isard also promoted scholarly research in the areas of conflict management and resolution, disarmament, and peace. The Peace Research Society was established in 1963 when Isard convened a group of scholars at Malmo, Sweden. At the Society’s first conference, held in Chicago the following year, participants included Kenneth Boulding and Anatol Rapoport and other leading scholars. From 1964 to 1968, the Society’s affairs were conducted by a Steering Committee at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1973, the Society became the Peace Science Society (International), and its office was transferred to Cornell University and administered jointly with the School of Management at SUNY Binghamton. The Society is now housed in the Department of Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University and holds annual meetings.

In 1979, Isard moved to Cornell University as Professor of Economics and City and Regional Planning. At Cornell, Isard continued to teach, conduct research, and participate in seminars into his 90th year. His Cornell legacies included the graduate fields of Regional Science and Peace Science, which together have produced over 60 Ph.D. graduates.

In 1985, Isard was elected to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. He was awarded honorary degrees by Poznan Academy of Economics, Poland (1976), Erasmus University of Rotterdam, the Netherlands (1980), the University of Karlsruhe, Germany (1979), Umeå University, Sweden (1980), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA (1982), Binghamton University, USA (1997), and the University of Geneva, Switzerland (2002). Isard's research contributions were substantial and diverse. He published over 25 books and 300 papers. His many students remember him as much for his exacting academic standards as his moral courage, his love of novelty, and his many personal kindnesses. At his passing, Nobel laureate Kenneth Arrow observed: "His intense moral conviction energized but never disrupted the achievement of scholarly accuracy."

A memorial service was held for Isard on April 29, 2011 in Sage Chapel on the Cornell Campus. The service was attended by the Cornell community, several of his children and grandchildren, his colleagues and students, and scholars from over a dozen countries who traveled to Ithaca for the occasion. Many speakers commented on Isard's deep love of music of all kinds, his joyful nature, and the fact that he danced regularly into his last year of life. At the service the following words by Cornell Professor Emeritus Richard Schuler were read.

Walter's methods for moving institutions were unusual: it was not by haranguing or thumping on tables or threatening boycotts that Walter accomplished so much both here and abroad. Rather, it was through quiet persistence and encouragement that his message crept, initially, from Harvard Square to Penn, then spread around the country, through Cornell and circling the globe. He founded two academic societies: Regional Science and Peace Science. He insisted that the word, science, appear in both societies' titles (and in the labels of the two graduate fields he's responsible for creating at Cornell). That wasn't a matter of arrogance. I never thought Walter was claiming that these areas of investigation initially embodied the full rigors usually attributed to a science. I think, as was Walter's way, he insisted on inserting the label, science, to serve as a directional guidepost, as an aspiration of continually striving to apply the best available scientific techniques to advance our understanding (and to convince others) in addressing these important topics.

That was Walter: encouraging others to advance human understanding about things that are important to people. Walter always found something positive to say about the work of others, and he tried to link like-interested people together and was unfailingly supportive of their extending their analyses. He was the original dynamic social networker, long before the internet. But unlike discourse over the internet, I never heard Walter ever, not ever, say a mean thing about any other person or their work! In the end, he was about advancing peace, tranquility and understanding; he worked at it exhaustively, and he was a living example of putting his theory into practice. What a model he is for a humane university and a progressive society.

Kieran Donaghy, Chairperson; and Richard Schuler