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Book Review of Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone

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Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone.

By Eric Klinenberg. New York: Penguin Books, 2013, 288 pages. Paper, \$13.14.

Most people in the world today, especially those in high-income Western nations, will experience living alone at least at one point in their lives, and for many, it is for extended periods of time. The majority of people who live alone view it as an *individual* phenomenon, a result of personal choice or, in contrast, an involuntary situation driven by circumstance. In *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, Eric Klinenberg (2013) highlights that the remarkable increase in the number of people living alone (whom he refers to as “singletons”) is, in fact, an unprecedented and significant demographic change, which derives from *social* forces and has the potential to radically reshape the way we organize our societies.

In 1950 4 million U.S. adults lived alone (9% of all households), compared to 32 million today, which is 28% of all households (Klinenberg 2013:4-5). The number of singletons is highest in metropolitan areas, among 35-64 year-olds, and among women (Klinenberg 2013:5). Other countries, especially nations in Northern and Western Europe, have even higher rates of living alone than the United States. Klinenberg explains that the main forces driving the rise in singletons are economic prosperity, the cult of the individual, the elevated status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and increased life expectancy.

One of the most impressive features of Klinenberg’s work is its scope. First of all, his references span several disciplines, including sociology, demography, gerontology, history, psychology, epidemiology, public health, philosophy, literature, and journalism. He both reaches back to sociology classics, for example Durkheim and Simmel, and newer classics, such as Goffman, as well as utilizing research with the most updated statistics and pertinent current sociology literature.

He explores living alone across all age groups, genders, social classes, and family statuses. In Chapter 1 he starts out by examining middle-class, unmarried young adults, who are one of the fastest growing groups of singletons. Many grow up as latchkey kids with their own room and a thirst for freedom and individualism. For them, living alone becomes a sign of economic success and emotional maturity. Later on Klinenberg also explores singletons who are middle-aged and elderly, divorced, widowed or never married. He underlines the differences between living alone in various types of situations, as well as between singleton men and women, who are still perceived at least somewhat differently. For women, living alone may sometimes still carry a stigma.

The class contrasts in the book are particularly fascinating. Besides middle-class (or higher) participants, Klinenberg also addresses the issues of lower-class individuals living alone. Many of them (if not homeless) are concentrated in single-room occupancy hotels (SROs). A large portion of them struggles with unemployment or underemployment, addictions, health problems, and/or a prison record. For them, living alone can potentially be seen as a sign of failure and lack of choices, as well as “defensive individualism,” a distrust in other people and institutions (Klinenberg 2013:112). At the intersections of being poor, male, unmarried, elderly, and sick, living alone can create very risky and vulnerable circumstances. Two stories that Klinenberg describes serve as poignant illustrations of this. Greg, who has had a heart attack, explains that he hopes he can get out in the hallway if he has another heart attack because there

somebody will at least find him sooner or later. The second graphic and sobering example is the description of the thousands of singletons in LA County who die alone without any money and any relatives, and after cremation and four years of storage, if no one claims them, they end up in a mass grave. Such examples demonstrate how different of an experience living alone can be depending on social class, age, gender, and whether it is voluntary or involuntary.

In *Going Solo* Klinenberg not only provides a vivid and comprehensive account of living alone, but he also debunks several myths related to singletons. For instance, based on his research, he concludes that people who live alone tend to be more socially active and often participate in community life more than others. Singletons do not have to be lonely and desperate, and, in fact, most of them are not. Many of them have close friendships and community ties, as well as partners; they just do not live with them. As we are becoming more able to afford living alone, more of us do so. Thus, for a great portion of singletons, living alone is a choice.

Klinenberg's scope in *Going Solo* is commendable not only in the range of topics he addresses, but also in his coverage of various geographical areas. His nearly 300 interviews span across the United States and some reach as far as Sweden. As Sweden is the country with the highest percentage of singletons, Klinenberg's exploration of Sweden's practices is very timely and beneficial. He concludes that a strong welfare state and an abundance of affordable small apartments fuel solo living in Sweden. While it is impressive that Klinenberg conducts some of his interviews in Sweden, I wished that he referred to these examples even more and throughout the book instead of reserving them for the Conclusion. Also, while singletons are highly concentrated in metropolitan areas, it could have been interesting to include more interviews with rural solo dwellers and draw comparisons with their urban counterparts. These two additions would have made the book not only very comprehensive, which it undeniably is, but also as complete as possible.

The book has immense relevance for public sociology. Klinenberg discusses the effect of solo living on local communities, neighborhoods, families, social networks, and our entire society and world. He underscores the plight of poor, elderly singletons, as well as the lack of compact residential units and other services and infrastructure to support the needs of every segment of the growing singleton population. He also points out the potential detrimental consequences of singlism (prejudice toward the unmarried) and marital status discrimination that numerous singletons report.

Overall, Klinenberg's work is very timely and powerful. He calls our attention to a ubiquitous, but understudied phenomenon and its far-reaching and potentially momentous consequences. He does this in an engaging, vivid prose, which adds to the appeal of his work. The book's accessible language and intriguing topic make it suitable for a wide range of audiences: anyone living alone, or anyone knowing any singletons, sociologists, demographers, psychologists, gerontologists, health care professionals specializing in elderly care, economists, urban planners, policy makers. It has relevance for people beyond the United States as well. I have successfully used it in an undergraduate Self and Social Existence course, and I believe it could be a useful addition to undergraduate or graduate courses in urban sociology, public sociology, marriage and families, aging, life course, and social policy.