"Ghetto"
A Word and its U.S./age through the Twentieth Century

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"The ghetto . . . owes its existence not to legal enactment but to the fact that it meets a need and performs a social function. The ghetto is, in short, one of the so-called "natural areas" of the city."

(Robert Park in Wirth, 1928, ix-x)

"America has contributed to the concept of the ghetto the restriction of persons to special areas and the limiting of their freedom of choice on the basis of skin color. The dark ghetto's invisible walls have been created by the white society, by those who have power, to confine those who have no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness."

(Kenneth Clark, 1965, 11)

"Ghettos, as intrinsic to the identity of the United States as New England villages, vast national parks, and leafy suburbs, nevertheless remain unique in their social and physical isolation from the nation's main stream. Discarded and dangerous places . . . ghettos are pervaded by abandonment and ruin."

(Camilo José Vergara, 1995, 2)

Ghetto *The Jews' quarter in an Italian town or city.*
(Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language, 1890)

Ghetto *1. The quarter of a town or city to which Jews were restricted for residence, esp. in Italy; a Jewry. Obs. or hist. 2. A quarter of a city where Jews in greatest numbers live.*
(Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, 1920)

Ghetto *1. The quarter of a town or city to which Jews were restricted for residence, esp. in Italy; a Jewry. Chiefly hist. 2. A quarter of a city where members of a racial group are segregated.*
(Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, 1960)

Ghetto *1a: A quarter of a city (as in Italy) in which Jews were formerly required to live b: a quarter of a city in which the residents are chiefly Jews . . . 2: a quarter of a city in which members of a minority racial or cultural group live esp. because of social, legal, or economic pressure . . . 3: an isolated or segregated group.*
(Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, 1976)

DEFINITIONS

In its original usage in 16th century Italy, the "ghetto" was the segregated district in Venice where Jews were required by law to reside, the former site of the "*ghetto nuovo*", or "new foundry." For many people the term conjures frightful images of the central and east European ghettos created by the Nazis in the late 1930's to facilitate the extermination of the Jewish people. At the dawn of the twenty-first century in the United States, "ghetto" designates urban districts comprised of high concentrations of mostly poor African-Americans. It is a synonym for less charged labels like "inner-city" that signify poor minority neighborhoods. Over the last century the evolution of the word "ghetto" in the United States, as traced through successive editions of Webster's International Dictionary, not only documents changes in common usage but reflects fundamental shifts in the very social and economic structure of the country as experienced primarily by two groups – Jews and blacks.[1] The word "ghetto" enters the United States lexicon with a specific, and remote, historical meaning – the segregation of Jews in Italian cities. The is the only meaning recorded by Webster's as late as 1890. By 1920, following substantial Jewish immigration to the United States from Eastern Europe (by 1910 there were over a million Jews in New York City), this definition had expanded to encompass Jewish districts more generally. By

1960, in response to large concentrations of impoverished blacks in northern industrial cities the definition was broadened to include members of "racial groups" more generally. And after the Civil Rights movement and urban uprisings in the 1960's focused attention on living conditions in black urban districts this definition became more nuanced: Webster's Third Edition (1976) attempts for the first time to explain how such districts might form as a result of "social, legal, or economic pressure."

Although the common definition of "ghetto" refers to a specific place, the word connotes equally a state of mind. As social psychologist Kenneth Clark keenly observes, "the *facts* of the ghetto are not necessarily synonymous with the *truth* of the ghetto (Clark, 1965, xxiii). And this *truth*, moreover, may be understood differently according to several factors: the race or ethnicity of the observer; whether the observer speaks from inside or outside the ghetto; whether the isolation is largely self-imposed ("voluntary") or under duress ("compulsory"); and whether the ghetto refers to a physical place or a psychological state. In all instances, however, the ghetto refers to relations of social standing and power. Thus the trajectory of the word traces Jewish assimilation on one hand and the continued segregation of African Americans as subject peoples on the other.

One way to define the ghetto is by a descriptive evaluation of a neighborhood (who lives there and why, physical and demographic characteristics). The difficulty of this approach, which can yield contradictory interpretations of the same place, has led some social scientists to devise more objective yardsticks to define a ghetto. These generally rely on measures of isolation and concentration that emphasize the segregation of a racial or ethnic group (rather than their income level). Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, in their important study *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, define the ghetto as "a set of neighborhoods that are exclusively inhabited by members of one group, within which virtually all members of that group live." (Massey and Denton, 1995, 18-19). By this measure, they argue persuasively, no group except black Americans has been ghettoized in the history of the United States. Their data show how other ethnic or racial groups lived in more dispersed patterns, or lived in less exclusively monocultural neighborhoods. Their research has the effect of removing from the category of ghetto dwellers not only the Jews but also other racial minorities, notably Hispanics, who have suffered from racial discrimination in the United States.

As a physical place, the ghetto is most generally identified by population density and a deteriorated and overcrowded housing stock. It is in this sense that writer Jack London evokes the "working class ghetto, south of Market Street" in San Francisco, which he refers to variously as a "labor ghetto", a "crowded ghetto", a "swarming ghetto" (London, 1986 [1909], 258, 262, 274, 291). At the turn of the last century this neighborhood was "populated primarily by single men: working men, immigrants, transients and hoboes" (Hartman 1984, 53) but was not identified with any specific racial or ethnic group. Although the classic ghetto is generally understood as densely populated, this notion has undergone revision as poverty and racial exclusion have taken new spatial forms. Director John Singleton's film *Boyz N the Hood* is a drama of ghetto life set in the South-Central neighborhood of Los Angeles, low-density neighborhood of detached single-family houses (Singleton, 1991). And Camilo Vergara's patient visual documentation of the gradual destruction of once dense inner-city neighborhoods across the country presents evidence that the "new" American ghetto is a sparse wasteland of abandoned lots and buildings, a contemporary ruin (Vergara, 1995).

Finally, "ghetto" has been used in a more general sense to describe voluntarily isolated communities. Freed from its associations with urban social distress, perhaps ironically, the term may also connote islands of privilege. Thus Lewis Mumford defines the suburb as "a segregated community, set apart from the city, not merely by space but by class stratification: a sort of green ghetto dedicated to the elite." (Mumford, 1961, 493). Other applications refer to universities as "academic" or "intellectual ghettos", or to gated residential communities as "golden ghettos."

THE JEWISH GHETTO

Most typically, however, "ghetto" refers to concentrations of ethnic or racial minorities living in isolation from other population groups. In the early part of the 20th century the term was still associated primarily with Jews, notably the large Jewish settlements in New York City's Lower East Side and the West Side of Chicago. Although Jewish settlement patterns did not register levels of isolation and concentration higher than some other ethnic groups, their large numbers and extensive cultural and economic activity created a highly visible enclave. While many Jews were poor, and restrictive real estate practices inhibited their settlement in some areas, for the most part the Jews lived together voluntarily to maintain their religious traditions. The synagogue was the central institution, along with Talmud schools and kosher markets. (Zeublin 1895, 93). As Louis Wirth noted in *The Ghetto*, his groundbreaking study of Chicago's Jewish community in the 1920's, "The ghetto is a cultural community that expresses a common heritage, a store of common tradition and sentiments." Wirth acknowledges that the ghetto is a form of toleration and an instrument of social control, but sees the perpetuation of the ghetto as largely voluntary: "The ghetto, therefore, may be regarded as a form of accommodation between divergent population groups, through which one group has effectually subordinated itself to another." (Wirth, 1928, 4-5). He relates an anecdote of a man whose son urges him to leave the ghetto. "What ghetto?" replies the father, whose circumscribed view of the world can't imagine a life

beyond the supportive environment of his community. (Wirth, 1928, 242).[2]

Journalist Hutchins Hapgood, writing about New York City in the same period, is more sanguine about the strengths of the Jewish community. "Whatever the Lower East Side's conditions, it was too passionate and belligerent about politics, literature, and life, too redolent of the shadowy splendors of an ancient past and visions of an uncharted future to be assigned to the lower depths." (Hapgood, 1967 [1902], xxiii). His sketches of the local intelligentsia – artists, scholars, writers, and political activists – depict the Lower East Side in an optimistic light that is in stark contrast to the unsympathetic portrayal of the same neighborhood by reformer Jacob Riis. In the chapter on "Jewtown" in his muckraking classic *How the Other Half Lives* [1901], Riis coarsens his crusading zeal with anti-Semitic stereotyping. Where Hutchins finds "a true community", Riis sees poverty, disease, and crime.

So the Jewish ghetto had a dual identity. In physical terms, as an overcrowded, unsanitary tenement district it was a classic "slum." Socially, by virtue of its strong religious, political, and intellectual institutions, the ghetto was a village, a transplanted version of the eastern European *shtetls* from which the Jews emigrated. Notwithstanding differences among commentators about which of these aspects were more significant, there was clearly a strong cohesive element to the Jewish community. As Jews moved uptown from the Lower East Side they settled again in close concentration to maintain their cultural milieu. Jeffrey Gurock's *When Harlem Was Jewish 1879-1930* describes Harlem as the Jews' "second ghetto," characterized by the institutions – synagogues, schools, markets, etc. – that Jewish residents brought with them as they migrated north in the city along newly constructed rapid transit lines.

The designation of Jewish Harlem as a "ghetto" contradicts the more prevalent notion that the Harlem ghetto was created only when the earlier Jewish residents were displaced by blacks. The issue is the extent to which "ghetto" carries pejorative connotations, and this is intimately tied to its racial composition. Harlem's transition from Jewish to Black in the first third of the 20th century was repeated in Newark, New Jersey, fifty years later, as Jews moved out to the suburbs and black families moved in. As one African American resident observed, "They call it a ghetto now, my old neighborhood in Newark. Ironically, it acquired that name only after the predominantly Jewish population moved out shortly after World War II." (Vergara, 1995, 4).

THE BLACK GHETTO

Between 1890 and 1970, the "Great Migration" brought over six million southern blacks to northern cities, pushed by the mechanization of agriculture and discriminatory "Jim Crow" practices and drawn by the promise of industrial jobs and greater racial tolerance. This influx was not always welcome in predominantly white northern cities, and blacks were subjected to many forms of racial mistreatment from verbal slurs to physical attacks. Discrimination in the housing market was a constant obstacle for all, regardless of economic status. Thus whereas middle class Jews were able to live beyond the "ghetto," their black counterparts were constrained by real estate practices to reside in "colored" neighborhoods.

The resulting economic integration may be one reason why black neighborhoods were not generally refereed to as "ghettos" in the 1920s and 1930s. Another is settlement patterns. In Chicago, for example, although 90% of the black population lived on the old South Side in 1920, nearly as many whites lived there too. A study of race relations in Chicago undertaken after a race riot in 1919 left 38 people dead refers to the "Black Belt" and "the Negro community" but does not use the term ghetto despite the wretched quality of many dwellings (Chicago Commission, 1922, 8, 108, 139). In New York City, small black enclaves were scattered in several working class neighborhoods before Harlem emerged as the first predominantly Negro community in the late 1920's. By 1930, 72% of New York's black population lived in Harlem. (Osofsky, 1964, 130). But the 1920's was the period of the Harlem Renaissance, as exuberant flowering of literature, art and music that celebrated the emancipation of the "New Negro" (Huggins, 1995). Despite the poor quality of tenement buildings where most blacks lived, Harlem projected a vibrant image to mainstream culture. Swedish social economist Gunnar Myrdal's exhaustive study *An American Dilemma, The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, published in 1944, does not use the term "ghetto" to describe patterns of residential segregation, nor does he dwell on the physical condition of Negro neighborhoods. He is more interested in the relationship between social segregation and discrimination and, notably, the role of federal institutions in establishing and reinforcing residential segregation (Myrdal, 1944, 625).

The designation of poor black communities as "ghettos" doesn't take root until after World War II. Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto*, published in 1965, offered an analysis of the ghetto that was not only frank in its assessment of objective conditions but penetrating in its understanding of the psychological dimension as well: "The objective conditions of the American urban ghettos are overcrowded and deteriorated housing, high infant mortality, crime, and disease. The subjective dimensions are resentment, hostility, despair, apathy, self-depreciation, and its ironic companion, compensatory grandiose behavior." (Clark, 1965, 11).

Notwithstanding pioneering research like Myrdal's and Clark's that called for a soul-searching examination of race relations in the United States, it remained for the sit-ins and marches of the Civil Rights movement combined with a wave of urban

rebellions in the late 1960's to propel a reluctant government into action. The urban "racial disorders" vented years of pent-up frustration exacerbated by the forcible repression of non-violent civil rights protests in Selma (Alabama) and elsewhere. Starting in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965, there were uprisings in Chicago and Cleveland the following year and outbreaks in the summer of 1967 in Tampa, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Newark and Detroit, not to mention scores of smaller cities across the country. In July, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson appointed a national advisory commission on "Civil Disorders" chaired by Gov. Otto Kerner of Illinois. The commission's findings, published the following year, were blunt in their indictment: "What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." (National Advisory Commission, 1968, 2)

THE GHETTO IN POPULAR CULTURE

The spontaneous uprisings and the patient organizing of the civil rights movement were two responses to living conditions in the black community, a discontent that found expression as well in popular literature and music. Claude Brown's graphic account of Harlem life in the post-World War II years, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, draws its title from the lure of paradise on earth that drew a generation of Negroes who migrated from the south only to discover that the "promised land" turned out to be "a slum ghetto . . . . too many people full of hate and bitterness crowded into a dirty, stinky, uncared-for closet-sized section of a great city." (Brown, 1965, 8).

The popular music of the day provides another perspective on the shifting understanding of ghetto life. Rock and roll legend Elvis Presley recorded Mac Davis' song "In the Ghetto" in 1969 over some objections from his production team (Guralnick, 1999, 231). Considered his first "protest song," it presents a compassionate response to the pathos of ghetto poverty:

As the snow flies
On a cold and gray Chicago mornin'
A poor little baby child is born
In the ghetto
And his mama cries
cause if there's one thing that she don't need
it's another hungry mouth to feed
In the ghetto

People, don't you understand
the child needs a helping hand
or he'll grow to be an angry young man some day
Take a look at you and me,
are we too blind to see,
do we simply turn our heads
and look the other way

By the mid-1970's, at the height of the black power movement propelled by organizations such as the Black Panther Party and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and charismatic leaders like Bobby Seale and Stokely Carmichael, a new consciousness arose in the black community encompassing both a new pride ("black is beautiful") and a new militancy. Stevie Wonder's ballad "Village Ghettoland," an angry account of ghetto life set to an incongruously mellow baroque score, reflects this heightened political awareness:

Families buying dog food now
Starvation roams the streets
Babies die before they're born
Infected by the grief

Now some folks say that we should be
Glad for what we have
Tell me would you be happy in Village Ghetto Land
Village Ghetto Land

During this same time a dramatic shift was taking root in the style and content of black popular music with the emergence of "hip-hop," a cultural phenomenon encompassing break dancing, DJing [disc jockeying], graffiti art and rap music. Born in the projects and tenements of New York's South Bronx, rap is a verse form spoken rhythmically over music with lyrics closely tied to the physical and mental landscape of the ghetto itself. The tension in the lyrics comes from the people in the ghetto, reflecting toughness and resilience as well as sadness and hostility. In this context, "ghetto" becomes almost an endearing term, reappropriating negative circumstances as a source of pride and affirmation that cannot be understood by an outsider. In "Ghetto Bastard" (1991) the group Naughty By Nature warns defiantly:

But I'm the one who has been labeled as an outcast
They teach in school some of the misfits I will outlast
But that's cool, with the fool smack 'im backwards
That's what you get when you're fuckin' with the ghetto bastard

If you ain't never been to the ghetto
Don't ever come to the ghetto
'Cause you wouldn't understand the ghetto
So stay the fuck out of the ghetto
Why me, Why me

Criticized by mainstream culture for the brutal and often vulgar frankness of its lyrics, rap music quickly captured the imagination of white suburban youth who account for 80% of its market. Little of this lucrative market has been captured by black-owned enterprises, demonstrating the capacity of ad-

vanced capitalism to commodify the very culture is suppresses. One exception, rap producer Russell (Rush) Simmons, pleads, "We need more black entrepreneurs." Owner of the record label Def Jam and the management company Rush Artist Management, Simmons started the Phat Farm clothing line to compete with designer Tommy Hilfiger's Tommy Jeans, in Simmons' words, Hilfiger's "nigga company." (Aidi, 2002).

HYPERSEGREGATION AND THE HYPERGHETTO

The black ghetto is not a static community. During the 1970's it experienced an intensification of poverty and isolation that has been subject to varying interpretations. Sociologist William Julius Wilson, in his theory of the "underclass", emphasizes the changing class structure of ghetto neighborhoods through the exodus of its more stable working- and middle-class population as a result of gains made by the civil rights movement. By the 1980's, Wilson writes, "ghetto neighborhoods are populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black urban community." (Wilson, 1987, 8). This community is characterized by soaring rates of joblessness, poverty, and criminal activity.

Massey and Denton, on the other hand, argue that the level of racial segregation, rather than middle class outmigration, is the key factor in explaining the degree of geographically concentrated poverty in urban black communities. Analyzing data from sixteen large metropolitan areas, home to one third of the black population in the United States, they found that "the extent of racial segregation was so intense and occurred on so many dimensions simultaneously that we label the pattern "hypersegregation." (Massey & Denton, 1993, 10). Moreover this segregation, they argue, didn't happen as a result of preference but was constructed between 1900 and 1940 by a combination of federal housing policies, discriminatory practices in the banking and real estate industries, and acts of private prejudice. The deliberate nature of this process leads them to refer to the segregated ghetto as a form of "American apartheid," condemning government policies through this analogy to South Africa's former notorious system of legally sanctioned racial separation.

Conditions have deteriorated to a point where observers speak of a "hyperghetto". For sociologist and documentary photographer Camilo Vergara, hyperghettos are "places where at least 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty level" (Vergara, 1995, xiii). Sociologist Loïc Wacquant's concept of the hyperghetto, on the other hand, highlights the aggravation and hyperbolic intensification of a process of cloistering and seclusion (Wacquant and Wilson, 1989). The degree to which institutionalized racism or changes in the structure of the national economy are seen as responsible for the further emiseration of ghetto neighborhoods has important implications for both public policy and the national discourse on race. As such it is hotly contested terrain in contemporary sociology and related disciplines.

GHETTO AS PRISON/PRISON AS GHETTO

A contemporary writer observed of the Lower East Side at the turn of the last century, "it was a fortress as much as it was a prison." (Eric Hoffer, cited in Hapgood, 1966 [1902], xiii). "Fortress" acknowledges the ghetto's strength in unity. But "prison" may seem a strange term to describe a neighborhood where people live voluntarily, if precariously. Indeed, in the United States there have been only two instances when a people's place of residence was forcibly restricted – the Japanese internment camps during World War II (euphemistically labeled "relocation centers") and, in some respects, the Indian reservations for Native Americans. But "prison" is a recurring metaphor in descriptions of America's second wave of urban ghettos, the concentrations of African-Americans who migrated north to New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, and other industrial cities. Kenneth Clark, a Harlem resident, acknowledged that he was a "prisoner within the ghetto long before I was aware that I was really a prisoner." (Clark, 1965, xv)

If this observation was possible in the early 1960's, by the end of the century the prison-like qualities of the ghetto were less subtle and the relationship between the ghetto and the prison moves beyond metaphor. Prison life is a constant factor in the daily experience of young African-American males. By 1995, nearly a third of these men are under the control of the criminal justice system on any given day, either in prison, on probation, or on parole. This represents an increase of nearly 8% in just five years, due primarily to the increasing rate of incarceration for drug use among African-American men and women alike: While African Americans constitute 13% of all monthly drug users, they represent 35% of arrests for drug possession, 55% of convictions and 74% of prison sentences (Mauer and Huler, 1995).

When the incarceration rate of black males is meshed with the intensified isolation of the "hyperghetto" a "deadly symbiosis" results: the ghettoization of prisons and the "prisonization" of the ghetto (Wacquant, 2001). His words provide an academic framework for sentiments expressed in the street by hip-hop musicians Dead Prez. Their song "Behind Enemy Lines" (2000), subtitled "conversations in a prison facility," observes:

> cuando yo llamo, como tú no me quieres escuchar
> No he visto mis hijos, mi mujer, no me mandan retratos,
> no tengo dinero. Estoy aquí jodío en la cárcel metío!!!
>
> You aint gotta be locked up to be in prison
> look how we livin
> 30,000 niggas a day, up in the bing, standin routine

They put is in a box just like our life on the block
Behind enemy lines.

THE PERSISTENT GHETTO

The persistence of the ghetto, evidence of the seeming intractability of racial tension in the United States, remains one of the nation's most vexing problems. At the start of the twentieth century, the great African American scholar/activist W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." (DuBois, 1966 [1903], xxiii) One hundred years later his words still resonate. The ghetto stands not only as the physical and emotional embodiment of this prophecy but has become a metaphor for global inequality based on race. Sociologist Howard Winant uses a phrase from an early rap hit, "the world is a ghetto"[3] as an organizing metaphor for his argument that race has been the touchstone of modernity since the days of colonial conquest and remains its continuing cause and effect (Winant, 2001). His work echoes another of Clark's insights: "The truth of the dark ghetto is not merely a truth about Negroes; it reflects the deeper torment and anguish of the total human predicament." (Clark, 1965, xxv).

In recent years a countervailing view has emerged which argues that with the civil rights gains of the late twentieth century the problem of race has been solved, and any lingering problems are due to personal failures or other non-institutional problems. The most revisionist of these accounts is by conservative pundit Dinesh D'Souza, whose 1995 book *The End of Racism* argues for an end to preferential programs like affirmative action. The argument for a transracial America is advanced in a more positive light by cultural columnist Leon E. Wynter who sees the broad appeal of contemporary black culture in mainstream white culture as a harbinger of broader enfranchisement. "It's hard to deny," he projects, 'that as the trend in pop culture is self-sustaining, it must eventually be replicated in society itself." (Wynter, 2002, 280).

Even Andrew Young, a civil rights leader, clergyman and statesman who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has put forth the thesis that the twentieth century dealt successfully with race. In a keynote address to a convention of the American Institute of Architects he argued that racism was like a chicken with it's head cut off: "It may hop around for a while, but it's dead!"[4] Young argued that the question for the twenty-first century is poverty, the eradication of which will hasten the disappearance of the lingering vestiges of racism.

But the contemporary ghetto lies precisely at the intersection of racial segregation and severe poverty, and the two cannot be so easily separated. The persistence of the ghetto argues that DuBois' comment of 1903 still holds, and the color line remains the problem of the twenty-first century, in the United States if not the world.

NOTES

[1] Because this paper covers a century of usage, the words "black" and "African American" are used interchangeably. The earlier racial designation "Negro" is used when appropriate for its historical context.

[2] Wirth's perspective is that Jews would be better off leaving the old neighborhood and assimilating themselves into the larger community. A later commentator suggests that this attitude may arise from Wirth, a German Jew, bearing a condescending attitude toward the Eastern European (Polish and Russian) Jews of the old west side (Rischin in Hapgood, 1967, xxvii).

[3] The phrase is from Grandmaster Flash's 1982 single, "The Message."

[4] Andrew Young, address to AIA National Convention, Philadelphia, PA 2000. Author's notes.

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