

Segregated From Its History, How 'Ghetto' Lost Its Meaning

CODE SWITCH: WORD WATCH

April 27, 2014 12:46 PM ET

Camila Domonske



Enlarge this image

The pushcart market in the East Side Ghetto of New York's Jewish Quarter was a hive of activity in the early 1900s.

Ewing Galloway/Getty Images

As you might have gathered from our blog's title, the Code Switch team is kind of obsessed with the ways we speak to each other. Each week in "Word Watch," we'll dig into language that tells us something about the way race is lived in America today.

The word "ghetto" is an etymological mystery. Is it from the Hebrew *get*, or bill of divorce? From the Venetian *ghèto*, or foundry? From the Yiddish *gehektes*, "enclosed"? From Latin *Giudaicetum*, for "Jewish"? From the Italian *borghetto*, "little town"? From the Old French *guct*, "guard"?

In his etymology column for the Oxford University Press, Anatoly Liberman took a look at each of these possibilities. He considered ever more improbable origins — Latin for "ribbon"? German for "street"? Latin for "to throw"? — before declaring the word a stubborn mystery.

But whatever the root language, the word's original meaning was clear: "the quarter in a city, chiefly in Italy, to which the Jews were restricted," as the OED puts it. In the 16th and 17th centuries, cities like Venice, Frankfurt, Prague and Rome forcibly segregated their Jewish populations, often walling them off and submitting them to onerous restrictions.

By the late 19th century, these ghettos had been steadily dismantled. But instead of vanishing from history, ghettos reappeared — with a purpose more ominous than segregation — under Nazi Germany. German forces established ghettos in over a thousand cities across Europe. They were isolated, strictly controlled and resource-deprived — but unlike the ghettos of history, they weren't meant to last.



Enlarge this image

Maxwell Street, a teeming marketplace of Chicago's ghetto, on July 22, 1939. AP

Reviving the Jewish ghetto made genocide a much simpler project. As the Holocaust proceeded, ghettos were emptied by the trainload. The prisoners of the enormous Warsaw ghetto, which at one point held 400,000 Jews, famously fought their deportation to death camps. They were outnumbered and undersupplied, but some



managed to die on their own terms; thousands of Jews were killed within the walls of the ghetto, rather than in the camps. Jewish ghettos were finally abolished after the end of World War II. But the word lived on, redefined as a poor, urban black community.

Jews line up in front of a well in a ghetto at Lublin, Poland, Feb. 1, 1941. *AP*

From Anti-Semitism To Race And Poverty

As early as 1908, "ghetto" was sometimes used metaphorically to describe slum areas that weren't mandated by law but that were limited to a single group of people because of *other* constraints. That year, Jack London wrote of "the working-class ghetto." Immigrant groups and American Jews were also identified as living in these unofficial "ghettos."

Even as those areas were identified, they were already transforming. A 1928 study of American Jewish ghettos explained why such communities were being "invaded" by people of color: "the Negro, like the immigrant, is segregated in the city into a racial colony. Economic considerations, race prejudice and cultural differences combine to set him apart." "Race prejudice" included laws and lending practices, from redlining to restrictive covenants, explicitly design to separate white and nonwhite city dwellers.

After World War II, "white flight" from inner cities further exacerbated racial segregation. By the '60s and '70s, so-called "negro ghettos" in cities like Chicago, New York and Detroit were central to the cultural conversation about poverty. "Something must be done, and done soon, to build a strong and stable family structure among Negro ghetto dwellers," an *Ebony* editorial contended in 1966; countless academic articles argued about the causes of ghetto poverty.

And in 1969, Elvis — in his late-career comeback — took a turn for the mournful with "In

the Ghetto."

Elvis (and many cover singers after him) sings about Chicago's crowded black ghettos with an outsider's concern: "People, don't you understand / the child needs a helping hand / or he'll grow to be an angry young man some day."

Almost half a century later, Busta Rhymes used the same song title to celebrate the ghetto as a source of identity.

Busta Rhymes doesn't ignore the painful effects of intergenerational poverty. The ghetto is where "crackhead chicks still smoke with babies in they belly." But he's not calling for help or claiming that all ghetto-dwellers are miserable. The ghetto is also "where you find beautiful women and rugrats / and some of the most powerful people, I love that!"

Ghetto Not-So-Fabulous?

Ghettos were always defined by lack of choice — they were places inhabitants were forced to live, whether by anti-Semitic governments, discriminating neighbors or racist practices like redlining. Sociologist Mario Small argues that these limits have largely been lifted, such that researchers should no longer consider "ghetto" a useful word for urban slums.

And indeed, use of the word "ghetto" in print has been declining since the early '70s. But slang variants have been rising in popularity since before the turn of the millennium. And a quick glance at social media suggests they're not going away; on a recent weekday, twitter users referenced "ghetto" almost 20 times per minute.

"Being ghetto," or behaving in a low-class manner (see also: "ratchet"). "Ghetto fabulous," flashy glamour without the wealth. "Ghetto" as an adjective, roughly synonymous with "jury-rigged," for anything cobbled together out of subpar materials.

Many commentators have objected to these terms. Using ghetto as an insult is, as our own Karen Grigsby Bates has pointed out, inherently classist. Ta-Nehisi Coates once wrote that "ghetto, in its most unironic usage, is a word for people you don't know. It's a word that allows you to erase individuals and create boxes." And arguments that the terms are race-neutral are, well, unconvincing.

This current use of "ghetto" is also curiously mismatched to the history of ghettos. Venice's ghettos were home to prosperous merchants. Warsaw's ghettos housed resistance fighters. Harlem was a ghetto when it hosted a transformative literary and cultural movement. Chicago's Bronzeville was home to the black professional class — ghettos, by removing citizens' freedom to live where they want, force schoolteachers next to drug dealers, working families next to warehouses.

But slang references to "ghetto culture" don't refer to any of those legacies, or to the

perseverance it takes to survive under such limitations. ("You surviving in the ghetto," raps Busta Rhymes, "you can make it anywhere.") Instead, they reduce ghetto life to poverty and poor behavior. *Acting* ghetto. *Being* ghetto. *Dressing* ghetto.

Ghetto, in slang usage, has entirely lost the sense of forced segregation — the meaning it held for centuries. In a rapid about-face, it's become an indictment of individual choices.

Source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/04/27/306829915/segregated-from-its-history-how-ghetto-lost-its-meaning>

Understanding America's Ghettos Starts With the First Jewish One

Raphael Magarik

Aug 01, 2016 3:00 PM

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the opening of the Venetian Ghetto, where the city's Jews were forced to live for nearly 300 years. Those for whom the term "ghetto" suggests the uprising against the Nazis in Warsaw or the riots in Harlem in 1964 may find it strange that this anniversary is being treated as a celebration. The events have included a concert in March at La Fenice opera house, a ceremonious promotional video, in which slogans like "deep cultural roots" and "a unique heritage" flash over images of Venice's Canton Synagogue and the first-ever performance of William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" in the ghetto.

Why, one might ask, is Venice commemorating the creation of a ghetto, rather than its emancipation by Napoleon, whose bicentennial in 1997 passed with far less fanfare?

Princeton sociologist Mitchell Duneier's marvelously rich new book, "Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea," answers this question about Venice, even as it focuses on African-American ghettos in the United States. Duneier frames his history of urban black life in America by showing how pre-modern Jewish ghettos were complex spaces in which Jews suffered but also thrived, spaces that differed wildly from both the Nazi and American spaces that inherited their names. This distinction underscores one of the book's central points — that the "ghetto is an intergenerational phenomenon," such that "much is lost when the larger history of ghettoization recedes." Duneier tells that larger history through portraits of black scholars of the ghetto, each placed in the context of a historical moment and city: Chicago in 1944, for instance, or Harlem in 2004.

Duneier argues that "ghetto" should not be a generic term for low-income urban areas. Rather, following many of the black sociologists and activists whose stories he tells, he suggests the term, as it applies to the U.S., is best used to denote "a space for the intrusive control of poor blacks."

"Ghetto" is never strident or even particularly argumentative. Nonetheless, its story repeatedly emphasizes the failures of the apolitical and ahistorical social science that has shaped much government and nonprofit urban policy in contemporary America. While the book celebrates social science's triumphs, it also shows how some social scientists have relied on numbers and ignored messy racial histories, producing too-convenient quick fixes for black poverty.

Further, sociology that lumps black ghettos together with other low-income communities cannot explain long-standing, entrenched American racism and the

specific impact it has had on urban black life. Duneier's detailed story of ideas, cities, policies and individual scholars offers a politically and historically thick alternative to the type of pseudo-objective, politically blind social science popular with Michael Bloomberg, Bill Gates, Arne Duncan and other American policy-making elites.

Pre-modern vs. Nazi ghettos

Understanding the black ghetto starts with the Jews. Duneier argues that we mistakenly think of pre-modern ghettos (like Venice's) as similar to Nazi ghettos. In part, that reflects Nazi propaganda. Hitler "framed his ghetto as a long-established standard operating procedure" in the hopes that feigning continuity with the past would blunt international criticism. In fact, by restricting where people could live by race rather than religion, Nazi ghettos radically departed from medieval and early modern Jewish enclaves. Jews living in Nazi ghettos could not convert out, as they could in pre-modern Europe. The Nazis attempted to eliminate commerce between gentiles and Jews, whereas early modern ghettos existed in large part to facilitate Jewish involvement in gentile economies while controlling the perceived religious threat of Judaism. Nazi ghettos, sites of regular shootings, beatings and murders, were part of an extermination process. This violence differed categorically from the sporadic pogroms of pre-modern anti-Semitism



Nazi officers talking with Jews in the Warsaw ghetto in Poland in 1943. An AP investigation found dozens of suspected Nazi war criminals collected millions of dollars in Social Security payments. AP Ironically, the idea that Nazi ghettos were "traditional" survived among respectable post-war historians (and many Jews!). Modern post-Enlightenment historians often found it convenient to conflate pre-modern and Nazi ghettos, because it confirmed their harsh judgments of pre-modern Christianity. Of course, understanding Venice's 500th anniversary celebration requires unlearning this history and disentangling pre-modern from Nazi ghettos. To be sure, Venice's Jews faced onerous taxes and sporadic violence, but the ghetto also hosted a mixture of Spanish, German, Italian and Levantine Jews (along with a synagogue for each community), supported a long-standing Jewish culture — and made some Jews very rich.

Understanding why black scholars in the U.S. adopted the term “ghetto” to describe their own communities also requires such disentangling. Duneier shows how using “ghetto” to talk about black neighborhoods took hold in the early 1940s, for two reasons. First, few African Americans visited Europe until World War II, when many drafted black men traveled to France, Germany and Italy, where they often compared American racism to the experiences of European minorities. Second, and more pointedly, Duneier shows how black scholars in the '40s invoked “ghetto” specifically in response to “the rise in attention to the Nazi treatment of Jews in Europe.” Black writers mined the analogy between the two ghettos, and particularly the horror of Nazi misdeeds in Warsaw, to wake American whites from their racial apathy.

Further, black scholars invoked ghettos to differentiate their own neighborhoods from those of poor, whiter immigrants. In one chapter, Duneier focuses on Horace Cayton, who studied sociology at the University of Chicago where he helped oversee a massive research project into black life in Chicago’s South Side. Cayton and his collaborator St. Clair Drake’s 1945 sociological masterpiece, “Black Metropolis,” which drew on that archive, actually repudiates the influential Chicago school of sociology, which thought that neighborhoods emerged from “natural forces,” independent of social policy. That school interpreted black enclaves as basically similar to poor “zones in transition,” through which poor European immigrants to Chicago passed before they became middle class. These zones formed organically and fostered crime and disease, but residency in them was strictly temporary. For the Chicago school, race was incidental.

By contrast, “Black Metropolis” used the term “ghetto” because Cayton and Drake emphasized the role of white racism: Blacks were poor because they were denied access to good jobs and they lived in crowded ghettos because of housing discrimination. Often this took the form of “restrictive covenants”: private deals made within white residential areas not to sell to blacks. “Black Metropolis” thus used intensive, fine-grained sociological work to show how black ghettos differed from other poor Chicago neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, Cayton and Drake’s work was largely ignored by post-war white America. A year before they published it, the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, funded by the Carnegie Corporation, released “An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy,” a best seller that dominated public discussion around race in the U.S. Myrdal understood white prejudice as a response to the unsavory conditions of black poverty, and he overlooked the force of covenants and other forms of discrimination in the north. Sadly, his blockbuster over-shadowed “Black Metropolis.”

Haunting melancholy

Cayton in 1944 Chicago is just one of Duneier’s stories, each researched in great detail and told in a flowing narrative and clear prose. (About the only thing missing is an

introduction; Duneier is so committed to historical narrative that it requires serious thought to infer his major arguments.) Alongside Cayton, Duneier has chapters about Kenneth and Mami Clark, who pioneered psychological work on racial prejudice in mid-century Harlem, which was cited when the Supreme Court desegregated schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*; William Julius Wilson, whose controversial theory of how the black middle class fled historically black neighborhoods in cities like New York and Chicago and produced a newly depressed ghetto was frequently misunderstood (including by Ronald Reagan, who tried to hire Wilson, much to the latter's chagrin); and Geoffrey Canada, the social entrepreneur responsible for the Harlem Children's Zone, an immersive attempt to help children escape the cycle of poverty. Numerous other figures crowd the pages of Duneier's "Ghetto."

While the book celebrates brilliant urban scholarship, particularly by black thinkers, the melancholy that haunts Cayton's story persists to the present. Myrdal's faith in the "American Creed" of "liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody" has always been more popular than examination of racist laws and institutions. You can hear Myrdal's heirs today insisting, in response to Black Lives Matter protests against police violence, that "All Lives Matter." With this slogan, whites refuse to confront the specificity of deep-seated American racism.



The area of the Jewish ghetto in Venice, 2013. AP / Michelle Locke

Further, the optimistic view that quantitative social science will help fix deep, historically rooted problems undergirds the education reform movement, probably the best-known urban policy initiative in America. (To be clear, Duneier has no aversion to quantitative methods; the problem is when social scientists both ignore race and imagine they can isolate the single variable that will lift blacks out of poverty.)

Duneier's chapter on Canada is particularly good in exposing the dangers of extensive donor involvement in public schools, the folly of utopian education experiments that attempt to find the variable that will save students from the ghetto, and the unrealistic expectations that such high-stakes social science places on teachers and school administrators.

Finally, Duneier traces how white scholars and policy makers privilege “race-blind” solutions. These ideas ignore the structuring force of racism. Especially since the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, they also assume the impossibility of asking “the white masses to make sacrifices on behalf of blacks.” The parts of “Ghetto” that focus on white incapacity to grapple with racism and its history make for very sad reading. Nearly a century has passed since the Great Migration began, bringing tens of thousands of blacks to northern cities.

Venetians may be celebrating, but Duneier’s book suggests that white Americans should instead use their own ghettos’ centennial to ask some hard questions about race and imagine how the next 100 years might be different.

Source: <https://www.haaretz.com/life/books/from-the-first-jewish-ghetto-to-modern-black-ones-1.5415979>

Evolutions of a Place called the Ghetto

By **Aram Goudsouzian**

April 22, 2016

Aram Goudsouzian is the chair of the Department of History at the University of Memphis. His most recent book is "Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear."

Imagine that it is 1969 and that you are watching Elvis Presley, in the midst of his comeback, crooning “In the Ghetto.” As you listen to his maudlin story of a young boy who grows up hungry, turns to crime and ends up dead, you absorb both liberal and conservative explanations for the tragedy. Elvis tells you that poverty caused this problem, and he chides society that “the child needs a helping hand.” But he also describes a terrible cycle rooted in culture and family, as the song ends with the dead boy’s mother giving birth to a new, desperate child. By virtue of the song title and the chorus, you know that he is describing a black kid in a poor, predominantly black city district, even if he never mentions race.

In “Ghetto,” Mitchell Duneier never writes about overweight superstars in jumpsuits. But the Princeton University sociologist helps us see why Elvis sang those words in 1969 and why you would have understood them in that particular way. As his fine book demonstrates, the meaning of “ghetto” has changed over time, responding to political circumstances. Engaging a host of classic works of urban sociology, Duneier describes how social scientists have grappled with poor, black, inner-city neighborhoods in the United States. His rich intellectual history of the ghetto raises important questions about how we might address the plight of its residents.

The term “ghetto” was first applied to Jews, of course. Duneier begins in Venice in 1516, when the Senate mandated that Jews live on the island of Cannaregio, known as the Ghetto Nuovo. The practice of separate Jewish neighborhoods then spread to Rome

and beyond. These medieval ghettos forced people to live in separate spaces, but Jews still interacted with other city residents and had a strong community life. By the early 20th century, “ghetto” no longer meant a legal separation but rather a crowded, poor, urban neighborhood.

Then Nazi Germany appropriated the term. While enclosing Jewish districts with barbed wire, Adolf Hitler’s regime rendered the people inside a degraded race. The Nazis enslaved, tortured and starved the segregated population. Although these zones bore little resemblance to medieval Jewish neighborhoods, American social scientists accepted Hitler’s usage of the term “ghetto.” Duneier laments a missed opportunity. By falling for the “Nazi deception,” he argues, scholars failed to effectively define the ghetto — the word allowed for both the cultural autonomy of 16th-century Venice and the strict social control of Nazi Germany.

After World War II, African Americans started appropriating “ghetto” to describe their own urban spaces. Harlem, for instance, resembled neither the Jewish ghettos of the Middle Ages nor those of World War II, but the term suggested how race shaped the distinct experiences of black people, in contrast to immigrants who could claim the privileges of whiteness. By the 1960s, “ghetto” more often referred to black city districts than to past Jewish experiences.

Social scientists, black scholars in particular, guided the evolving understanding of the American ghetto. Although he describes many intellectual influences and offshoots, Duneier traces that history through three main figures: Horace Cayton, Kenneth Clark and William Julius Wilson.

Cayton, a University of Chicago graduate student in the 1930s and 1940s, challenged the prevailing interpretations of African American life. Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s influential “An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy” (1944) documented the nation’s racial discrimination, but it concentrated on the South and had an optimistic, liberal hope for the future; as Duneier uncovers, Myrdal blew the chance to hire Cayton and gain access to his huge research project on the black community on Chicago’s South Side. Cayton instead collaborated with African American sociologist and anthropologist St. Clair Drake on “Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City” (1945). They highlighted intransigent prejudice and the race-specific discrimination faced by blacks, such as restrictive housing covenants, even as they documented the rich cultural life within the ghetto.

Two decades later, when Kenneth Clark wrote “Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power” (1965), the black inner city appeared a brewing crisis. Clark focused on the ghetto’s problems, not its vitality. Where other scholars explained black urban poverty through single factors such as a city’s geography, family structure or culture, he offered a more comprehensive approach. “He broke new ground,” Duneier writes, “becoming the first to understand ghettos as the result of vicious cycles occurring within a

powerless social, economic, political, and educational landscape." In a sense, Clark dug the scholarly foundation for Elvis's song.

While Clark emphasized how racist government policies and capitalist developers shaped the ghetto, Wilson advocated a race-neutral approach. The black middle class had departed the inner city, and a deindustrializing economy left the remaining poor with few prospects. In the Reagan-era political climate, race-conscious remedies had little support. So in works such as "The Declining Significance of Race" (1978), "The Truly Disadvantaged" (1987) and "When Work Disappears" (1996), Wilson described the economic and geographic barriers faced by the underclass, and he proposed social democratic initiatives such as expanded federal jobs programs. He characterized a ghetto as any neighborhood where more than 40 percent of the population lived in poverty. But by defining a ghetto "without reference to either race or power," Duneier argues, "the idea's history in Europe and America no longer seemed relevant."

"Ghetto" leaves the reader craving a solution to urban poverty, but Duneier prescribes no specific remedies. In a final chapter he describes the trials and triumphs of the Harlem Children's Zone, which uses a comprehensive approach to education that starts in early childhood, provides social services and fosters safe neighborhoods. But its model cannot easily be replicated. Its success is rooted in the charismatic leadership of its founder, Geoffrey Canada, and his deep-pocketed sponsors.

Ultimately, Duneier's vision is bleak. His book describes the ghetto as a historical process rooted in racial discrimination, spatial segregation and political powerlessness. Absent a genuine commitment among the American public to helping the black poor, that process continues.

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/evolution-of-a-place-called-the-ghetto/2016/04/20/b10702b0-c90c-11e5-88ff-e2d1b4289c2f_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.618f0905e410