

The Washington Post

Opinions

# Evolution of a place called the ghetto

By Aram Goudsouzian April 22, 2016

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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.

## **GHETTO**

### **The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea**

By Mitchell Duneier

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 292 pp. \$28