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### The Ghetto: Structure, Stigma, and the Spatial Logic of Inequality

A ghetto is not a poor neighborhood or an urban stereotype. It is a historically specific mechanism of racial domination that combines stigma, constraint, spatial confinement, and institutional encasement. From the Jewish quarters of early modern Europe to the Black neighborhoods shaped by twentieth-century American housing policy, the ghetto exposes how structural racism reproduces inequality through the organization of space. From Wacquant's analytic reconstruction to Small's cross-city comparisons and Massey's account of segregation as the "linchpin of stratification, shows that "ghetto" remains a revealing but often misused term. Reading these sources alongside *Race in America* (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2015), I will clarify both the historical logic of enclosure and the modern distortion of the word into a pejorative shorthand for poverty or Blackness.

The first "ghettos" were compulsory Jewish districts in sixteenth-century Venice, they were walled, guarded, and closed at night. As Wacquant (2004) explains, four elements defined them: stigma, constraint, spatial confinement, and institutional encasement. They were Janus-faced: instruments of control for dominant groups but also sites of internal solidarity and self-protection for the confined. Transplanted to the United States, this logic reappeared in the Great

Migration when federal, state, and market institutions produced racially bounded “Black belts.” Race in America describes how redlining, racial covenants, white flight, and urban renewal transformed cities into systems of specialized racial domination (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2015, pp. 173-180). Rather than natural outcomes of class difference, these were state sanctioned enclosures sustained by a racial ideology that appeared “color-blind” yet protected white advantage.

Massey (2020) calls segregation the “structural linchpin” modern race relations because it localizes exclusions and makes exploitation efficient. By concentrating stigma and limiting mobility, segregation functions as an institutional routine of structural racism, one that, as (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2015, pp.114-115) explain, reproduces inequality through organizational practices even in the absence of overt prejudice. The historical meaning of “ghetto” refers to a spatial instrument of racial domination, not simply a neighborhood with low income.

For Wacquant (2004), a true ghetto requires the co-presence of all four elements. This precision distinguishes it from: Slums, which may be poor but not racially enclosed, comprised of working class; Ethnic enclaves, which operate as voluntary springboards for upward mobility; and Gated communities, which practice elective segregation through privilege. All ghettos are segregated, yet not all segregated areas are ghettos. The difference lies in involuntary confinement and duplicative institutions created under exclusion.

While the original ghettos had literal walls and enforced “urban policing” of boundaries, the logic Wacquant describes hasn’t disappeared, it remained and took new forms. Today, stigma shows up through media portrayals and dog-whistle politics that frame certain neighborhoods as

“dangerous” or “broken,” which follows residents outside the space itself. Constraint now operates through the legacy of credit scores, zoning, rental screenings, and school district boundaries that limit mobility in practice, even without explicit racial language. Spatial confinement persists through a lack of affordable housing outside historically racialized districts, limited transit routes, and environmental mapping that clusters hazards and underfunded institutions in the same areas. Institutional encasement also continues, but instead of duplicating institutions for survival, many residents now navigate dense networks of schools, social services, policing, and resource-gatekeeping agencies that regulate daily life (Wacquant, 2004). The walls aren’t brick anymore, but the experience of restricted movement, concentrated stigma, and institutional oversight still mirrors the original structure.

Mario Small (2004), extends this by showing that no two ghettos are alike. Chicago’s Woodlawn, depopulated and institutions poor, contrasts with Harlem, dense and rich institutions. Across U.S. cities, poor districts differ dramatically in organization and opportunity structures. As Small observes, the dominant Chicago image ignores heterogeneity: some areas are “institution deserts,” others “institution jungles.” Recognizing this diversity prevents sociologists from treating “ghetto” as a one size fits all concept. et

Viewing the ghetto through this analytic lens illuminates current realities in three ways. First, it refines diagnosis. Policy efforts often assume that poor neighborhoods lack institutions, but Small’s research shows that some are over-institutionalized yet under-resourced, producing congestion rather than absence. Without distinguishing types, reform risks mis-targeting aid. Second, it reveals persistence. Massey’s data demonstrate that although average segregation has declined, large metros remain hyper segregated, and class segregation has intensified. This dual map concentrated affluence verses concentrated on poverty ensure that racial inequality remains

spatialized. The transition from redlining to reverse redlining, predatory lending aimed at minority borrowers, shows how exploitation replaces exclusion without dismantling the structure. Third, it clarifies ideology. When people describe “ghetto” behavior or aesthetics, they often draw on what is called color-blind ideology, the belief that inequality stems from culture rather than policy. This ideology exercises symbolic power by naturalizing segregation and making it appear the product of individual choice (Desmond & Embayer, 2015, pp. 395-398).

Today the term “ghetto” refers, in strict sociological terms, to locations where involuntary racialized closure and institutional encasement persist. These remain concentrated in metropolitan regions shaped by durable racial boundaries (Massey, 2020). Yet in everyday speech, the word often collapses into a racial slur. The article, “*Five Reasons to Rethink “Ghetto”*” illustrates how calling something “ghetto” now serves as racial shorthand, detached from history and used to police taste, class, or authenticity. This linguistic drift obscures the structural process: redlining, disinvestment, policing, and the intergenerational transmission of neighborhood disadvantages (Deblaker-Gebhard, 2011).

If we hold onto the sociological meaning rather than the slang version, do ghettos still exist today? In many ways, yes. But they look different than they did fifty years ago. We no longer see fenced-in districts with curfews or legally enforced racial boundaries, yet the pattern of involuntary racialized concentration remains visible in cities like Chicago, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Detroit, Los Angeles, and others. What has shifted is the mechanism. Rather than overt exclusion, we now see what some scholars call “predatory inclusion” meaning people are granted access to housing, credit, or institutions, but under exploitative terms that keep wealth from accumulating. Policing, school zoning, property taxes, transit designs, and housing markets continue to shape who stays confined and who can leave (Massey, 2020). In that sense, ghettos

have not disappeared; they have adapted to a society that claims to be color-blind while reproducing racial boundaries through policy, markets, and administrative systems.

Hence, the modern “ghetto” is simultaneously a living institution of racialized space and a stigmatized symbol misapplied in everyday talk. Sociological clarity requires holding both meanings in tension while refusing to conflate them. This duality becomes even clearer when hearing how ordinary people define the term.

Friend 1, a 17-year-old classmate, described the ghetto as “areas that tend to look not as nice... with graffiti, broken buildings, homeless people everywhere, and typically a lot of crime.” Friend 2, a 27-year-old paralegal, echoed this view, picturing “rundown neighborhoods that are dangerous... where crime rates are high and the whole community feels like it’s going downhill.”

Both responses reveal how “ghetto” is widely understood through visible decay and moral judgment rather than through the sociological lens of segregation, state abandonment, or institutional racism. Their definitions center on aesthetics and danger, precisely the stereotypical imagery that can obscure structural causes. In contrast, scholars like Wacquant and Massey show that these conditions are not products of “bad neighborhoods” but of systematic exclusion and concentrated disadvantage. This contrast between public perception and sociological analysis underscores why language matters: everyday speech often reproduces the very stigmas that sociology seeks to unpack.

Historically, the ghetto was a coercive spatial order created to contain stigmatized groups; in the United States, it evolved into the spatial architecture of structural racism. Scholars from Wacquant to Massey agree that segregation remains the key mechanism linking race and

inequality. Yet the term itself has been hollowed out, used as a slang or insult rather than analytic category. Re-anchoring it in its sociological meaning restores clarity: the ghetto is a structure, not a personality; a product of power, not pathology. To describe inequality honestly, we must resist the color-blind habit of turning policy into culture and reclaim language that exposes, rather than conceals, the spatial logic of racial domination.

## References

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