

# The Idea of the Ghetto

*by Nicolas Duvoux*

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**The black ghetto has garnered much attention from researchers and American society alike. Revisiting the intellectual trajectory of many of its key thinkers, ethnographer Mitchell Duneier examines the consolidation of its progressive layers of meaning. An endeavour in intellectual, political, and social history.**

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Reviewed: Mitchell Duneier, *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, The History of an Idea* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroud, 2016), 292 p.

Drawing on his teaching experience, Mitchell Duneier, one of America's foremost ethnographers, notes that the history of the ghetto is a forgotten history. Not only are his students unaware that Jews were the first population to find themselves trapped in a ghetto in Medieval Europe, they are also not familiar with the different periods of the black ghetto in America. In his view, the value of the ghetto as an idea lies precisely in how it covers diverse configurations; configurations that are in no way limited to the vague, objectivating notion of a mainly poor and black disadvantaged neighbourhood and instead involve varying degrees of control over populations and varying degrees of flourishing among populations (p. 220).

The most commonly accepted meanings of 'ghetto' reduce its historical depth and, more generally, overlook the fact that the social relation it creates depends on a particular historical, social, political, and intellectual context. M. Duneier's intellectual and social history of the ghetto aims to counter this distortion (which is also a form of depoliticisation).

## **The misleading parallel between the Nazi ghetto and the contemporary police and prison ghetto**

Mitchell Duneier's reflection begins and ends by revisiting the obligatory comparison with the Jewish ghetto during the Nazi period. Despite the total oppression that held sway there, the Nazi ghetto is just one of many meanings the Jewish ghetto has taken in history. The Warsaw ghetto and the medieval Venetian ghetto were two configurations with radically different levels of possibility for the flourishing of a social and cultural life for Jews. However, several political and intellectual processes have led to the distinction between the two being blurred. Sociologists, particularly Louis Wirth, one of the most prominent authors of the Chicago School, have given weight to this idea of continuity between the ghettos of Nazi Europe and those that came before (p. 23). And, in the wake of W. E. B. Du Bois, for black sociologists, comparison with the case of European Jews provided avenues for sociological thought about the singular nature of the black ghetto as compared to the ethnic enclaves of European minorities.

Systematically conflating the two has prevented the social sciences from looking at how the control and flourishing of populations varied from ghetto to ghetto. This point is even more important now. In the second half of the twentieth century, the rise of a dynamic cultural and social life in the black ghetto seemed to make comparison with the Nazi ghetto less convincing and relevant. More recently, however, the contemporary ghetto, with its hyper-incarceration of men and spreading police control and repression in a context of black economic disadvantage, seems to lend it new relevance. For M. Duneier, the comparison remains senseless and precludes any understanding of the fact that black elites were among the first to support criminalising drug use and that the contemporary ghetto is not an instrument of external control by whites over all aspects of blacks' lives, but rather the product of an increasingly univocal focus on criminality as a way of containing social problems (p. 221).

## **The black thinkers of the ghetto**

The book's central chapters focus on four figures who are emblematic of moments in the ghetto's history. The investigation nonetheless remains rich and seamless throughout, as it retraces the intellectual movements underpinning the new turns introduced by these authors and analyses both their influence and the opposition they faced.

With his co-author, Saint-Clair Drake, Horace Clayton was the first to grasp the specific nature of the black ghetto. Indeed, the term cannot be reduced to the naturalist and evolutionist connotations that came with the Chicago School relating it back to the ethnic

enclaves (Jewish, Italian, etc.) that developed in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century as holding areas where immigrant populations adapted. The black ghetto was the product of segregation mechanisms, among which 'restrictive covenants' (i.e. clauses forbidding the sale of goods to blacks outside their designated living spaces) were key. The ghetto was not inherent to urban development. It was an institution of external control, based on restricting the circulation of blacks and on job ceilings preventing their professional promotion. *Black Metropolis* (1944) defined the ghetto as: a) different from other ethnic neighbourhoods; b) subject to vicious cycles of outside repression and inside decay; c) producing inherently inferior institutions that nonetheless served as a source of pride to its inhabitants; d) a key factor in explaining the life trajectories of its residents; e) despite being crucial, not something that explained all the problems of black people (or, therefore, all the solutions to be provided).

In the heart of the civil rights struggle, Kenneth Clark's work represented a shift away from Cayton and Drake's arguments: in *Dark Ghetto* (1965), he defined the ghetto as a locus not only for external control but also for the institutionalisation of powerlessness. For Cayton and Drake, despite everything, black people could still take pride and joy in their daily lives; Clark's view instead showed internalised oppression, reflected in sexual morality, the breakdown of family life, and the deterioration of the education system.

In the twenty years between Clark and Cayton's reflections, conservative and individualistic readings had become more established, whether they focused on the increasing spatial mismatch between jobs and workers, on family (the famous 'Moynihan report'<sup>1</sup>), or on culture (Oscar Lewis). Clark's work brought back a conflictual and controversial relationship to the notion of ghetto. For him, the ghetto was a social, political, and institutional colony. His analyses would later go on to inspire, in particular, Robert Blauner's work on 'white privilege' (*Racial Oppression in America*, 1972).

It took another twenty years for sociologist William Julius Wilson to identify the ghetto's new configuration, resulting from the social mobility that the civil rights movement had opened up to the more advantaged levels of the black population. Wilson contributed to reforming the field of studies about urban poverty by showing how the intersection of race and class had divided the African-American population into distinct social spaces. The effects of macro-economic changes (de-industrialisation and the expansion of the service sector within the economy) and the civil rights movement combined to the detriment of the most marginalised fringes of the black minority, concentrated in central urban spaces abandoned by other segments of this population. His points of view, particularly about the importance of the interaction between space and social disadvantage (through the social isolation of the poor and the negative effects of concentrated poverty), slowly came to shape the national agenda for public anti-poverty policy. However, his thoughts about the ghetto were more ambiguous

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<sup>1</sup> On this importance of this report and of Oscar Lewis's arguments, as well as on how these two intellectual works with different statuses were appropriated by conservatives in the social representation of poverty in the United States, see Nicolas Duvoux, 'The Culture of Poverty Reconsidered', *Books and Ideas*, October 6, 2010.

insofar as, by taking a demographic approach (defining 'ghettos' as neighbourhoods where more than 40% of residents lived in poverty), he rejected the specific effect of race that could explain why, in the face of identical demographic indicators, the black ghetto showed greater decay. This racial blindness was strategic for Wilson, insofar as focusing on the experience of blacks ran the risk of jeopardising the chances of whites ascribing to anti-poverty policies.

The last figure, Geoffrey Canada, spent his youth surrounded by criminality and violence. He then invented a model for action aimed at changing the situation of the ghetto from the ground up, rather than at attempting once again to resolve the macro-economic parameters creating this situation. With the Harlem Children Zone programme, he established a model for action aimed at spreading a set of educational standards and related initiatives targeting the structural and cultural variables of poverty throughout the whole neighbourhood. This programme was the inspiration for the Barack Obama administration's public policy agenda *Promise Neighborhoods*. Canada's work followed on from that of Kenneth and Mamie Clark, while also being characteristic of the neoliberal era. His initiatives, launched with a view to systematically improving quality of education, were only partially successful. And by trying to resolve the ghetto's problems without resolving its macro-economic issues, he lent legitimacy to deterministic theories by demonstrating that, without early investment, it is unrealistic to try to improve the socio-economic condition of the most disadvantaged. The idea that the success of a few individuals would rub off on the neighbourhood as a whole was limited by the fact that the programme's recipients wanted to leave their environment.

## Countering Gunnar Myrdal's optimism

These different thinkers' opposition to Gunnar Myrdal's arguments is a guiding thread throughout M. Duneier's book. The Swedish economist, mandated by the Carnegie Corporation to reach a diagnosis about the racial problem in the mid-twentieth century, concluded in *An American Dilemma* (1944) that the solution to the situation of black people lay in white people's contradictions, caught between their belief in democratic ideals, on the one hand, and differential treatment of this minority, on the other. For decades, his work was considered the definitive synthesis on the racial question and was even cited in the 'Brown v Board of Education' Supreme Court decision.

M. Duneier shows that, while it was natural for each of these major thinkers of the ghetto to engage with Myrdal, they all went about demolishing his progressive and optimistic vision of race relations. Despite being in contact with the economist, Cayton was ultimately unable to collaborate in the project that eventually gave rise to *An American Dilemma*, depriving Myrdal of any inside perspective on race relations in the large northern cities, such as Chicago, which would certainly have tempered his optimism about the effects of blacks

migrating to the north. Cayton and Drake's works both show that a colour line existed in the north too, even if it was less insurmountable than the one in the south.

The civil rights movement and race riots of the 1960s further heightened disagreement with Myrdal's arguments: as Clark pointed out to him, only violence had managed to force whites to take an interest in the situation of blacks. As for Wilson, the entire policy agenda he defended from 1987 onwards was based on his deep scepticism about Myrdal's ideas: it was important to help blacks and whites together precisely because the latter would never help the former unless it was in their interest to do so. Finally, Canada's initiatives were entirely founded on wealthy, white benefactors funding programmes that did not spend tax dollars, thereby highlighting whites' capacity to dissociate perception from reality. When all is said and done, the ghetto is based on precisely this cognitive dissonance.

## **An essential idea, with obvious limitations**

M. Duneier concludes his investigation with a set of propositions about the ghetto (p. 222-231). The notion of ghetto refers to the restriction on residential space imposed upon populations on the basis of race, income, and wealth. The ghetto offers a way of understanding how decisions that are harmful to a minority can be perpetuated without affecting the dominant population. In a sense, the social reality of the ghetto validates, after the event, the prejudice that created it in the first place. Its physical reality becomes a rationalisation for further segregation. Prejudice breeds the reality, and the latter then provides the former with cognitive validation. The ghetto offers a way of identifying the specific mechanisms through which blacks have been segregated, which differentiates them from other minorities or ethnic groups. The ghetto is created and controlled by outside institutions. It is therefore the locus for many forms of domination, for dispossession, and for exploitation, as recent studies have shown. The inhabitants of the ghetto, far from showing 'inner solidarity', look to differentiate themselves from the people with whom they are forced to live: this happens because ghetto residents struggle to live according to standards of moral worth and decency and are not deviants. Finally, the ghetto produces effects on entire generations. Acknowledging this reality means putting into perspective any desire to measure the effects of moving people out of the ghetto (for example in the 'Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing' programme) and relinquishing the illusion that public policy has the scope and ability to produce immediate effects on a deeply-entrenched social configuration.

These arguments notwithstanding, the notion of ghetto forged by these thinkers has its limitations. With the notable exception of Cayton and Drake's work, which used female investigators and was therefore able to reflect the experiences of women in the ghetto, it tends

to propagate an essentially male and progressive view of social reality. Moreover, it cannot be generalised, as Loïc Wacquant's work has demonstrated.<sup>2</sup>

This last point is where this otherwise masterly book leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied. The way Loïc Wacquant frames the ghetto as the combination of spatial segregation and economic exploitation could have been discussed in the thoughts collected here by M. Duneier. Is there any sense in using the term ghetto to refer to all the different configurations studied? Is there any sense in comparing them as ghettos, insofar as the notion is supposed to bring out varying degrees of external control and possibilities for flourishing? If so, what conceptual effects can we identify and what lessons can we learn to broaden social uses of the term, in ways that make it both more extensive and more comprehensive? M. Duneier's ghetto extends beyond the ghetto as L. Wacquant conceives it. It calls into question the founding identity of American democracy and the moral resources upon which the dominant were supposed to draw (according to Myrdal). It also lies beneath Wacquant's conception, in the forms of rationalisation and in the relationships tinged with paternalism through which whites encourage or obfuscate parts of the reality that blacks reveal to them. In this regard, M. Duneier's book follows on from Alice O'Connor's work and provides a key contribution to the intellectual and political history of the sociology of poverty in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 24 February 2017. Translated from the French by Lucy Garnier with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 4 May 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> Loïc J. D. Wacquant, 'A Janus-Faced Institution of Ethnoracial Closure: A Sociological Specification of the Ghetto', in Ray Hutchison and Bruce Haynes (ed.), *The Ghetto: Contemporary Global Issues and Controversies* (Boulder: Westview, 2011), p. 1-31.

<sup>3</sup> Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth Century US* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).