

Review Article

Exploring the Concept of Ghetto

Liyi Xie

School of International Tourism & Culture, Guizhou Normal University, Guiyang, China

Email address:

Shirley.liyixie@gmail.com

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Abstract: The existence of ghetto is an intractable problem in the field of city studies from ancient time to current society. The unclear concept of ghetto is one of the most controversial theme and various scholars put forward different ideas that are based on empirical, historical or social point of view. This paper tends to explore an explicit concept of ghetto by analyzing three popularly accepted examples of real ghetto and various scholars' views.

Keywords: City Studies, Ghetto, Poverty, Segregation, Racism

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of ghetto has existed for centuries. The original ghetto emerged in medieval Europe, Jews were segregated by religious authorities as the source of moral corruption and carriers of diseases, such as the Venetian Ghetto. In the modern society, some parts of the world still have ghettos in cities, such as African-American ghettos in United States. As a special community that combines with social, economic and historical elements, the definition of ghetto is being put forward under a controversial position. For instance, some scholars insist that ghetto should be defined by racial segregation and subjugation without limitations on poverty and class. Others argue that areas with concentrated poverty are ghettos despite racial or ethnic makeup. Still some scholars synthesize all the characteristics to consider the ghetto.

According to a large number of investigations and debates, several constituents of ghetto could be concluded below: concentrated poverty; involuntary segregation and spatial confinement; racism, stigma and constraints; institutional encasement. To do a deeper research of ghetto needs a clear starting point, it is the definition. What the ghetto is? Who live in the ghetto? What are the constituents of a ghetto? Does the concentrated poverty stand for the ghetto or not? So many puzzled questions and debates linger in our minds. This paper will introduce three typical ghettos briefly first, and combining those examples with several scholars' points to analyze every constituent of the ghetto mentioned above for achieving a more explicit concept of the word 'ghetto'.

2. Brief Introduction of Three Typical Ghettos

Various ghettos existed in the history or exist in the modern society, although they are located in different places or have dissimilar stories, the characteristics of them are same. Three typical and accepted ghettos will be introduced in this part for understanding the concept of 'ghetto' more easily and clearly -- the Venetian Ghetto, Japanese Burakumin and the African-American ghetto.

2.1. The Venetian Ghetto

From the historical point of view, the ghetto was established in medieval Europe, "Perhaps due to the power of stereotypical representations of ghettos in the United States, and more recently the rise of the 'ghetto fabulous' discourse, it is seldom acknowledged that the term ghetto in fact comes from Renaissance (16th century) Venice" (Slater, 2009). The first Jewish generation was settled in Venice under permission of Venetian government in 1382 (Haynes, 2008), the residents made a living by lending money, doing business and medicine, Jews were allowed to keep their customs and manage their own affairs. However, the Jews lost their statuses and were seen as the sources of moral corruption and carriers of disease for strengthening the regional power and the eruption of syphilis. In 1516, around 700 Jews were banished to the Ghetto Nuovo, it was an island located in the Northwest edge

of the city, and the entry was controlled by two gates which were locked at sunset (Haynes, 2008). The Ghetto Vecchio and the Ghetto Nuocissimo were built following the establishment of Ghetto Nuovo.

Ghettos were surrounded by water and high walls, outer windows and doors were sealed, police guarded the entry and patrolled through canals. Jews could leave the ghetto in morning for economic activities, but they had to wear yellow badges out of the ghetto – yellow circles for men and yellow scarves for women, and they were forced to back the ghetto before sunset. For time and spatial confinement, Jews had limited communication with the outer world; therefore, they reserved their own culture and developed their own institutions and administrative priorities within the walls. “Everything from synagogues to markets, from schools to charities formed and developed behind ghetto walls (Slater, 2009).”

2.2. Japanese Burakumin

Burakumin were seen officially as rural outcasts and the lowest class in Tokugawa era (1603 – 1868). The Tokugawa government divided people into four classes: samurai, peasant, artisan and merchant. Burakumin ranked behind merchant and were usually formed of hinin and eta, ‘hinin’ includes town guards, street cleaners and executioners, ‘eta’ includes butchers, tanners, leather-makers, and undertakers (Slater, 2009). Both hinin and eta are discriminated words, ‘hinin’ means ‘non-human’ and ‘eta’ means ‘filthy’ in Japanese, they are all untouchable in the eyes of Buddhism and Shinto.

Burakumin had to obey various rules which were set legally, firstly, they lived in Buraku only, and could enter into the town during daytime; secondly, they had to wear yellow collars and to walk on barefoot; thirdly, they were forced to drop on their hands and knees when met commoners; the fourth rule, marriages were limited, they just could married with Burakumin.

Burakumin were emancipated in 1871, they could move into cities but with notorious conditions, for instance, living in districts around garbage dumps, jails or crematoria with high crime rate and messy social order; job opportunities hanged in the range between low-paying and dirty works; separated schools established for them to be educated; permanent marks of Burakumin stay still for the existence of a ‘family registration system’ in Japan (Devos & Wagatsuma, 1966). The Burakumin Defense League counted that around three million Burakumin were trapped in 6,000 ghettos in Japanese cities in late 1970. According to some Japanese citizens, they said it is difficult for Burakumin to find a job because they will be identified by the address information even in nowadays.

2.3. African-American Ghetto

After World War I, a huge influx of African migrated from the North to the South in America, on one hand, this phenomenon was resulted from the Jim Crow racism, on the other hand, the mushrooming industries needed unskilled labor for speedily expanding economy. However, as Slater (2009) mentioned that the mass African migrants “was seen by

whites as a disturbing threat to racial purity, the moral order of the time.” The blacks were discriminated and segregated by the white Americans, they were confined in fields of housing, polity, public accommodation, schooling and economy (Osofsky, 1971). African Americans had to find shelter within limited boundaries, and developed their own institutions to meet basic needs, such as black churches, black schools, black business and clubs, black political and civic associations (Wacquant, 2004).

A process named white flight occurred after World War II, as response to the large African migrants in inner cities, whites moved out from downtown cities to suburbs. Construction of freeways for connecting suburbs and downtown through some ghettos and residential areas led to residents’ relocation, several public housing projects were provided for relocated residents, especially for black urban poor, therefore, public housing areas turned into black ghettos, as Slater (2009) mentioned, “for example, between the early 1950s and early 1960s, the Chicago Housing Authority built 33 housing projects comprising 21,000 units, 98% of which were built in neighborhoods almost all black.” In tandem with the practice of redlining and mortgage discrimination, African-American were confined seriously in the field of housing, it is extremely difficult for them to leave the ghettos, the ‘blockbusting’ made by estate agents for seeking profit also expanded the ghettos.

Hence, African-American ghettos refer to areas where have concentrated and segregated black neighborhoods in United States from the beginning to nowadays, invisible but clear line of color exists still today, for instance, Harlem in New York City, southern part of Chicago, Lynwood, Compton and Watts in south central Los Angeles, Woodward East in Detroit and so on, obviously, the harmony assimilated image portrayed by Wirth (1928) did not come true, unfortunately, some residents in the ghettos are even living in an abyss of misery.

3. Constituents of the Concept of ‘Ghetto’

To define a ghetto clearly is a significant tool for scholars to study the ghetto. For policymakers, key points to improve the ghetto are to understand what the ghetto is, where the ghetto is and what problems should be solved in the ghetto area. However, the concept of ghetto is surrounded by furious debates that are argued mainly in the fields of historically oriented definition, socially oriented definition and poverty-oriented definition. Just as Wacquant said: “to label as ‘ghetto’ any area exhibiting a high rate or concentration of poverty is not only arbitrary...It robs the term of its historical and empties it of its sociological contents.” (Wacquant, 2008, p. 49).

By synthesizing several scholars’ points, Wacquant (1997) concluded an ideal-typical ghetto along with its characteristics. He pointed that “a ghetto may be characterized as a bounded, racially and/or culturally uniform socio-spatial formation”, its constituents contain: “forcible relegation”, “a ‘negative typed’ population”, “frontier territory”, “a set of parallel institutions”, institutions are “only at an incomplete and inferior level”.

According to realistic ghettos mentioned above and

Wacquant (1997)'s synthetic analysis, some key constituents of ghetto can be concluded and will be discussed later: concentrated poverty; involuntary segregation and spatial confinement; racism stigma and constraints; institutional encasement. These elements will be analyzed in this part for achieving an explicit direction of ghetto.

3.1. Concentrated Poverty

Once mention the word 'ghetto', 'poverty' is supposed to be the most impressed role in the ghetto world for the public and the most controversial part among academic debates. Even though most of the ghettos are or were extreme poor, such as Japanese Burakumin, most African-American ghettos. However, can concentrated poverty represent ghetto? There is an empirical poverty-based definition raised by Jargowsky and Bane (1991): "We define a ghetto as an area in which the overall poverty rate in a census tract is greater than 40 percent. The ghetto poor are then those poor, of any race or ethnic group, who live in such high-poverty census tracts...It is important to distinguish our definition of ghetto tracts based on a poverty criterion from a definition based on racial composition. Not all majority black tracts are ghettos under our definition nor are all ghettos black" (pp. 239, 241).

Wacquant (1997) responded this redefinition critically, he pointed out that historical meaning and social import must be included to consider the ghetto, it is arbitrary to label areas with high rate or concentration of poverty ghettos. In addition, most extreme poor urban areas in America's Rustbelt today are transformed from yesterday's Black Belts. Therefore, because they were and are ghettos lead to poor, jobless and miserable lives instead of being ghettos on account of extreme poverty.

Pattillo (2003) also doubts the 40 percent theory, she agrees with Wilson that "ghettos are places of high rated poverty and joblessness" and adds places full of working- and middle-class black neighbourhoods, she argues that "my usage of the term as the entirety of the spatial segregated and contiguous black community is more historically and analytically powerful." Pattillo (2003)'s studies focus on black middle-class and working-class for illustrating racial segregation and subjugation are the core identifiers of ghettos but not poverty.

There are two different black neighborhoods which are described by Pattillo (2003) to prove her "more historically and analytically powerful" viewpoint: Groveland and North Kenwood, Chicago. Groveland is home for black in the highest social status, such as elected official in Chicago land politics, and also for members of the street gangs, such as Board of Directors – the largest street gang in Chicago. In Groveland, 70 percent homeownership and high stability indicate an affluent situation, whereas lifestyles and socio-economic heterogeneity are reflected by a few crack houses and the various contrary institutions as gardening clubs and vacant over grown plots, a major bank branches and Payday Loan operations. North Kenwood is a redeveloped and repopulated place that holds two kinds of residents – the old and the new. North Kenwood was a high poverty rate neighborhood, however, many middle- and upper class blacks

moved in for its central location since 1990 along with collisions between the old residents and the new residents. "Groveland and North Kenwood are both ghettos" (Pattillo, 2003). Pattillo illustrates reasons why they are ghettos: in despite of socio-economic heterogeneity they still "share a history of racial residential structuring in Chicago, and the concomitant stratification of politico-economic resources and power" and "they are component parts of a system of spatially-based racial segregation and subjugation that defines the ghetto and circumscribes the visions, interactions, and life possibilities of its residents" (Pattillo, 2003).

In conclusion, ghetto cannot be identified by poverty only, because ghetto is not formed of poverty but also other historical, social and endemic elements. If we term extreme poor areas ghettos, then shall we call some of the third world countries ghettos? Actually, most ghettos are forced to be impoverished and are forced to be ghettos for those historical and social reasons that will be put forward later.

3.2. Involuntary Segregation and Spatial Confinement

An obvious and common feature of ghetto could be found among the Venetian ghetto, Japanese Burakumin and African-American ghetto – involuntary segregation along with spatial confinement. Jews were forced to live in guarded places with high walls as boundaries; Brakumin had to live in Buraku, as well the segregated African-American. Involuntary segregation is a key constituent of ghetto especially from the social perspective. Gans (2008) defines "the ghetto is a place to which the subjects or victims of the involuntary segregation process are sent".

However, as Wacquant (2004) pointed out, "all ghettos are segregated but not all segregated areas are ghettos." The segregation and spatial confinement must be involuntary. For instance, the mushrooming "gated community" is also a segregated area in many megacities and developed areas, but it is built for the rich to get "security, seclusion, social homogeneity, amenities, and services" and escape from the "chaos, dirt, and danger of the city." (Caldeiria, 2000, pps. 265-265). An analysis of the societal othering process is the premise to understand involuntary segregation, this analysis contains three questions: 1) which minority or minorities are selected to be segregated; 2) what are the reasons for segregation; 3) who push them into a segregated situation (Gans, 2008). Apparently, Jews in medieval Europe were isolated by religious power since Jews were considered as moral corruption and carriers of disease; Tokugawa government segregated Burakumin for official stratification; and "the dark ghetto's invisible walls have erected by the white society, by those who have power" (Clark, 1965, p.11). These real examples indicate that involuntary segregation is a main driver of ghettos.

Nevertheless, the involuntary segregation is not so apparent in the civil world today, actions of confining people's activities within certain space are rude and go against the humanitarianism. Involuntary segregation has been changed into an indirect and invisible way, economic force plays a more important role in the field of involuntary segregation.

Economic segregation seems to be voluntary, but it leads to involuntary segregation to some extent. For instance, the white flight for the coming of mass African migrants resulted in involuntary segregation of African-Americans; the rich lives in “gated communities” for isolating from the poor leads to an more obvious spatial confinement between the rich and the poor, it also gives less choices for the poor to choose where to live. “Economic segregation is rarely seen as involuntary, because it is usually ascribed to the workings of seemingly impersonal economic forces.” (Gans, 2008).

The final characteristic of involuntary segregation is difficult assimilation. According to Wirth (1928), foreign migrants will integrate into the wider society after generations, so does the African-American from ghettos. However, ghettos are not enclaves. Members of ghettos are segregated involuntarily. Enclave is that people own same religious, ethnic or cultural backgrounds segregate themselves for sharing identical language, culture or custom, and they are not discriminated by the white (Gans, 2008). In addition, people from enclaves can assimilate into the white society without handicaps.

As a conclusion, involuntary segregation establishes spatial confinement and these limited spaces form a part of the ghettos. Furthermore, accesses to the abundant social and economic resources are limited by the isolation. People from ghettos also have less contact with mainstream societies. Ghettos will be worsened within this circle.

3.3. Racism, Stigma and Constraints

Besides poverty and involuntary segregation, racism, stigma and constraints are other formations of ghettos. As Wacquant (1997) stated, “The ghetto is a historically determinate, spatially-based concatenation of mechanisms of ethno-racial closure and control”. Jews from Venetian ghetto who belong to the same ethnic were stigmatized and confined by various rules, such as limitations of timing and clothes. Burakumin were “widely perceived as a different race and officially labeled outcasts by the Tokugawa government” (Slater, 2009) and were forced to wear special clothes and collars; Burakumin in current society have more difficulties for achieving job opportunities than commoners.

Racial prejudice can be thought as a key element during the process of ghettoization. Some races were or are stigmatized by the majorities and this discrimination leads to segregation, constraints and poverty. African-Americans are discriminated by the whites, and the black seems to be the only segregated racial minority in United States nowadays. According to Chicago School three-stage model of ethnic segregation and assimilation, ethnical groups could integrate into the mainstream society gradually after generations, however, African-Americans turn out this theory with a grain of salt. In 1930s, black-white segregation rate in Chicago was 76% (Taeuber & Taeuber, 1965, p. 54), it increased to 80% in 1980s (Massey & Denton, 1993) and remained in the 80% level in 2000s (Iceland et al. 2002). Unlike other foreign whites or foreigners who assimilated into American society gradually, African-American are isolated, constrained and discriminated

because of the racism.

Racism is also a cause of involuntary segregation. Wilson (1973) elaborated that competitive race relations ran in the modern society, some members of the subjugated group challenge the control of the dominating group, therefore, the dominant groups use physical segregation to rebuild or maintain their position. “Thus the amount of contact between the castes is minimized and the society is increasingly compartmentalized” (Wilson, 1973, p. 53). This situation is happening between the whites and the blacks in African-American ghettos.

Stigmatization and constraints follow with racial inequality. The blacks are confined in the field of housing, they usually have to pay more for housing and other services and goods than whites, not only for the poor blacks, but for all of the blacks, including middle-class or higher (Gans, 2008). As Massey and Denton (1993, p. 9) stated, “Middle class households – whether they are black, Mexican, Italian, Jewish, or Polish – always try to escape the poor. But only blacks must attempt their escape within a highly segregated, racially segmented housing market”. Residents of African-American ghettos have the worst schools (Massey, Condran & Denton, 1987) and poor position in labor market (Iceland, 1997); ghettos are crowded and have public facilities of lower quality and limited open spaces; an address from ghetto area is attached with a label of stigma and it is more difficult for residents who hold ghetto address to get a job (Gans, 2008).

Segregation occurs with racialization for different religions, features, behaviors and moral standards. Isolated ethnical groups are stigmatized, constrained and regarded as dangerous and deviants by residents outside the segregated areas, these emphasize that it is necessary to consider a ghetto with racism, stigma and constraints.

3.4. Institutional Encasement

Institutional encasement is a notable characteristic of the concept of ghetto. As a result of isolation, ghettos developed their own culture, religion and social institutions inside and formed a strong collective consciousness and solidarity. The Medieval Jewish ghettos “developed as an urban space isolated from the outside world” (Haynes, 2008). Jews were free within the ghetto areas, they could wear any clothes and jewelry inside and were allowed to practice their religion; a set of various organizations were coined in Jewish ghettos, for instance, business associations and markets, charities, aid organizations and religious places; in 18th century, the largest European ghetto even had its own city hall, this indicated a complete right of administration (Wacquant, 2004). African-Americans also had no choice but to be more self-sufficient and to build segregated institutions for themselves due to the walls of color line. For example, a “black city” has its own black clubs, black churches, black educational institutions and media, black political associations and so on (Wacquant, 2004).

This institutional differentiation in ghettos has nothing to do with extreme poverty or simplex culture shock, it is compelled by racial discrimination, constraints and spatial seclusion; it

is a socially oriented phenomenon. Wacquant (1997) mentioned that the ghettos are not disorganized but are organized for social limitations and racial isolation. Wacquant (1997) emphasized a blank part of understanding a ghetto – to consider the ghetto as an institutional form. According to Wacquant (Ibid)'s direct observation, reasons of organized ghettos could be concluded: constrained economic access and resources; poor local organizations and social insecurity; racial discrimination and class prejudice; stigmatization based on territorial identity; residents in ghettos have weak voice in the field of politics and bureaucratic indifference.

Emergence of institutions in ghettos aims at providing basic needs for dwellers, ghettos become parallel cities inside cities, constituents of ghetto mentioned above foster the foundation of institutional encasement, and conversely, institutional encasement impels the formation of the ghetto.

4. Conclusion

According to the words stated above, it is clear to believe that the concept of ghetto contains several constituents: concentrated poverty; involuntary segregation and spatial confinement; racism, stigma and constraints; institutional encasement. All of these characteristics have to be considered when we study the ghetto. As a most controversial element, concentrated poverty cannot represent the ghetto without other social or historical parts.

Racial discrimination creates involuntary ethnic isolation and many constraints; concentrated segregation limits the wider accesses and resources and the institutional encasement emerges; these negative elements lead to impoverishment. Finally, a ghetto is established.

In addition, to achieve an explicit concept of ghetto will be helpful both for scholars and policymakers. A clear concept could be a useful tool to study and analyze the ghetto; policymakers can design and carry out more effective strategies that are based on all the constituents of ghetto for saving ghetto residents from the miserable situation. Racism, involuntary segregation and other constraints should be noticed but not only focusing on solving concentrated poverty.

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