

Defining ghetto



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All of us on a regular basis employ various terms and notions that have complex histories and, correspondingly, quite complex meanings. To the list of such terms belongs the notion of ‘ ghetto’, which holds a prominent position in contemporary social and cultural discourse. Indeed, the very existence of ghetto-like formations in American cities and in other parts of the world draws attention of sociologists and politicians due to the large number of acute problems generated there.

One has just to recall the mass riots that took place in the French ghettos in 2005 to realize that these sociocultural formations are potentially prone for publicity, or to be more exact infamy (Ireland 2005). At the same time, on the cultural level ghetto is popularized in numerous forms of mass culture such as films and music (Tallahassee Community College 2006).

So, let us try to find out how this concept of ghetto that nowadays apparently has somewhat contradictory status tends to be formally defined, and in the process to analyze the validity of such definitions remembering that such a complex notion as ghetto can hardly be expected to have single and unambiguous connotation. In its strictly historical sense, ghetto can be defined as the part of a city in which Jews were prescribed to live. The first mentioning of ghetto relates to Italy of the early sixteenth century, but even earlier ghettos were actually present in some other parts of Europe (Wikipedia 2006).

With time, the notion of ghetto expanded to include any areas of cities where representatives of a particular ethnic, religious, or cultural group lived in a significant concentration either by compulsion or by choice (Project IDEELS 2006). By today, the term has underwent even further expansion of meaning

as it grew to include the whole layers of subcultures, which is manifested in equalization of for example some elements of gay culture with the notion of gay ghetto (Fiss 2003, pp. 92-101).

In this way, we can see that the meaning of the word ' ghetto' has been developing along with the changes through which our society has passed, and even has assumed the function of an adjective that describes qualities stereotypically associated with the impoverished life in most ghettos. Now, evaluating the validity of the mentioned standard dictionary definitions of ghetto it seems warranted to argue that while all of them reflect a certain objective meaning of this word, none of them can pretend to catch up with the evolution of the usage and application of this term, as by the way is the case with many other complex notions.

In particular, from the described expansion of the sphere of applicability of the word ' ghetto' from the initial spatial dimension of localization of social groups to the realm of cultural allegorical markers, it can be judged that perhaps this word is already or will soon be at the point when with its help people will express their attitudes to the whole cultural or ethnic groups, so that anyone can be characterized as belonging to a certain type of ghetto.

What reinforces this view is the fact that many researchers in social sciences feel this tendency of misuse of the original concept of ghetto, and strive to exchange the term for the original locations named in that way for neutral terms like ' inner city' or ' economically disadvantaged areas' (Winant 2002, pp. 152-154). Still, it may be too late to avoid the leakage of the pejorative meaning of the notion of ghetto into the language.

As we can see, the analysis of the traditional definitions and the real-life usage of the word 'ghetto' shows that there is a certain contradiction between its original specific meaning and the subsequent expansion of its application, which has also mostly been associated with racial, class, and cultural divisions in societies but in a much more vague and arbitrary way. Therefore, the overviewed definitions of the word 'ghetto' instead of being exhaustive descriptions serve as a kind of anchors with the help of which one may grasp the basic nature of this social and cultural phenomenon.