Pat Origenes

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English 131 D

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<p style="text-align:center">That's So Ghetto!</p>

Earlier this year, I was hanging around after one of my classes ended for the day. Few, if any, of us had regularly scheduled meetings afterwards and were often prone to aimlessness after the bell had rung, like so many bits of tapioca suspended in the room, waiting to be consumed by conversation or group impetus towards the door. My friend Lisa and I were eavesdropping on a conversation among some classmates when the oft-used phrase, "That's so ghetto!", was tossed out. Lisa, ever the champion of the oppressed, immediately objected. "That's inappropriate," she admonished. "You shouldn't use that word." I accepted observer status as the looks of confusion turned to understanding and then to protests. Our peers claimed that no racist line had been crossed; the word was not being used in relation to an ethnic group – it was only being used in reference to something of low quality. Later, I looked up the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online and was somewhat caught off-guard. I don't know exactly what I had been expecting, but I had never considered how old the word was or its origin. I fall into the same league as my fellow students; within the last few years, I have told people, "I used to live on the ghetto side of Greenlake." I'm pretty sure that the Greenlake demographic is mostly Caucasian and not particularly poor; I was only conveying a sense of poverty (that is, in relation to the other side of the lake). What is happening here? Why does it evoke such emotion from

some people while others say it without a second thought? A single word, yet many meanings and disparate reactions.

It turns out that the all-knowing OED is not even sure of the origins of "ghetto". It says, "Of uncertain etymology…" (I feel that, were it possible, it would cast its eyes down in shame at this admission of ignorance). Not to be deterred, it goes on to suggest that it is of Italian origin, possibly dating back as far as the early 1500's. The first definition given is, "The quarter in a city, chiefly in Italy, to which the Jews were restricted." I was a little surprised, initially, at the Italian origin and I don't recall ever having associated "ghetto" with Jews. It had seemed to be an American English term for an urban area where poor Blacks lived (kind of like "the projects"). I realized a few things upon reflection: I have studied Italian, so the origin made sense; although I don't consciously associate "ghetto" with Judaism, I can recall its use in media about both World Wars; at some point, I had stopped linking it to any ethnic group. The second OED definition is as follows:

"A quarter in a city, esp. a thickly populated slum area, inhabited by a minority group or groups, usu. as a result of economic or social pressures; an area, etc., occupied by an isolated group; an isolated or segregated group, community, or area."

This is certainly akin to my traditional interpretation, but is this how I would use it today? In a broader sense, has the word gone through a similar evolution within society?

I enlisted a range of individuals to assist me in my evaluation. I went back to Lisa, who is the youngest of the trio. She is a twenty-one year-old member of the Jackson School of International Studies and hails from California. Her anti-establishment point of view is strong enough that it would, in some circles, earn her an "anti-American" tag, but it also makes her keen

to social injustice. To her, "ghetto" is a term which describes a run-down, high-crime, ethnically segregated quarter of a city. Her objection to the word is when it is used in direct relation to "Black American", especially one of low class. In contrast to Lisa, there is my eighty-year old mother. She was raised a poverty-stricken Catholic in the Midwest. Later in life, she earned an associate's degree in social work and, with my father, spent a significant amount of time helping the underprivileged. As it turns out, most of the disadvantaged people were minorities. She has seen "ghetto" evolve from a term which primarily meant "Jewish area" to one which specifically describes an urban place where poor, Black Americans live. However, she almost exclusively thinks of "ghetto" in its original meaning. This is partially because it has always meant that to her, but it is also because she has a fascination with the Holocaust and is very well-read on the subject. In the middle, we have Michelle. She is a mid-thirties woman who grew up in a small Washington town, moved to Seattle, and completed a Master's program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Her reaction and opinion of "ghetto" was remarkably similar to my own. The main difference is that she admits to using it only on extremely rare occasions.

Non-traditional dictionaries are another way to get a sense of how words are used and how they reflect upon culture. The 1986 edition of the *New Dictionary of American Slang* does not contain an entry for "ghetto", while the 2005 version of *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* has three. The contrast here is not just one of the existence/non-existence of an entry in a slang dictionary. The *New Dictionary* does have a related entry: ghetto blaster (164). These large, portable (yet unwieldy) music players gained this moniker because young, urban, Black men stereotypically carried them perched on their shoulders, loudly playing "Black" music; this gives

"ghetto" an ethnic flavor. *Cassell's* makes no links to ethnicity; its three definitions of the slang are:

1. Second-rate, old-fashioned, inferior

2. Superior, first-rate

3. Tough, aggressive, confrontational (592).

It should be noted that the *New Dictionary* also supplies a variant: coon box. Understanding that "coon" is a denigrating label for Blacks, one can interpret "ghetto" as having a negative connotation in 1986.

Multimedia reports present contemporary usage of language. Consider two recent articles, published one year apart. In a 2005 *Lilith* magazine story about Jews in the city of Lodz during World War Two, "ghetto" is used extensively to refer to the segregated part of the city where the Jewish people were forced to live. In this application, "ghetto" retains is original meaning (although extreme poverty existed in Lodz, it is not directly related to the "ghetto" label). On the other side, a 2006 *Colorlines* column pointed out a City of Miami press release which promoted a "Ghetto Style Talent Show" along with a "Watermelon Eating Contest". It may not have made an explicit connection to Black culture, but I believe that it would be unreasonable to see them as unrelated. So, today, "ghetto" is not only used in the traditional sense, but also in an updated form.

"Ghetto", like every other word, is a work in progress. It's a five-hundred year-old word whose definition started as an "ethnically segregated quarter of a city (probably Jewish)". It eventually traveled an ocean to America and added "urban slum where Blacks live" and now includes, *inter alia,* both "high quality" and "low quality". However, even the last two meanings

are derived from the "urban slum" definition. This is apparent for the latter, but the former must be related to the term "ghetto fabulous", which the OED defines as:

"(A)n ostentatious or flamboyant lifestyle or manner of dress, associated with the hip-hop subculture and characterized as a marker of status in economically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods…"

So, we have:

- Ghetto = high-quality = hip-hop subculture = Black

- Ghetto = low-quality = Black

- Ghetto = urban slum = Black

- Ghetto = aggressive and confrontational = Black

- Ghetto blaster = coon blaster

"Ghetto", in relation to Black culture, arose out of the concept of an ethnically segregated population. While its original definition is not prejudicial, by the mid 1980's, it had absorbed racist overtones, and, even though that sense was purged from later dictionary definitions, the word is still employed with ignorant insensitivity. Lisa's right: "ghetto", outside of its "segregated quarter definition", means "low-class Black" and is racist. That being said, one might argue that bigoted speech is, primarily, based upon intent. For example, I don't believe that, when the term "vandalism" is used, it is a criticism of Eastern Europeans (referring to the origin of the word as relating to a fifth-century East German tribe). However, we live in a society which continues to struggle with issues of equality and it is a mistake to dismiss the power of language to influence our behavior.   I and many people I know bandy "ghetto" about innocuously, wrapped in the belief that, because we have consciously overcome our personal

prejudices, we are insulated from bias. By continuing to use it in this manner, we propagate the idea that "Blackness" is inferior and not "one of us".

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