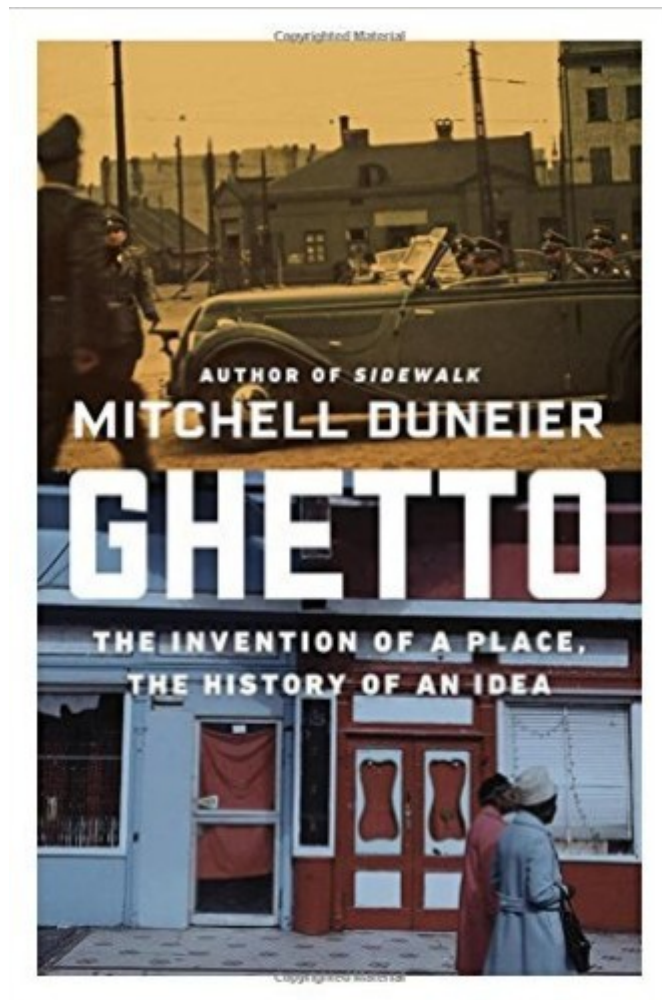


Neighborhoods real and imagined

by [Heath W. Carter](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue

## In Review



## Ghetto

By Mitchell Duneier  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

She could not quite complete the sentence. “I wonder if you can explain how it is that some black people dress and talk just like I do while others . . .” Her voice trailed off. It was the regular meeting of a women’s community group, and we were

sitting knee-to-knee in one member's living room: some 25 white women, most in their sixties and seventies, and me, the white male professor and guest speaker for the day. I had been invited to talk about race and civil rights. Once I concluded my initial remarks we moved into a question-and-answer period and now here we were, awaiting an end to this seemingly interminable silence.

Finally, another voice piped up, "Well, then there's the ghetto blacks." Murmurs of agreement greeted her words almost immediately. Clearly others had been thinking the same thing but had been afraid to say it.

And for good reason: *ghetto* is a word that exists today on the margins of polite conversation. Most of the women in the room understood this, but as their murmurs underscored, the avoidance of the word has done little to sap the force of the idea.

The ghetto still looms large in the imagination of white Americans. For many conservatives, it is a place overrun with "deadbeat dads," "welfare queens," and "black-on-black crime"—a vision that explains and justifies the persistence of racial inequality in terms of individual moral failings. If only "those people" would get their act together. But progressives, too, are mindful of the ghetto. Fears of it underlie "common sense" about where one does and does not stop for gas or a bite to eat. They lurk moreover in casual conversations—just as ubiquitous among those on the political left as the right—about which neighborhoods are "safe" and have "good" schools to which you might want to send your children.

Ideas about the ghetto matter. They have long mattered. These are the inescapable conclusions of Princeton sociologist Mitchell Duneier's new book. Duneier does not shy away from using the word. In fact, he argues that it remains a useful social scientific concept when deployed responsibly, with a sensitivity to its history.

Duneier recounts that history, following the origins back to medieval Europe, where Jews were sometimes forced to reside in quarters of their own. Hitler claimed to be reviving this older arrangement, but as Duneier makes clear, the rigidly enforced, murderous Nazi ghettos bore little resemblance to those of 16th-century Venice. He moves quickly on from this Jewish prehistory but underscores a key point: the term *ghetto* has been used to describe highly variable human environments.

This has certainly been true in the case of African Americans, the main focus of Duneier's account. There was suffering, to be sure, in mid-20th-century Chicago's Black Belt—but there was also "semi-flourishing," as he terms it: thriving small

businesses and cultural institutions, not to mention relative autonomy from the forces of law and order. Contrast that with the situation of Chicago's Englewood neighborhood today, where a toxic blend of blight, crime, and intrusive state control have produced a far more dystopian outcome.

Duneier narrates the sobering story of the black ghetto by retracing the steps of pathbreaking social scientists. The chapters are organized around key figures and moments in time: "Chicago, 1944: Horace Cayton," "Harlem, 1965: Kenneth Clark," and so on. Along the way he introduces a number of other key figures in the ghetto's intellectual history, including Gunnar Myrdal, author of the important 1944 study *An American Dilemma*, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who in 1965 published a controversial report titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."

Duneier takes readers on a journey full of surprising insights. He convincingly argues that the Swedish Myrdal's rebuff of Cayton, a black sociologist who wanted to be paid if he was going to contribute data to what would become *An American Dilemma*, undermined the integrity of the study, which ended up neglecting the vast experiences of southern migrants to northern cities and thus overestimating the scrupulousness of white Americans.

The chapter on William Julius Wilson is another analytical gem. Duneier shows that Wilson—most famous for his provocatively named 1978 book *The Declining Significance of Race*—did not actually believe that social class was sufficient to explain enduring racial inequality. Rather, by emphasizing class he hoped to advance a "hidden agenda" of getting whites to sign on to colorblind social welfare policies, which would nevertheless, given the significant overlap of race and class, disproportionately help African Americans. It didn't work out as Wilson had hoped. By the time Geoffrey Canada was founding the Harlem Children's Zone in the early 20th century, the social safety net was much smaller—and it would be cut most dramatically by a Democratic president, Bill Clinton.

Duneier's story dovetails with many recent histories of modern conservatism. The very same season in which the civil rights movement was extracting federal commitments to racial justice was the one in which a potent political movement coalesced at the grassroots in opposition to federal largesse. Widespread investment in the illusion of a colorblind, meritocratic United States preempted more serious grappling with the history and present-day legacies of systemic racism.

White Americans preferred not to confront the nation's original sin but instead to push it under the rug. The consequences remain manifest: in an election cycle permeated by racist nationalisms, and in living rooms where poor African Americans are essentialized as "ghetto," even by those afraid to say the word.

As for the ghetto itself, it is able to persist, Duneier concludes, thanks to the "ability of the American people to compartmentalize, to live with moral dissonance."