



The Age of Cultural Ghettos

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Editorial

In the nineties of the twentieth century, the Internet created a revolutionary means of instantaneous communication between all people regardless of their hobbies, interests, and geographical locations, making it possible for religious and culturally conservative individuals and groups to develop cultural ghettos in which to live despite being scattered all over the globe. Although members of cultural ghettos rarely know each other, they know well the ideas, rumors and fantasies produced by the ghetto to which they belong, and the ideas and conspiratorial theories it promotes. Nevertheless, whatever they promote is often far from the predominant reality in the societies in which they live and to which they belong. However, these arrangements enable the inhabitants of ghettos to exchange information, spread rumors and perpetuate a different, often outdated culture, that takes its positions based on a narrow view of the world. Consequently, leaders of cultural ghettos find themselves moving away from rationality while imposing their ideas and ways of thinking on their followers. This paper is an attempt to explain how and why cultural ghettos were created, what role they play in our lives, and their impact on humanity.

In 1996, I observed something unusual about the behavior and ingenuity of most minorities in America; man's ability to function and succeed and enjoy life despite all adversities. This observation provoked my curiosity and impelled me to find out what stands behind this unusual behavior and accomplishments. And to avoid generalizations, I decided to look at other places in the world. To my surprise, I observed the same minority behavior and ingenuity in Germany and Britain. Arabs, Chinese, Indians, and Koreans are the most successful minorities that proved their ability to succeed despite all adversities that include discrimination by most white Americans and Europeans.

The majority of immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America to Western countries, especially the culturally and religiously conservatives' individuals and families, often lag educationally and scientifically behind the societies in which they live in the West, as well as the societies from which they migrated. In addition, as Third World societies develop economically and culturally slowly, expatriates in the diaspora live in closed sociocultural environments, isolated from the world that surrounds them, recycling outdated values and attitudes. And though most of those people lack adequate knowledge of the cultures, laws, and languages of the lands in which they live and function, they manage to succeed materially and climb the social ladder to the ranks of the middle class, and sometimes to the wealthy class without having to suffer much. This is due to three major factors:

1. The arrival of satellite channels in Europe and America and other countries of the diaspora has enabled the vast majority of expatriates to stay in constant contact with their homelands, relatives and friends abroad. Most of them spend hours a day sitting in front of televisions watching the same programs and series watched by their relatives and friends in the old homeland and subjected to the same propaganda meant to falsify their consciousness. They also use Skype and WhatsApp to call their relatives for free and exchange views with them about what they have seen from the series they watched and the rumors they have heard.
2. The ability to create largely closed and isolated sociocultural environments to live in and interact with whom they wish to contact in the world.
3. Since this makes them feel that they actually live in their homelands but work in the diaspora, they feel obligated to take advantage of being in the diaspora to get as much money as they can, even if this requires using immoral and illegitimate means.

I invented the cultural ghetto concept about 25 years ago to explain this strange phenomenon that crystallized after the advent of the Internet. The ghettos in which Jews, Roma and other minorities lived against their will due to racial discrimination in Europe centuries ago, and where the downtrodden of the world's poor live today against their will in America and other countries are acts of savagery. These poor people are being isolated in miserable places unfit for human

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living. Though the poverty-stricken ghetto of the past was a place, the cultural ghetto of today is not a geographical place but an open space in which its members live mentally and ideologically of their own free will regardless of their whereabouts and living conditions. And this enables them to exchange information and fabricated rumors that are often based on irrational ideas and ways of thinking. And while these ideas and rumors contribute to falsifying their consciousness and isolating them from their surroundings, they reinforce their irrational behavior and outlandish convictions and beliefs.

Being strangers living in isolated spaces and subjected to racial discrimination, justifies to them taking negative and sometimes hostile attitudes towards the other, and towards their compatriots who disagree with them. After the rise of religious extremism as a cultural current, cultural ghettos began to spread throughout the globe, pushing those belonging to them to challenge the societies in which they live, and carry out actions that are alien to the customs and traditions of those countries. Religiously conservative men began to wear strange costumes in the streets and commercial centers of large cities, raise long beards, and cover women's faces with burqas. These are actions that work to perpetuate their isolation and backwardness in cultural terms and deepen the hostile reactions to them wherever they live. As a result, they develop a sense of victimhood in a cruel world that hates them and wishes to get rid of them, which pushes them to more extremism and intolerance that causes them to reject any thought contrary to what they believe in.

Most people tend to cling to their traditional cultures and carry their customs and values and attitudes with them wherever they may go, regardless of where they live and the conditions of the cultural ghettos in which they live. Today, Arabs, Buddhists, Chinese, Christians, Indians, Jews, Muslims, Vietnamese, and others live in cultural ghettos in every western country. This has made the old feelings of suspicion, envy and jealousy that prevail in their countries of origin to shape their attitudes in the diaspora and direct their behavior towards each other and the other people. As a result, their ability to carry out collective action related to the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres is vastly restricted, which causes them oftentimes to waste time and money needlessly.

For example, Mr. Larry Koehler invited me to his wedding to a Jewish girl of Syrian origin. Larry is an American Jewish journalist who advocates peace and coexistence of Palestinians and Jews in Palestine. The wedding took place in a small seaside town in New Jersey, near New York. When I entered with my daughter the ballroom, we discovered that there were two halls, one for Jews of Syrian origin, that is, for the bride's family and their friends, and the other for Jews of Eastern European descent, that is, for the groom and his family and their friends, and that there was no mixing between the two groups. So, two rabbis completed the marriage formalities in two separate ceremonies, one in the style of Eastern European Jews, and the other in the style of Syrian Jews. However, the Syrian Jews did not participate in the ceremony of the European Jews, and the European

Jews did not attend the ceremony of the Syrian Jews. And when the music and songs and dancing began, the music on the European side was American and Eastern European, while the music and songs and dance on the Syrian side were entirely Arabic, and so was the food and the language, even the band was led by a young Palestinian American.

When the Syrian Jews discovered that we were Palestinians, they did not let us go to the other side, as they monopolized me and my daughter to talk about their memories in Syria and their nostalgia for a homeland from which they had been uprooted by Zionism and longed for. One of the things they told us that night was that they all worked in the cloth and clothing trade which they import from abroad, and that their homes and workplaces were in New York City, but they bought apartments close to each other in the coastal town where the wedding was held. And in order to maintain their unity, strengthen ties among themselves, and raise their sons and daughters on the values and traditions of the Arabic culture on which they grew up, they decided to spend a month each year in that town on the beach, living as one family, reminiscing about the past, and moving away from New York's gloomy atmosphere and harsh life.

But can the second and third generations of those Jewish people repeat this way of life and live in a luxurious Jewish ghetto? Although this is possible, I do not believe it is probable; the future generations are less likely to adhere to this tradition because to adhere to it means to isolate themselves from the society that they seek through education and work to integrate with. This is what the second generation of the Arab immigrants I know have done in America.

Today, the smartphone is creating not less than a million cultural ghetto daily and holds at least a billion individuals' prisoners inside the ghettos it has so far created. And while smartphones sidetrack the loyalties of those prisoners to human causes, they confuse their minds, isolate them from most other human beings, and often influence their attitudes, tendencies and decisions negatively. But as minds get confused, loyalties continue to disperse, and the isolation processes continue unabated, the ability of all peoples to organize themselves around shared interests declines substantially. And with the decline of peoples' ability to organize themselves around shared causes, their capacity to act with passion to change their lot in life dissipates in thin air.

This means that we are progressively getting weaker to organize ourselves, define our goals in clear terms, and revolt against what we perceive as injustice that undermines our chances of living dignified lives in our homelands. In the meantime, the ghettoization of most people gives the rich and powerful men, women and corporations the opportunity to act according to their whims and desires to serve their interests without fearing revolt by the people they exploit and subjugate. This is certain to cause poverty and corruption to prevail and increase in most countries, and thus weaken the chances of change that would free the smartphones prisoners from poverty and repression and restore their sanity and sense of humanity.