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Welcome to the Ghetto

A news story from Reuters published today contains some rather sobering information. At the present time, the unemployment rate for men stands at 7.9% and for women it is 6.4%. For both sexes, moreover, unemployment up to this point in the recession has been overwhelmingly a working class phenomenon. The economic distress of working class men is therefore especially intense, even compared with their working class wives and sisters.

The rates of unemployment are following a pattern that is quite typical of a recession, but the shift toward unemployment and underemployment of men is a trend that actually shows clearly in all years. It is of course in recessions that it becomes alarming. Before the depression of 1980-82, men had both a much higher participation in the labor force and a lower rate of unemployment. Taking annual averages, there has never been a year in which the rate of unemployment of men was as much as 1% higher than that of women. In the 1991 recession, the gap reached 0.9%, and that has been the previous worst. In the 2003 recession, the unemployment rate of men was 0.6% higher than that of women. Behind these numbers lies the actual employment numbers, and it is there that the trend is clearest. In 1973, the earliest year for which we have data and a recession year, men accounted for 60% of the employed: the number of employed men was 50% higher than the number of employed women. Today the numbers are about equal.

Let me not beat around the bush here. This is how you build the ghetto. What is the ghetto? It is a society in which men have been relegated to the shadows. They cannot find work and have therefore no reason to acquire education, and so they live on the charity of working women, who they prey on for the most part. The women have all the money – in part because the state pays them, but mostly because they work – and they run everything. It seems to have escaped the attention of many persons who presume to speak for or speak to the public, but the reality is that the women like running everything. Since everyone seems to have adapted their expectations to come to grips with very low income and poor prospects for change or advancement, the ghetto society has found a frightening equilibrium, and it can survive indefinitely. How long actual ghettos survive I cannot say, but they do not disappear because of internal forces or inconsistencies.

Is there any reason why the citizens of a ghetto would all have to be from any one race or nationality? I don't see why. Historically, in twentieth century America, it was black people in the North who faced the conditions that lead to a ghetto: high unemployment of men. But people are people. Between 1850 and 1900 the ghetto in America was associated with urban Irish neighborhoods, and with alcohol. From 1900 to 1940 many different nationalities got a chance to experiment with ghetto life. This kind of terminal subculture, moreover, is rather common around the world. In the recent hit movie Gran Torino, the young Asian heroine explains to old Walt Kowalski that in the 'hood the girls go to college and the boys go to jail. The ghetto is open to everyone; no one will be excluded because of race, nationality, or country of origin.

There is no way to attack the causes of the ghetto except by helping the boys and men to grow up to their potential, and to grow into the roles that a healthy society needs them to perform. Discarding the men is not helping the women. The women, as a group, need those men. They need the men to do what only men can do. Without the men, both men and women will fail; the whole community will fail.

Historically, in America, the institution that has done by far the most to get people out of ghettos has been the Catholic Church. This is in part because most of the urban poor were from Catholic countries, so they naturally collected around the Church. The fact remains that the tool that has done the most to help those poor has been the moral example of the Church, supplemented by practical supports like the Catholic schools. The Church will apply herself to these needs as much as possible, because there is no excuse not to do so. The Church can never be exempted from the duty to serve the poor. In performing her duties however, the Church will raise more anger and resentment than gratitude, because those who have a lot and live well would often rather ignore the condition of the poor – or even add further hardships and indifference to it – than to see some hated rival earn approval for helping them. Be that as it may, there is only one way out of the ghetto, and one institution that is irrevocably committed to showing the way to those in need.

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