

# Pathologizing Place and Race

## The Rhetoric of Slum Clearance and Urban Renewal, 1930-1965

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### Introduction

“When slum clearance enters an area,” Harrison Salisbury wrote in 1954, “it does not merely destroy slatternly houses. It uproots the people. It tears out the churches. It destroys the local business man. It sends the neighborhood lawyer to new offices downtown. It mangles the skein of community friendships and group relationships beyond repair.” As measured by lives disrupted and communities destroyed in American cities during the period from 1930 to 1965, urban renewal and slum clearance projects affected low-income urban populations much like war. Like wars, these projects were governed by rules of engagement that defined the enemy, codified the reasons for combat and specified the goals to be attained.

In the policy realm, the rules of engagement have different names. Defining the enemy is translated to “the negative social construction of target populations” (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). On one hand, media and public discourse can picture those who experience difficulties in positive terms. On the other hand, these populations can be defined in negative terms, legitimating punitive policies. Welfare recipients and individuals with HIV exemplify populations that have been construed in negative terms (Schram, 1998, 2005; Sontag, 1978/2001; Ingram and Schnieder, 1988, 2005).

Reasons for combat similarly translate into causal stories that explain how problematic situations came to exist and define the range of appropriate remedies (Stone, 1989). These stories have all the elements of narrative: villains who create the difficulty; the victims whom it threatens; and heroes, the policy prescriptions intended to save the victims.

Causal stories establish warrants for political action, legitimating particular policy solutions (Hillgartener

and Bosk, 1988; Best, 2001). Grave threats demand the policy equivalent of “shock and awe.” The threats justify the swift use of overwhelming force. In social policy narratives, these threats are often framed as metaphors that connect social problems to familiar, visceral concepts, such as disease. Without intervention these social problems will spread beyond the initial sick population to engulf healthy sectors of society. Populations afflicted by social problems are portrayed as vectors of pathology that have the potential for spreading their difficulties to others. Metaphorically, the areas in which they are concentrated become pockets of infection (Meyer and Schwartz, 2000).

This paper is based on an analysis of national newspaper coverage of “slum clearance” and “urban renewal” during the period from 1930-1965.<sup>1</sup> It argues that rhetoric in popular media connected “slums”/“ghettos”<sup>2</sup> to pathology, and that this connection helped to legitimate urban renewal and slum clearance policies. The destruction of existing communities was warranted by the need to prevent this pathology from spreading. The rhetoric of pathology changed over time. Early on, arguments about physical disease were invoked along with those about social disease. These areas were connected to illnesses, such as tuberculosis, typhus, and venereal disease. Connections between slum housing and social difficulties, such as crime, were presented in the context of this medical model. The connection was rooted in the poor physical conditions of slum life. Rhetoric focused on the physical pathology of slums or on physical conditions, such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, and poorly maintained buildings. These physical conditions, in turn, produced both physical diseases, such as tuberculosis and social problems, like crime. (Sidney, 2005)

<sup>1</sup> I accessed these newspapers using the ProQuest historical newspapers collection. I examined The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times. For comparison, I also examined accounts in two historically black newspapers, The Chicago Defender and the Amsterdam News. I used search terms that included various combinations of the words “riots”, “Negroes”, “urban renewal”, “poverty”, “slums”, and “slum clearance.”

<sup>2</sup> The term “ghetto” began to appear in the 1960s. As I argue, the transition from “slum” to “ghetto” in policy discourse marked the point at which problems of low-income urban areas began to be almost entirely racialized so that the “target population” became almost exclusively black and, to a lesser degree, Hispanic.

The rhetoric began to change in the 1950s, and this change became more apparent with the urban riots of the 1960s. The notion of physical disease survived mainly as metaphor, and the “slum” problem was redefined so that the inhabitants of slums, rather than the conditions of the housing stock, were identified as the difficulty. Slums became any geographic area inhabited by “carriers” of social disease such as criminals, promiscuous women, alcoholics, and addicts. The physical condition of the buildings or neighborhoods was incidental. Urban renewal was justified by the need to disperse problem populations.

These problem populations were increasingly defined along racial lines. The term “slum” gave way to that of “ghetto,” and slum-born pathologies were increasingly connected to race and to the attributes and behaviors of individual residents. A 1961 account of a dilapidated neighborhood on West 84th Street in New York City, where a street brawl had involved more than 400 blacks and Puerto Ricans, illustrates this new rhetoric: “This is, clearly, more than a slum. A slum is good people in bad houses. But this, as one man put it yesterday, is ‘a ghetto of sociopaths’” (Phillips, 1961).

This paper examines changes in the rhetorical structure of urban renewal. The first section focuses on the development of rhetoric that pathologized “place”. Slums were problematic because degraded housing and neighborhood congestion facilitated the spread of physical and social disease. During the period from 1935 to 1965, however, a rhetorical shift occurred. Media accounts increasingly portrayed slums as cancers. Slums had become an invasive, possibly terminal, disease. The actual condition of the housing stock, the density of neighborhoods, and the prevalence of physical disease became less relevant. Once an area was publically identified as a slum, it was construed to be a cancerous lesion, and slum clearance could be justified as a surgical intervention needed to save the host.

The second section examines the parallel development of popular rhetoric that pathologized race and reconstructed slums as “ghettoes” that were defined not by the condition of the housing stock, but by the geographic concentration of blacks. Ghetto populations were construed to be dangerous because they constituted a reservoir of social pathology that could be ignited into explosive violence. These two sets of changes reinforced one another. Slums were increasingly described as “cancers” as they also became increasingly defined as areas that contained concentrated populations of blacks.

## The Pathology of Place

On March 29, 1930, Governor Franklin Roosevelt defended his proposed “slum clearance” program at a luncheon of the New York Board of Trade. “Hundreds of thousands of men and women,” Roosevelt said, “are

still living in vile and unhealthy surroundings contribution to another unresolved condition – crime. During my lifetime, the proportion of people living in ancient and vile surroundings has been constantly decreasing. We have made progress, yet we are still far from removing what physicians would call ‘points of infection’ in our midst” (“Governor Asks City”, 1930).

The phrase “ancient and vile places” is a synecdoche that incorporates social understandings about slums during this period. Slums were urban areas with specific physical characteristics- old, badly maintained housing; high population density; poor sanitary arrangements. These characteristics, in turn, produced problems with the physical and moral health of inhabitants. Slums were therefore likely to spread both physical disease and social disease. A 1930 article headlined “Bad Slums That Remain A Reproach to New York” summed up this line of reasoning: “It is to the slum that the criminologist traces the bulk of crime. To the slum the social worker looks for delinquency; health agencies for much rickets, cardiac trouble, and pernicious anemia; and to schools in the slums for great mental deficiency” (McMullen, 1930).

Discussions of slums and slum clearance during this period emphasized their physical characteristics. For instance, a story about individuals displaced to make way for New York City’s Stuyvesant Town project in 1945 begins, “From dark rooms and apartments without sanitary facilities and from back houses that stand amid clotheslines and unkempt yards, families which have been in the same house or the same block for as much as half a century are being uprooted daily” (Cooper, 1945). The destruction of existing communities was justified by the poor physical condition of slum housing.

Degraded housing and congested neighborhoods facilitated the development of physical illness. Writing in 1950, R. Van Dellen, a health columnist told readers of the Chicago Daily Tribune that “Everyone is in favor of slum clearance not only for esthetic reasons but because it is more healthful...When too many individuals are huddled into a small space, filth and dirt generally prevail.” Filth, he continues, produces additional problems including infant diarrhea and infestations of vermin that could lead to typhus. He also argues that congested slums produce foul odors and noise, further undermining the inhabitants’ health.

The physical condition of slum housing also produced social diseases. Pathological slum environments were transformative: they transformed “people” into “problems.” In his 1935 testimony on the Wagner Bill<sup>3</sup>, Baltimore Rabbi Edward L. Israel argued that the development of a permanent federal agency to assist with slum clearance was needed to “dry up the nation’s cesspools of crime.” This thinking connected crime to the physical conditions rather than the inherent moral failings of

inhabitants. “He declared,” the New York Times reported, “that crime led to an erroneous conclusion that it was the foreign element that was responsible for the crime. But when the foreign element moved away and ‘other races’ moved in, the section still remained a ‘cesspool of crime’, showing, he said, that it was a matter of environment” (“Slum Dwellers Plead to Senators,” 1935). Individual misbehavior was connected to environmental degradation.

Slum clearance therefore became an investment in crime control. In 1945, a New York Times article titled “Goldstein Warns of Gangster Rule” reported the remarks of one mayoral candidate: “I’m happy to see these slums go...The more we invest in slum clearance, the less we spend on reformatories and penitentiaries.” The logic was straightforward; the poor physical conditions that produced disease also created poor social conditions, and these led to higher rates of crime and other social problems.

Changing use of metaphors in this rhetoric revealed a shift in this causal link. The specific connections between physical conditions and slum-borne illness were deemphasized, and slums were increasingly compared to cancers. Susan Sontag noted that “tuberculosis and the alleged or real threat of it in the slum-cleaning and the ‘model tenement’ movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.” “The feeling” she continues, “was that slum housing ‘bred’ tuberculosis. The shift from tuberculosis to cancer in planning and housing rhetoric had taken place by the 1950s. Blight, a synonym for slum, is seen as a cancer that spreads insidiously...the use of the term ‘invasion’ to describe when the non-white and poor move into a middle class neighborhood is as much a metaphor borrowed from cancer as from the military” (1978/2001, p.74). As Sontag’s comment indicates, the metaphoric transition marked a focus on specific groups, rather than specific physical surroundings, like the “slum problem.”

The cancer metaphor had distinctive implications. It removed attention from the specific environmental conditions that threatened physical and social health. Regardless of the condition of its housing or the congestion of its streets, any area defined as a slum was a potentially fatal lesion on the metropolis. This metaphor constructed a syllogism that linked the relationship between slums and their surroundings to that between cancer and its host.

An examination of news coverage of slum issues during the period from 1935 to 1965 makes two points. First, the metaphorical connection between cancer and slums was pervasive. Secondly, this usage increased over time, building to a peak in the 1950s.

Figure One demonstrates these patterns.

**Figure One**  
**Articles Associating Cancer and Slums**

	NY Times	Chicago Tribune	Washington Post
1930-9	7		7
1940-9	9		8
1950-9	28	10	9
1960-9	12	2	2

Specific examples provide insight into the patterns shown in Figure One. In 1935, an announcement of New York’s Ten Eyck clearance project indicated that it would “spearhead a drive to wipe out the worst slum cancer spots in the city” (“Housing Job”, 1935). The theme also appears in a 1950 article that quoted the chairman of the Chicago Planning Commission: “Unless other studies uncover more slums of a more cancerous character, those along the railroad track should have first priority” (Sturdy, 1950). Another contemporary account described slums as “the no man’s land which rings the business district and forms a cancer that is slowly but surely eating away at the vitals of centralized business” (Bloom, 2004: 319). The dramatic images invoked by this metaphor had two effects. First, they emphasized the geographic location of slum areas rather than their physical deficiencies. Secondly, the images made it possible to label areas as slums without considering the physical characteristics of buildings or neighborhoods.

Metaphors also invoked symptoms of cancer. In 1954, for instance, Albert M. Cole, head of the Federal Housing Administration, denounced one problematic Chicago housing project as “a nauseating running sore on our civic life” (“US Chief Wars on Race Bias”, 1954). Like cancer, slum blight would metastasize, producing terminal decay in the host. In the same year, a Chicago Daily Tribune article headlined “Cities Are Rotting Away at the Core” quoted Illinois Senator Paul Douglas’s comment that “Our cities are rotting away at the core and our residential neighborhoods are falling into disrepair” (“Slum Rot Hits Cities at Core”, 1954).

The danger that slums would metastasize warranted radical action that, like surgery, involved the painful destruction of some areas in order to preserve the body as a whole. A 1942 letter to the editor of The Washington Post justified the disruptive process in these terms: “It seems to me that any criticism of the process of demolition before reclamation is unfair. Slum reclamation is a major operation. Before a return to health can begin, the diseased part must be removed. There are hardships inflicted, but when the cancer is gone, the resulting cure is worth all the pain the operation caused” (Flagg, 1942).

<sup>3</sup> The Wagner Bill sought to create a federal department of housing within the Department of the Interior.

The slum clearance literature referenced other medical modalities. An influential 1955 plan for slum clearance in Washington, D.C for instance, took a triage approach. “No Slums in Ten Years” suggested that some areas would require “complete clearance,” others could benefit from “spot surgery”, while “large-scale rehabilitation” would be needed in others (Bloom, 2004: 79).

The increased frequency of the “cancer” metaphor as a warrant for invasive slum clearance measures kept pace with another shift in the rhetoric of slum clearance. As the urgency of the disease metaphor increased, the characteristics of race rather than those of place became more salient. The term “ghetto” replaced that of “slum,” and the racial characteristics of residents eventually eclipsed the physical characteristics of their neighborhoods as the defining characteristic of “pathological” areas. This nominal transition had substantive force. As the slum problem was redefined as the ghetto problem, urban renewal came to be justified as a program that would break up concentrations of urban blacks in order to reduce their potential for explosive violence.

## The Pathology of Race

In 1965, Hubert Humphrey spoke to the National Conference on Civil Rights. His widely-reported speech, intended to raise national consciousness about racial inequality, also demonstrated the changed public understanding of slums and their pathology:

“Slumism is poverty, illiteracy, disease..discrimination and frustration and bitterness..ungathered garbage and unheated buildings...a family of eight in an unheated room..danger in the air and violence in the street..rent so high a desperate man is moved to tears, or to crime...decay of structure and deterioration of the human spirit.”

“The danger,” he noted, “ is that these ghetto slums are rapidly becoming not just part of the nation’s major cities but the nation’s major cities themselves.”

Humphrey was a noted supporter of legislation to address racial and social inequities, and his use of these themes demonstrates that the transition from “slum” to “ghetto” had become so pervasive that it was even incorporated into “progressive” tropes, like slum clearance and urban renewal.



Detroit, Michigan Photo: Ryan Michael

As slums were increasingly defined in terms of race rather than place, the term “ghetto” became more common. Etymological history demonstrates the distinction between the word “slum” and the word “ghetto.” The former referred to place – originally, a back room or back alley, probably from the Irish phrase “S lome Slum”, meaning a “vulnerable place.” The term ghetto, by contrast, was from the Venetian dialect ghetto, an island to which Jews were relegated. It therefore referred to a place that segregated problematic groups, such as populations of color.

By the 1950s, discussions of “slum clearance” and “urban renewal” policies had become de facto discussions about the dangers posed by large urban concentrations of black Americans. These concentrations were metaphoric “cancers” that would destroy their urban “hosts” if not surgically removed. This redefinition occurred within a particular historical context. During the period from 1930 to 1965, issues of racial disparity in housing, education, political participation and employment were brought to the foreground by the return of black soldiers from World War II, by the civil rights movement, and by the urban riots of the 1960s.

As Figure Two demonstrates, the rhetorical association between slums and ghettos and blacks increased slowly until the 1940s, and more quickly thereafter. The process of racialization became more intense during the 1950s. Robert C. Weaver of the John Hay Whitney foundation commented at the beginning of the decade, “as we look at what is being done in Chicago and Detroit, we see that what is supposed to be slum clearance is becoming Negro clearance” (“Inequalities Causing Race Bias, 1950). By the early 1960s, race had pervaded discussions of urban renewal/slum clearance, and intervention was rationalized by the need to prevent further explosions of urban violence.

**Figure Two**  
**Stories Associating “Negroes” and “Slums”<sup>4</sup>**

	NY Times	Chicago Tribune	Washington Post
1930-9	75	5	27
1940-9	134	45	123
1950-9	267	125	109
1960-5	468	110	185

<sup>4</sup> Because Proquest identified such a large number of stories using both the word “Negro” and the word “slum” I was not able to read each of the stories. I did, however, eliminate classes of articles that seemed likely to contain associations that did not relate to my hypothesis. I eliminated advertising, stories about situations in other nations, obituaries, book reviews, and reports of cultural events such as art shows.

The process of racialization can be traced through two phases of discourse. In the first phase, slums that housed large numbers of blacks were described in generic terms- that is, they were viewed as overcrowded areas characterized by dilapidated buildings and poor sanitary arrangements. Both place and race were problems. In the second phase, slums were redefined as ghettos, and concentrations of blacks rather than concentrations of dilapidated buildings were identified as the principal problem.

A 1930 article written in the aftermath of a Harlem riot demonstrates the first phase of racialization. “Within this territory lives an economically, socially and politically diverse group, united only by race. Harlem is American the way New York is American, a melting pot made up to Spaniards, Puerto Ricans, South Americans, West Indians, Mexicans, Africans and Abyssinians.” The author further argues that slum problems, such as ‘bunching’ [overcrowding] and poor housing, occur because the supply of housing for Negroes in this area is limited, leading to higher rents, and because Negroes are let go first in economic downturns (Feld, 1935). Notably absent from accounts of this sort, however, are concerns about “spreading” violence that might engulf larger segments of the city.

By the 1940s, however, a second rhetorical phase had emerged. Slums were increasingly viewed in terms of their potential for spreading racial violence. The physical condition of slum housing was only part of the problem. A 1943 editorial in *The Chicago Tribune*, for example, criticized the argument that the recent Detroit race riots were simply a function of poor housing conditions:

“...to ascribe race riots to bad housing is quite a flight of logic. Is it supposed that the Negroes of Detroit found their slum quarters so undesirable that they sallied out to attack the white people? Or that the whites of the city were so outraged by the Negro slums...that they invaded them and attacked the Negroes?” (“Housing and Race Riots”, 1943).

The supposed pathology of black and Hispanic slum dwellers was central to this developing construction. Urban blacks and Hispanics were increasingly distinguished from previous minority groups that had passed through the slums on their way to better lives. A 1959 *New York Times* article titled “60% Rise in Puerto Ricans and Negroes Is Seen Here” reported an analysis put forward by Harvard historian Oscar Handlin. Handlin noted that

“other big waves of migration also gave rise to the type of lawlessness and social disorder in which the newcomers [that is, blacks and Puerto Ricans] figured prominently. But he reported, too, that drug addiction and sexual disorders and irregularities among the Negro and Puerto Rican newcomers run high. And he records, too, that these newcomers seem more susceptible to physical and mental illnesses” (Knowles, 1959).

Characterizations of racial pathology suggested that concentrations of urban blacks created neighborhoods defined by particular patterns of “danger and deviance.” These “symptoms” of pathology constructed a sort of “slum syndrome” that characterized urban blacks and Hispanics. “Drunkenness. Unemployment. Gambling. Overcrowding. Homosexuality. Narcotics Addiction. Despair” headlined one account of a black and Puerto Rican neighborhood on West 84th street where a street brawl had occurred (Phillips, 1961). High percentages of female-headed families, high birth rates, and high rates of mental illness were other “symptoms” (Priddy, 1955).

Geographic concentrations of poor urban blacks were kindling for a potential conflagration. Some accounts stressed that outside agitators held the match. A 1943 article entitled “Problem of Negro Worries Capital” warned that the District’s mix of poor blacks concentrated in slums and well-educated, more affluent blacks was problematic: “We have welling up here an irresistible force among Negroes for their rights...it is being directed by people of great intelligence and increasing daring. The force is increasing to the point where we have to consider a basic law of physics. That force is going to burst out somewhere unless the white community adjusts itself to it” (Catledge, 1943). As new social movements emerged, these movements became incorporated into this discourse: “Increasingly strident appeals by so-called Black nationalist, Muslim and pro-African organizations are being made to the city’s Negroes. Some of the appeals are being made in terms that would promote the desegregation of black men and white” (Knowles, 1959).

The Cold War connection warranted stepped-up slum clearance efforts. In 1957, a New York Times story headed “Washington Slum to Be Replaced” demonstrated this new sense of urgency: “Ground will be broken this spring for an urban renewal project of global significance (emphasis added). The developers have already razed 29 acres of miserable frame shacks. A photograph of the Negro slum, with the Capitol looming out of the squalor, was circulated throughout the world by the Soviet Union as an ‘example’ of how Americans live.”

**“Slum clearance and urban renewal were weapons aimed not at problematic places, but at problematic populations.”**

The Watts riots in 1965 marked another break point. Now, the potential for violence had nothing to do with physical conditions and everything to do with concentrations of “pathologic” populations. Watts, as a 1965 New York Times story pointed out, had little in common with Eastern slums:

“To the eye of the Easterner, to whom a slum is a pile of bricks with dirt in the street and piled garbage cans the description of the Watts area in this term is misleading. Depressed urban areas in the wide-open cities of the west, in which Los Angeles is a leading example, do not have slums of that sort. Their slums look like Watts, a settlement of houses separated by lawns that often are kept green by watering, cars parked in front, various indications of appliances such as TV antennae and a business district that looks clean and well-tended.”

Still, the article continues, the symptoms of “slum pathology” are present, and “In 1960 the population was 77% Negro and now is much more. About 30% of the children are from broken homes, and the dropout rate in school is about 2.2 times that of the rest of the County... More than 500 parolees from County prisons live nearby. In three months the police reported 1,000 crimes, which included 96 murders, rapes, and felonious assaults...Prostitution and drunkenness are readily found in the area...narcotics are for sale there” (“Experts Divided on Rioting Cause”, 1965).

The “prevailing moods” in black areas were, a similar article noted, “economic and social apathy, a rankling sense of grievance against ‘whitey’, and a pent-up potential for violence” (“Race and Riots”, 1965). The warrant for action to break up this critical mass of grievance was expanded further during the 1960s. It now authorized attempts to break up any concentrations of urban blacks that posed a threat of explosive violence.

The McCone Commission Report on the Watts riots laid out this new warrant. “In examining the sickness at the center of our city, what has depressed and stunned us most is the dull, devastating spiral of failure that awaits the average child in the urban core- so serious and so explosive is the situation that unless it is checked, the August riots may seem to be only a curtain raiser for what could blow up in the future” (“Race and the City”, 1966). Concentrations of poor urban blacks, regardless of the condition of their housing, were now construed to be the problem. Slum clearance and urban renewal were weapons aimed not at problematic places, but at problematic populations.

## Conclusion

The warrant for slum clearance and urban renewal changed in two ways from 1935 to 1950. Slums came to be regarded as more than sites that harbored physical and social illness. By the end of the period, any areas that were described as slums had become potentially metastasizing illnesses that justified any methods needed to remove them.

During the same period, the focus of this pathology shifted from “place” to “race”. The “cancer” was no longer defined in terms of concentrations of problematic buildings, but in terms of concentrations of problematic people; that is to say, poor people of color.

These two changes reinforced one another. In each of the three newspapers examined, the 1950s represented a high point in the number of stories that associated cancer and slums. During this era, the rhetorical association of “slums/ghettoes” and blacks became much more common, although it peaked in the 1960s. The result of this shift was to conflate place and race; problematic neighborhoods were any neighborhoods where blacks concentrated.

These changes occurred within a shifting historical context. During the 1950s, the domestic and international risks posed by geographic concentrations of black Americans were pointed up by their incorporation into Cold War propaganda and by the rise of new Black Nationalist and civil rights movements. During the 1960s, the expansion of the civil rights movement, the growth of black power movements, and waves of urban riots reiterated the theme that concentrations of blacks, regardless of their physical surroundings, were potential powder kegs.

The rhetorical developments described in this paper have contemporary echoes and suggest an agenda for future research. Future studies might ask, for instance, whether more frequent public discourse about increasing violence and social problems in suburbs characterized by concentrations of blacks reiterate the tendency to conflate the pathology of place with that of race.

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