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THE GHETTO

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ABSTRACT

The ghetto, the modern Jewish immigrant settlement in the Western world, has arisen out of the medieval European urban institution by means of which the Jews were effectually separated from the rest of the population. It represents a case study in isolation and accommodation, and indicates the processes involved in the formation and development of local communities in city life. The natural history of this institution shows that it developed as a gradual and undesigned adaptation to a strange habitat and culture, and its disintegration proceeds independent of legal enactment. The Jews, in so far as they are a separate ethnic group, are a product of ghetto life, which accounts for the reappearance of the ghetto wherever Jews settle in large numbers. The modern ghetto in its location and structure is determined by the unique status of the Jew and by his traditions. His neighbors in the new world tend to be the same as in the old. Eastern ghettos differ from those of the West in that the latter generally have as many local areas of settlement as there are waves of immigrants. As the Jew becomes conscious of his subordinate position in the ghetto he flees, but he is pursued by fellow-Jew until his new habitat assumes the atmosphere of the ghetto itself. In the course of his migration, his personality changes as the culture of his group fuses with that of the larger world outside.

I

For the past five hundred years the Jewish settlements in the Western world have been known as ghettos. The modern ghetto, some evidence of which is found in every city of even moderate size, traces its ancestry back to the medieval European urban institution by means of which the Jews were segregated from the rest of the population. In the East, until recently, the ghetto took the form of the "pale" of settlement, which represents a ghetto within a ghetto. The ghetto is no longer the place of officially regulated settlement of the Jews, but rather a local cultural area which has arisen quite informally. In the American cities the name "ghetto" applies particularly to those areas where the poorest and most backward groups of the Jewish population, usually the recently arrived immigrants, find their home.

From the standpoint of the sociologist the ghetto as an institu-

tion is of interest first of all because it represents a prolonged case study in isolation. It may be regarded as a form of accommodation through which a minority has effectually been subordinated to a dominant group. The ghetto exhibits at least one historical form of dealing with a dissenting minority within a larger population, and as such has served as an instrument of control. At the same time the ghetto represents a form of toleration through which a *modus vivendi* is established between groups that are in conflict with each other on fundamental issues. Some of these functions are still served by the modern ghetto, which, in other respects, has a character quite distinct from that of the medieval institution. In Western Europe and America, however, it is of primary interest because it shows the actual processes of distribution and grouping of the population in urban communities. It indicates the ways in which cultural groups give expression to their heritages when transplanted to a strange habitat; it evidences the constant sifting and resifting that goes on in a population, the factors that are operative in assigning locations to each section, and the forces through which the community maintains its integrity and continuity. Finally, it demonstrates the subtle ways in which this cultural community is transformed by degrees until it blends with the larger community about it, meanwhile reappearing in various altered guises of its old and unmistakable atmosphere.

This paper concerns itself, not with the history of the ghetto, but with its natural history. Viewed from this angle the study of the ghetto is likely to throw light on a number of related phenomena, such as the origin of segregated areas and the development of local communities in general; for, while the ghetto is, strictly speaking, a Jewish institution, there are forms of ghettos that concern not merely Jews. Our cities contain Little Sicilies, Little Polands, Chinatowns, and Black Belts. There are Bohemias and Hobohemias, slums and Gold Coasts, vice areas and Rialtos in every metropolitan community. The forces that underlie the formation and development of these areas bear a close resemblance to those at work in the ghetto. These forms of community life are likely to become more intelligible if we know something of the Jewish ghetto.

II

The concentration of the Jews into segregated local areas in the medieval cities did not originate with any formal edict of church or state. The ghetto was not, as is sometimes mistakenly believed, the arbitrary creation of the authorities, designed to deal with an alien people. The ghetto was not the product of design on the part of anyone, but rather the unwitting crystallization of needs and practices rooted in the customs and heritages, religious and secular, of the Jews themselves. Long before it was made compulsory the Jews lived in separate parts of the cities in the Western lands of their own accord. The Jews drifted into separate cultural areas, not by external pressure or by deliberate design. The factors that operated toward the founding of locally separated communities by the Jews are to be sought in the character of Jewish traditions, in the habits and customs, not only of the Jews themselves, but of the medieval town-dweller in general. To the Jews the spatially separated and socially isolated community seemed to offer the best opportunity for following their religious precepts, their established ritual and diet, and the numerous functions which tied the individual to familial and communal institutions. In some instances it was the fear of the remainder of the population, no doubt, which induced them to seek each other's company, or the ruler under whose protection they stood found it desirable, for purposes of revenue and control, to grant them a separate quarter. The general tenor of medieval life no doubt played an important rôle, for it was customary for members of the same occupational group to live in the same locality, and the Jews, forming, as a whole, a separate vocational class and having a distinct economic status, were merely falling in line, therefore, with the framework of medieval society, in which everyone was tied to some locality. In addition, there were the numerous ties of kinship and acquaintanceship which developed an *esprit de corps* as a significant factor in community life. There was the item of a common language, of community of ideas and interests, and the mere congeniality that arises even between strangers who, coming from the same locality, meet in a strange place. Finally, the segregation of the Jews in ghettos is identical in many respects with the development of seg-

regated areas in general. The tolerance that strange modes of life need and find in immigrant settlements, in Latin quarters, in vice districts, and in racial colonies is a powerful factor in the sifting of the urban population and its allocation in separate local areas where one obtains freedom from hostile criticism and the backing of a group of kindred spirits.

Corresponding to the local separateness of the Jew from his Christian neighbors there is to be noted the functional separation of the two groups. Just as the world beyond the ghetto wall was external to the life within the ghetto, so the personal relationships between Jews and non-Jews were those of externality and utility. The Jews supplemented the economic complex of medieval European life. They served a number of functions which the inhabitants of the town were incapable of exercising. The Jews were allowed to trade and engage in exchange, occupations which the church did not permit Christians to engage in. Besides, the Jews were valuable taxable property and could be relied on to furnish much-needed revenue. On the other hand, the Jews, too, regarded the Christian population as a means to an end, as a utility. The Christians could perform functions such as eating the hind quarter of beef, and could purchase the commodities that the Jews had for sale; they could borrow money from the Jew, and pay interest; they could perform innumerable services for him which he could not perform himself. In the rigid structure of medieval life the Jews found a strategic place. The attitude of the medieval church had coupled trade and finance with sin. The Jews were free from this taboo, which made the occupation of merchant and banker seem undesirable to the Christian population. The Christian churchmen were not troubled about the "perils of the Jewish soul," for, so far as they knew, he had no soul to be saved. What made the trade relation possible, however, was not merely the fact that it was mutually advantageous, but the fact that trade relationships are possible when no other form of contact between two peoples can take place. The Jew, being a stranger, and belonging, as he did, to a separate and distinct class, was admirably fitted to become the merchant and banker. He drifted to the towns and cities where trade was possible and profitable. Here he could utilize all

the distant contacts that he had developed in the course of his wandering. His attachment to the community at large was slight, and when necessity demanded it he could migrate to a locality where opportunities were greater. He owned no real property to which he was tied, nor was he the serf of a feudal lord. His mobility in turn developed versatility. He saw opportunities in places where no native could see them. While the ghetto was never more than a temporary stopping-place, the Jew was never a hobo, for he had an aim, a destination, and his community went with him in his migrations.

While the Jew's contacts with the outside world were categorical and abstract, within his own community he was at home. Here he could relax from etiquette and formalism. His contacts with his fellow-Jews were warm, intimate, and free. Especially was this true of his family life, within the inner circle of which he received that appreciation and sympathetic understanding which the larger world could not offer. In his own community, which was based upon the solidarity of the families that composed it, he was a person with status. Whenever he returned from a journey to a distant market, or from his daily work, he came back to the family fold, there to be recreated and reaffirmed as a man and as a Jew. Even when he was far removed from his kin, he lived his real inner life in his dreams and hopes with them. He could converse with his own kind in that familiar tongue which the rest of the world could not understand. He was bound by common troubles, by numerous ceremonies and sentiments to his small group that lived its own life oblivious of the world beyond the confines of the ghetto. Without the backing of his group, without the security that he enjoyed in his inner circle of friends and countrymen, life would have been intolerable.

Through the instrumentality of the ghetto there gradually developed that social distance which effectually isolated the Jew from the remainder of the population. These barriers did not completely inhibit contact, but they reduced it to the type of relationships which were of a secondary and formal nature. As these barriers crystallized and his life was lived more and more removed from the rest of the world, the solidarity of his own little community

was enhanced until it became strictly divorced from the larger world without.

III

The forms of community life that had arisen naturally and spontaneously in the course of the attempt of the Jews to adapt themselves to their surroundings gradually became formalized in custom and precedent, and finally crystallized into legal enactment. What the Jews had sought as a privilege was soon to be imposed upon them by law. As the Jews had come to occupy a more important position in medieval economy, and as the church at about the time of the Crusades became more militant, there set in a period of active regulation. The ghetto became compulsory. But the institution of the ghetto had by this time become firmly rooted in the habits and attitudes of the Jews. The historians of the ghetto are usually inclined to overemphasize the confining effect of the barriers that were set up around the Jew, and the provincial and stagnant character of ghetto existence. They forget that there was nevertheless a teeming life within the ghetto which was probably more active than life outside.

The laws that came to regulate the conduct of the Jews and Christians were merely the formal expressions of social distances that had already been ingrained in the people. While on the one hand the Jew was coming to be more and more a member of a class—an abstraction—on the other hand there persisted the tendency to react to him as a human being. The ghetto made the Jew self-conscious. Life in the ghetto was bearable only because there was a larger world outside, of which many Jews often got more than a passing glimpse. As a result they often lived on the fringe of two worlds. There was always some movement to get out of the ghetto on the part of those who were attracted by the wide world that lay beyond the horizon of the ghetto walls and who were cramped by the seemingly narrow life within. Sometimes a Jew would leave the ghetto and become converted; and sometimes these converts, broken and humiliated, would return to the ghetto to taste again of the warm, intimate, tribal life that was to be found nowhere but among their people. On such occasions the romance of the renegade would be told in the ghetto streets, and the whole

community would thereby be welded into a solid mass amid the solemn ceremonies by which the stray member was reincorporated into the community.

The inner solidarity of the ghetto community always lay in the ties of family life, and through the organization in the synagogue these families gained status within a community. Confined as the province of the ghetto was, there was ample opportunity for the display of capacity for leadership. The ghetto community was minutely specialized and highly integrated. There were probably more distinct types of personality and institutions within the narrow ghetto streets than in the larger world outside.

The typical ghetto is a densely populated, walled-in area usually found near the arteries of commerce or in the vicinity of a market. The Jewish quarter, even before the days of the compulsory ghetto, seems to have grown up round the synagogue, which was the center of Jewish life, locally as well as religiously. A common feature of all ghettos was also the cemetery, which was a communal responsibility and to which unusual sentimental interest was attached. There were a number of educational, recreational, and hygienic institutions, such as a school for the young, a bath, a slaughter house, a bakehouse, and a dance hall. In the close life within the ghetto walls almost nothing was left to the devices of the individual. Life was well organized, and custom and ritual played an institutionalizing rôle which still accounts for the high degree of organization of Jewish communities, often verging on overorganization. These institutions did not arise ready made. They represent what life always is, an adaptation to the physical and social needs of a people. In this case particularly, those institutions that had to deal with the conflict and disorder within the group and the pressure from without were the characteristic form of accommodation to the isolation which the ghetto symbolized and enforced. This holds good not merely for the institutions of the ghetto, but for the functionaries and personalities that center around them. The Jews as a race as we know them today are themselves a product of the ghetto.

The ghetto, from the standpoint of biology, was a closely inbreeding, self-perpetuating group to such an extent that it may

properly be called a closed community. Not that there was no intermarriage, but these mixed marriages as a rule were lost to the ghetto. The Jews have frequently and rightly been pointed out as the classic example of the great force of religious and racial prejudices, of segregation and isolation, in giving rise to distinct physical and social types. These types persist roughly to the extent that ghetto life and its effects have continued relatively unchanged, which is most true of Eastern Europe and the Orient. The difference in community life accounts in large part for the differences between various local groupings within the Jewish population.

The Russian, Polish, and in part the Roumanian, Jews differ from those of Western Europe—the German, French, Dutch, and English Jews—in several fundamental respects. For a long period the Jews of the East were merely a cultural dependency—an outpost—of Western Jewry. When an independent cultural life did develop in Russia, Poland, and Lithuania, it was self-sufficient and self-contained, set apart from the larger world. Not so with the Jews of Western Europe. They were never quite impervious to the currents of thought and the social changes that characterized the life of Europe since the Renaissance. While the Jews of the East lived in large part in rural communities, in a village world, those of the West were predominantly a city people, in touch with the centers of trade and finance near and far, and in touch at least for some time with the pulsating intellectual life of the world. While the Jews of the Rhine cities were associating with men of thought and of affairs, their brethren in Russia were dealing with peasants and an uncultured, decadent, feudal nobility. When the Jewries of the West were already seething with modernist religious, political, and social movements, those of the East were still steeped in mysticism and medieval ritual. While the Western Jews were moving along with the tide of progress, those of the East were still sharing the backwardness and isolation of the gentile world of villagers and peasants. Although until the middle of the last century the Jews of the East were never quite so confined in their physical movements as were the ghetto Jews of the West, the former lived in a smaller world, a world characterized by rigidity and stability; and when they were herded into cities, in which they constituted

the preponderant bulk of the total population, they merely turned these cities into large villages that had little in common with the urban centers of the West. Many features of local life in the modern Jewish community bear the imprint of the successive waves of immigrants first from the West and then from the East.

The formal enactments that made the ghetto the legal dwelling-place of the Jews were abolished toward the middle of the last century in most of the countries of the world. Strangely enough, the abolition of the legal ghetto was opposed by a great portion of Jews as late as a hundred years ago, for they had a premonition that the leveling of the ghetto walls would mean the wiping out of separate community life, which the formal ghetto rules merely symbolized. Those who saw in the new freedom the waning influence of the Jewish religion and the ultimate dissolution of Jewish life in separate communities had two things left to console them: (1) the formal equality decreed by law did not at once gain for the Jew ready acceptance and a parallel social status among his fellow-citizens; and (2) although Western Jewry seemed to be crumbling, there were approximately six millions of Jews left on the other side of the Vistula who were still clinging to the old bonds that exclusion and oppression had fashioned. But since that time even Russia has been revolutionized, and the so-called "last bulwark" of Judaism threatens to disappear.

IV

Just as the ghetto arose before formal decrees forced the Jews into segregated areas, so the ghetto persists after these decrees have been annulled. Mr. Zangwill has said: "People who have been living in a ghetto for a couple of centuries are not able to step outside merely because the gates are thrown down, nor to efface the brands on their souls by putting off their yellow badges. The isolation from without will have come to seem the law of their being."¹ The formal abolition of the ghetto and the granting of citizenship did for the Jews about what the emancipation proclamation did for the Negro. Slavery was more than a mere legal relationship, and the ghetto was more than a statute. It had become

¹ Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*, p. 6.

an institution. Though the physical walls of the ghetto have been torn down, an invisible wall of isolation still maintains the distance between the Jew and his neighbors.

Even in towns containing only a handful of Jews, there will be found in all parts of the world some more or less definitely organized community. The ecological factors that enter into its development are essentially those of the medieval ghetto. There are several items besides the continuity of traditions from within and prejudice from without that account for the persistence of the modern ghetto, particularly in American cities. One of these is the colonization movement among the Jews, by which Old World communities are sometimes kept intact in the New World. But even where no such organized effort exists, it is remarkable to what extent the Jewish community tends to perpetuate its old surroundings.

To a large extent the modern ghetto is necessitated by the precepts and practices of orthodox Judaism, by the need of dwelling within easy reach of the synagogue, the schoolroom, and the ritual bath, the kosher butcher shop and the kosher dairy. But even for those who are indifferent to religious observances and ritual practices, residence in the ghetto is necessitated by social and economic circumstances. Ignorance of the language of the new country, of its labour conditions, and of its general habits and ways of thought, as well as the natural timidity of a fugitive from a land of persecution, compels the immigrant Jew to settle in the colony of his co-religionists. Among them he is perfectly at home; he finds the path of employment comparatively smooth, and if his efforts to attain it be delayed, he is helped in the interval by charity from a dozen hands.²

In countries where the contact between Jew and non-Jew has been continued for a few generations, and where no new immigration from other countries in which the Jews retained their old status has taken place, the ghetto has to a large extent disintegrated. Under these circumstances, not only does the ghetto tend to disappear, but the race tends to disappear with it. Contact with the world through education, commerce, and the arts tends to bring about a substitution of the cultural values of the world at large for those of the ghetto. This contact, moreover, frequently brings about intermarriage, which is most frequent in those locali-

² Israel Cohen, *Jewish Life in Modern Times*, pp. 37-38.

ties where intercourse between Jew and Gentile is least restricted. It is safe to say that the present fifteen and a half million Jews in the world constitute only a small proportion of the living descendants of the original Jewish settlers in the Western world at the beginning of the Christian era. They are merely the residue of a much larger group whose Jewish identity has been lost in the general stream of population. What has happened in the case of the Jews is essentially what has happened in all minority groups in recent times. As the barriers of isolation have receded, social intercourse and interbreeding have decimated the size of the group and leveled its distinguishing characteristics to those of the milieu.

A Jewish community may in some respects be said to exist after the obstacles to ready intercourse with the world outside have been removed, but it tends to become a nondescript community. Where, however, as is the case in most large cities of Western Europe and especially the United States, a steady influx of new immigrants has replenished the disintegrating community, there a ghetto, with all the characteristic local color, has grown up and maintains itself. It is with such a community, as found in the Chicago ghetto, that this study has dealt.

V

Western ghettos differ from those of the East in that the former comprise at least two sections, the native and the foreign. The native section lives in some sort of concentration within convenient distance from the communal institutions. A rise in material prosperity is generally followed by a removal to a better district, where a new Jewish area is created, but one less distinguished from its environment by external tokens. The foreign section, however, lives in a state of dense concentration. Their poverty makes them settle in the poor quarter of the town, where they reproduce the social conditions in which they have been born and bred, so far as the new environment will allow. The ghetto in the East may be a symbol of political bondage; but in the west the only bondage that it typifies is that exercised by economic status, by sentiment and tradition.³

³ See Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

If you would know what kind of Jew a man is, ask him where he lives; for no single factor indicates as much about the character of the Jew as the area in which he lives. It is an index not only to his economic status, his occupation, his religion, but to his politics and his outlook on life, and the stage in the assimilative process that he has reached.

West of the Chicago River, in the shadow of the central business district, lies a densely populated rectangle of crowded tenements representing the greater part of Chicago's immigrant colonies, among them the ghetto. It contains the most varied assortment of people to be found in any similar area of the world. This area has been the stamping-ground of virtually every immigrant group that has come to Chicago. The occupation of this area by the Jews is, it seems, merely a passing phase of a long process of succession in which one population group has been crowded out by another. There is, however, an unmistakable regularity in this process. In the course of the growth of the city and the invasion of the slums by new groups of immigrants there has resulted a constancy of association between Jews and other ethnic groups. Each racial and cultural group tends to settle in that part of the city which, from the point of view of rents, standards of living, accessibility, and tolerance, makes the reproduction of the Old World life easiest. In the course of the invasion of these tides of immigrants the ghetto has become converted from the outskirts of an overgrown village to the slum of a great city in little more than one generation. The Jews have successively displaced the Germans, the Irish, and the Bohemians, and have themselves been displaced by the Poles and Lithuanians, the Italians, the Greeks, and Turks, and finally the Negro. The Poles and Jews detest each other thoroughly, but they can trade with each other very successfully. They have transferred the accommodation to each other from the Old World to the New. The latest invasion of the ghetto by the Negro is of more than passing interest. The Negro, like the immigrant, is segregated in the city into a racial colony; economic factors, race prejudice, and cultural differences combine to set him apart. The Negro has drifted to the abandoned sections of the ghetto for precisely the same reasons that the Jews and the Italians came there.

Unlike the white landlords and residents of former days and in other parts of the city, the Jews have offered no appreciable resistance to the invasion of the Negroes. The Negroes pay good rent and spend their money readily. Many of the immigrants of the ghetto have not as yet discovered the color line.

The transition and deterioration of the ghetto has been proceeding at such speed that the complexion of the area changes from day to day. Dilapidated structures that a decade ago were Lutheran and Catholic churches have since become synagogues, and have now been turned into African M. E. churches. Under the latest coat of paint of a store-front colored mission there are vestiges of signs reading "Kosher Butchershop" and "Deutsche Apotheke."

True to the ancient pattern, the most colorful and active section of the ghetto is the street market, which resembles a medieval fair more than the shopping district of a modern city. But this institution, together with the rest of ghetto culture, is fast declining. The life of the immigrants in the ghetto is so circumscribed and they are so integrally a part of it that they are unaware of its existence. It is the children of the immigrant who discover the ghetto and then . . . flee. What a few years ago was a steady but slow outward movement has now developed into a veritable stampede to get out of the ghetto; for, with all its varied activities and its colorful atmosphere, the ghetto nevertheless is a small world. It throbs with a life which is provincial and sectarian. Its successes are measured on a small scale, and its range of expression is limited.

Not until the immigrant leaves the ghetto does he become fully conscious of himself and his status. He feels a sense of personal freedom and expansion as he takes up his residence in the more modern and less Jewish area of second settlement. As late as twenty years ago, when the first Jewish fugitives from the ghetto invaded Lawndale, an area about two miles west, which in Chicago represents the area of second settlement, they came into collision with the Irish and the Germans, who had turned what was recently a prairie into something like a park. It took the Jews about ten years to convert it into a densely settled apartment-house area. At first they could not rent. Experience in the ghetto from which the Irish and Germans had been displaced had given these residents a

vision of what was in store for their homes. But this time the Jews could afford to buy, and they bought in blocks. By 1910 Lawndale had become a second ghetto. Its synagogues were a little more modern than those of Maxwell street; the beards of the Lawndale Jews were a little trimmer, and their coats a little shorter, than in the original ghetto; but Lawndale had become Jewish. Those residents of the ghetto who stayed behind derisively called Lawndale "Deutschland," and its inhabitants "Deutschuks," because they were affecting German ways.

But the Lawndale Jews found little rest and satisfaction. Their erstwhile neighbors, impelled by identical motives—to flee from their fellow-Jews, and be less Jewish—had given Lawndale a new complexion, unmistakably Jewish, though not quite as genuine as that of the ghetto itself.

In their attempt to flee from the ghetto, the partially assimilated Jews have found that the ghetto has followed them, and a new exodus sets in. The plans of those who fled from the ghetto in order to obtain status as human beings—as successful business or professional men, rather than as Jews—have been frustrated by the similar plans of others. So it is with the third settlement in the fashionable apartment hotels and the suburbs. As the area becomes predominantly Jewish, the non-Jewish settlers move, and the Jews begin the pursuit anew. Scarcely does the Jew get a glimpse of the freer world that looms beyond the ghetto when he becomes irritated by the presence of his fellow-Jews, more Jewish than himself; he is bored, disgusted, and resumes his flight.

In the process he changes his character and his institutions. But what has held the community together in spite of all disintegrating forces from within and without is not only the replenishment of the ghetto by new immigrants—for this is a waning factor—but rather the return to the ghetto of those who have fled but have been disappointed and disillusioned about the results of their flight. They have found the outside world cold and unresponsive to their claims, and return to the warmth and the intimacy of the ghetto. Finally, the Jewish community has been kept intact by the fact that the outside world has treated it as an entity. The Jewish problem, if there be one, consists in the fact that the ghetto

persists in spite of the attempt of so many to flee. As long as the nucleus remains, it will serve as a symbol of community life to which even those who are far removed in space and in sympathies belong and by which they are identified.

The Jews as individuals do not always find the way to assimilation blocked. They make friends as well as enemies. The contacts between cultural and racial groups inevitably produce harmony as well as friction; and the one cannot be promoted nor the other prevented by nostrums and ready-made programs and administrative devices. Interaction is life, and life is a growth which defies attempts at control and direction, however rational they may be, that do not take account of this dynamic process. In the struggle for status, personality arises. The Jew, like every other human being, owes his unique character to this struggle, and that character will change and perhaps disappear as the struggle changes or subsides.

What makes the Jewish community—composed as it is of heterogeneous cultural elements and distributed in separate areas of our cities—a community is its capacity to act corporately. It is a cultural community and constitutes as near an approach to communal life as the modern city has to offer. The ghetto, be it Chinese, Negro, Sicilian, or Jewish, can be completely understood only if it is viewed as a socio-psychological, as well as an ecological, phenomenon; for it is not merely a physical fact, but also a state of mind.