

Roth, Race, and Newark

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Photo by Marlon Holmes

In recent years, one of the ways in which Philip Roth's literary reputation has been advanced is through the proposition he has "universalized" his Newark cityscape comparable to Joyce's Dublin or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.¹ It argues for the view that Roth's Jewish neighborhood, Weequahic, is indeed representative of Newark and, in turn, his vision of Newark illuminates urban/ethnic, postwar America. However, from my perspective, Roth and his reviewers are disturbingly uncritical about race and its legacy in Newark. His recent American trilogy (*American Pastoral* [1997], *I Married A Communist* [1998] and *The Human Stain* [2000]) when taken together with the two non-fiction works that preceded the novels (*The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* [1988] and *Patrimony: A True Story* [1991]) offer a very blinkered view of Newark and its racial politics. In these books, there is a willingness to stereotype post-1965 Newark as a crime-ridden burnt-out city of Blacks and, unfortunately, to contribute to a liberal, racist mentality about Newark as an unlivable city especially when contrasted to "the good old" days of the 1940s and 1950s.

For the few short years of Roth's adolescence (1945 to 1950), Newark's almost two decades of industrial decline was held in check. Roth and his generation were the inheritors of an efflorescence that was the culmination of Newark's "golden" era, but one that was built on long-term, cynical exploitation of racism and deep, pervasive political corruption. What undermined many northern cities was de-industrialization, which in Newark had started in the 1920s (despite the economic boom), accelerated by the Depression, briefly reversed during World War II, and then resumed with breath-taking speed shortly after the War. Roth's nostalgia informs this blinkered view of racial and class divides in Newark -- a romanticizing of the world that Roth usually dismisses as naïve. In short, when imagining the racial politics of Newark, Roth the hard-edged, thoughtful, and ironical realist, becomes a conservative "utopian" -- too much caught up

in the interplay between his liberal, civil rights conscience and his sentimentalizing of Weequahic.

I

In Roth's vision, childhood, for second generation Jews in Weequahic, was Edenic. Newark was an "American Pastoral." He grew up in a "real" neighborhood, bounded, homogeneous and secure, but still intellectually and culturally provincial given the rootedness and restraint of his parents and their generation. In the protected environment of his middle-class, white and virtually all-Jewish neighborhood, his Newark world was indeed a Camelot -- mothers at home, neighbors on the stoops, wartime prosperity, good schools, and no "street crime."



Roth's childhood home on Summit Ave., Newark
(Photo by Bryan Anselm, *New York Times*)

In *The Facts*, Roth noted that he had not lived in Newark since he left for Bucknell but neither had his parents who, in 1952, moved first to a garden apartment Elizabeth, then to Moorestown in Southern New Jersey, and finally back to Elizabeth once Herman Roth retired. Roth's early life in Weequahic is described in a section called "Safe At Home" (the baseball inference is clear enough) which portrays the bounded, segregated life of the neighborhood.

Our lower-middle-class neighborhood of houses and shops -- a few square miles of tree-lined streets at the corner of the city bordering on residential Hillside and semi-industrialized Irvington -- was as safe and peaceful a

haven for me as his rural community would have been for an Indiana farm boy. (30)

. . . Not only did growing up Jewish in Newark in the thirties and forties . . . feel like a perfectly legitimate way of growing up American but, what's more, growing up Jewish as I did and growing up American seemed to me indistinguishable. . . .

I would think that much of the exuberance with which I and others of my generation of Jewish children seized our opportunities after the war -- that wonderful feeling that one was entitled to no less than anyone else, that one could do anything and could be excluded from nothing -- came from our belief in the boundlessness of the democracy in which we lived and to which we belonged. . . . (122-23)

The neighborhoods were as insulated as gated communities --Weequahic the Jewish ghetto, the North Ward the Italian, and the Central Ward the Black. As one Newark historian noted: "The city was really a conglomeration of small, self-contained towns -- Vailsburg, Roseville, Forest Hill, Woodside, Clinton Hill, Down Neck (or the Ironbound). . . . Each community had its own stores, taverns, churches --its own pride and its own way of life."[2](#) As Roth said, in a recent interview, the separation in the city was rigid:

. . . Chicago furnished me with my first look at the big world. It was the first time I really felt, saw, registered, the black presence in an American city or, in the slightest way, became personally engaged with blacks. When I was growing up in Newark in the 30's and 40's, we were all -- Irish, Italians, Slavs, blacks, Jews -- settled and secure in different neighborhoods. There was barely any social overlap. . . .[3](#)

Roth, like many other white, middle-class liberals, turned his back on Newark; no wonder he was shocked when he returned. He really was a tourist whose vision of the city is too much refracted in the memories of a very short-lived utopia that was his Weequahic. In a 1998 interview, Roth succinctly stated his view of Newark, but suggests some of the contradiction between childhood memory and adult judgement:

myself am surprised I'm so mesmerized by this place, because I left younger than my friends. . . . And I never went back.

On the other hand, the place has come to represent for me, I suppose, modern times in America, and the fate of Newark has been the fate of many other cities . . . tremendously productive industrial towns, had a hardworking, fully employed working class. Had good, strong, corrupt city administrations. . . . And in other words the city worked. . . . And that's all been destroyed. The riots of the late sixties in Newark just ended the real life in the city, and the city became an intensive-care case . . . and life in the city is pretty awful . . . over the years I went back to visit by myself, walk around. When it became too dangerous to walk by myself I'd go with somebody . . . I was mesmerized by the destruction of this place . . . And I knew all the streets and I knew what they had looked like and I knew how people lived.[4](#)

In the 1980s, when he visited more frequently, the loss is palpable but his judgment clear: "The Weequahic neighborhood for over two decades now has been part of the vast black Newark slum. . . . I drive through streets entirely familiar to me despite the boarded-up shops and badly decaying houses. . . ." No doubt the sensitivity is triggered by having to confront, in the three years from 1986 to 1989, the slow-growing tumor that was killing his father. On one visit, Roth drove his father from Elizabeth, just south of Newark, to the new medical facility (The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey) built in the Central Ward, a route along Bergen Street, one of the bustling, vibrant commercial streets of the old neighborhood.

. . . to drive through the most desolate streets of black Newark. What in my childhood had been the busy shopping thoroughfare of a lower-middle class, mostly Jewish neighborhood were now almost entirely burned out or boarded up or torn down. The only ones about seemed to be unemployed black men -- at any rate, black men standing together on the street corners, seemingly with nothing to do. . . .⁵

Roth saw his father as the indomitable representative of those first-generation children of immigrants who were still struggling for that American foothold. ". . . I had to drive him across poor, poor, poor old Newark. He knows every street corner. . . . He's the bard of Newark. That really rich Newark stuff isn't my story -- it's his."⁶ It is easy enough to understand Roth's astonishment and distress. Weequahic was changed dramatically and more quickly by "white flight" than almost any other section of the city. The older Jewish population dropped from some 30,000 in 1948 to just 500 in 1977 becoming, of course, an essentially all Black neighborhood. However, Roth does not seem able to see that Weequahic, remained a middle-class enclave, just poorer.⁷

In the novels of the trilogy, Roth sets his fictional alter-ego and "alter-brain," Nathan Zuckerman, the task of imagining what "de-rails" three very different but heroic figures: Seymour (Swede) Levov, Ira Ringold and Coleman Silk in the swirl of three disparate moral/historical crises of the postwar period.⁸ Swede and Ira are linked to directly to Weequahic, while Coleman's East Orange was, in the 1920's and 1930's, very much a middle-class, mainly white Newark suburb with many upscale apartment buildings and larger one-family homes. In *American Pastoral*, Roth has structured a Miltonian fable about the demise of Swede Levov, Zuckerman's childhood hero, who as a fair-haired, athletic "phenom" was as near to the all-American boy as any of the kids growing up in pre-war Weequahic. After the war, Swede returned from the Marines to take over his father's leather glove factory (Newark Maid). He became a rich, decent businessman but couldn't sidestep the disorder engulfing America in the 1960s.

How the ultimate Jewish, assimilationist success-story is eviscerated is the novel that Zuckerman/Roth imagines. In an important and trenchant review of the novel, Louis Menand argues for the importance of two nodes of pastoral significance -- focusing on the utopian nature of Roth's Jewish neighborhood. One is the traditional rural locale, the verdant Morris County estate where Swede has moved with his beauty-pageant, Catholic wife and the other is Weequahic or rather Zuckerman's childhood memories of the old neighborhood -- the innocent nursery of the "American dream."

"American Pastoral" can be read as generically advertised -- that is a story of Arcadian bliss into which the serpent inexorably creeps. It can be read as an American Book of Job, a story of underserved suffering and the fickleness of fate. It can be read as political allegory -- a story of how the

spirit born out of victory over Fascism was destroyed by Vietnam and Watergate. But at bottom it seems to be a book about the same thing that almost all of Roth's books are about: the life -- the aspirations, the pride, the accomplishment -- of the vanished world of Weequahic, the Jewish Atlantis. . . . With few exceptions, this is the world Roth has been writing about all his life. . . .

This is the life that Seymour Levov thinks he is not breaking with but extending when he steps out of the ethnic enclave and into what he imagines to be full-fledged Americanness. He thinks he can preserve the old values of work, family, and fair play but discard the atavistic compulsions of mindless discipline, authority, and tradition.⁹

For Zuckerman, Swede was a star, a god. He doesn't seem Jewish, rather seamlessly American and still completely at ease with himself just as he was at Weequahic High. However, whether one considers Weequahic as Arcadia, Atlantis, Camelot, or Shangri-la, the background is indeed the idyllic world of the "old" Newark neighborhood -- peaceful, nurturing, and innocent. Zuckerman sees in himself and, of course, in Swede the proud, idealistic and driven children of that lost world. As Menand notes, "But he [Swede] can't go back, because the little world he came from has been closed down, vandalized, destroyed. All the little worlds of prewar America are closed down. He is in exodus from the diaspora" (94).

At his forty-fifth high school reunion Zuckerman learned from Jerry, Swede's younger brother, now a famous Miami surgeon, that Swede's daughter, Merry, was the infamous Rimrock Bomber. In 1968, she blew up the tiny post office in Old Rimrock as an anti-war protest and killed a young doctor who had stopped to mail letters on his way to the hospital. She ran off and joined the radical underground. Jerry says, "his life was blown up by that bomb" (68). The vast bulk of the novel is Zuckerman's "dreamed up" chronicle of Swede's tragic life, but triggered and informed by the nostalgia of the class re-union and the memories of childhood ". . . when the Swede, his neighborhood, his city, and his country were in their exuberant heyday, at the peak of confidence, inflated with the very illusion born of hope" (87). Zuckerman has to abandon his image of Swede's perfectionism and of freedom that American success was supposed to bring to account for the "tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy -- that is every man's tragedy:"

. . . the daughter and the decade blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and there infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, violence, and the desperation of the counter pastoral -- into the indigenous American berserk. (86)

The centerpiece of Roth's vision of postwar euphoria and of blissful childhood is the reunion speech that Zuckerman did not give, but drafted at home as a diary entry in response to that agitated afternoon of provocative, fond sentimentalizing with his high school compatriots about growing up in the old neighborhood:

. . . The Depression had disappeared. Everything was in motion. The lid was off. Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together . . . the clock of history reset and a whole people's aims limited no longer by the past -- there was the neighborhood, the communal

determination that we, the children, should escape poverty, ignorance, disease, social injury and intimidation -- escape above all insignificance . . . ours was not a neighborhood steeped in darkness. The place was bright with industriousness, There was a big belief in life and we were steered relentlessly in the direction of success. . . . The goal was to *have* goals, the aims to *have* aims. Yet it was this edict -- emotionally overloaded as it was by uncertainty in our elders, by their awareness of all that was in league against them that made the neighborhood a cohesive place. . . . To have lived -- and in this country, and in our time, and as who we were. Astonishing. (40-44)

Zuckerman/Roth grew up, in a golden, innocent moment, with other second generation, post-immigrant children whose grandparents were the Yiddish speaking, orthodox Jews, émigrés from eastern Europe and whose parents had grown up in the slums of Newark, but who with the first bit of prosperity in the 1920s moved out of the already decayed tenements in the Third Ward and the Down Neck district to newly built housing in either Clinton Hill (Ward 16) or Weequahic (Ward 9 or South Ward), a part of the *first* "white flight" which included most of the white the ruling and professional elite of Newark as well. This exodus in the 1920s was just as dramatic and perhaps more significant than the well-publicized instance in the late-1960s. The Jewish move to Clinton Hill and Weequahic after World War I is clearly shown in Figure 1, below.

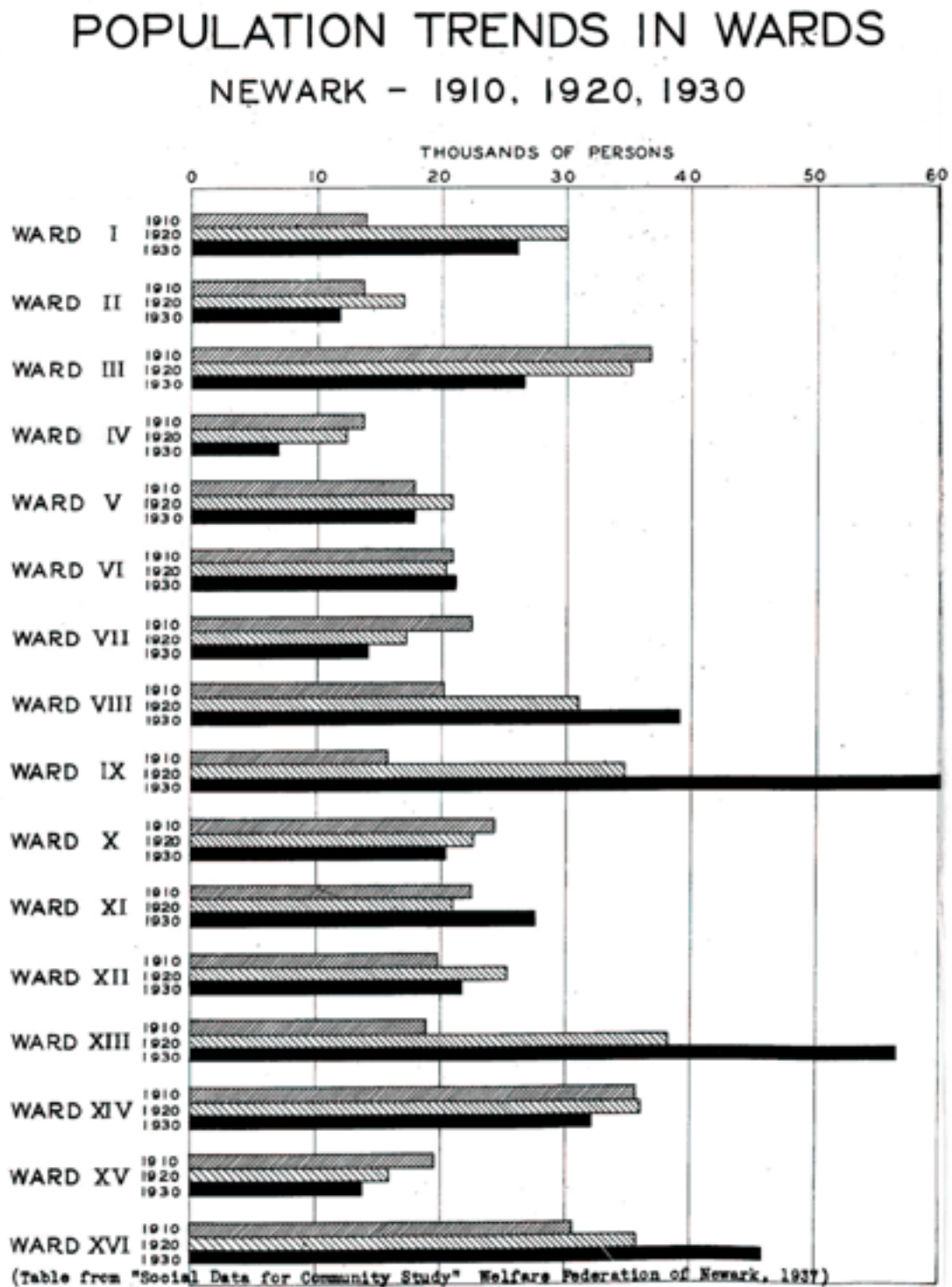


Figure 1 [10]

The first move out of the central city not only created the homogeneity of the Clinton Hill and Weequahic, but opened space for the next wave of immigrants, southern Blacks, who came north to fill the factory jobs available once European immigration was sharply curtailed after 1924. Because ward boundaries often changed from decade to decade exact comparisons are not possible but according to the data collected by the Jewish Welfare Federation, by 1940, Jewish population in those two districts totaled more than 40,000. At its postwar peak, Jewish population in Newark approached 57,000. By 1940 the Jewish shift from the inner city was nearly complete. The total population of the Third Ward dropped from 36,910 in 1910 to 25,830 in 1940 with just 2300 Jewish residents (mainly grandparents to Roth's generation or working class). For the Jewish population of Newark in 1948, see Figure 2, below.

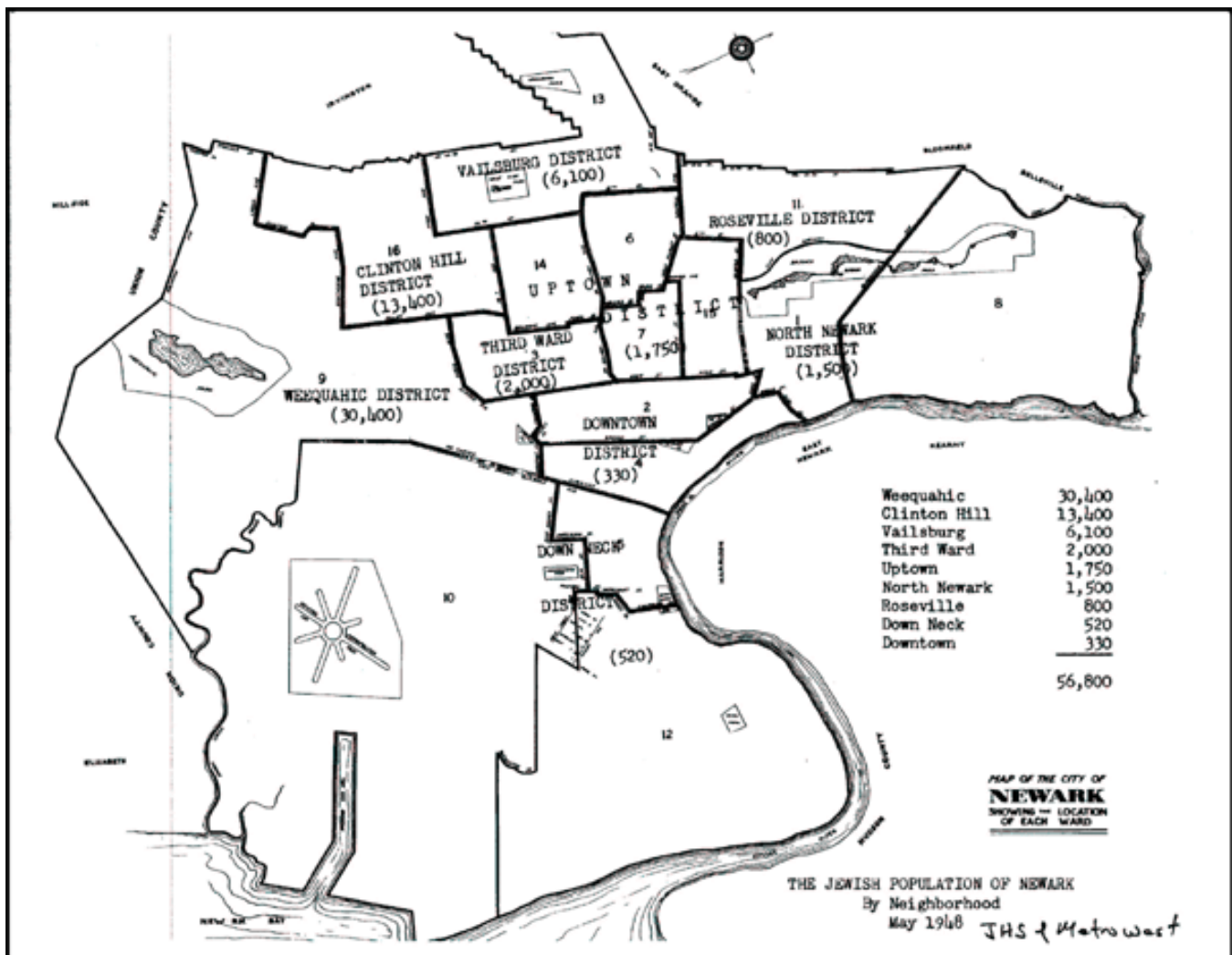


Figure 2 [11]

By 1948, the Jewish Welfare Board would report the rather complete removal to outlying Wards and the beginning of the postwar move to the suburbs starting with the returning soldiers who occupied the new apartments in Irvington. See Figure 3, below.

Jewish Population Distribution 1948

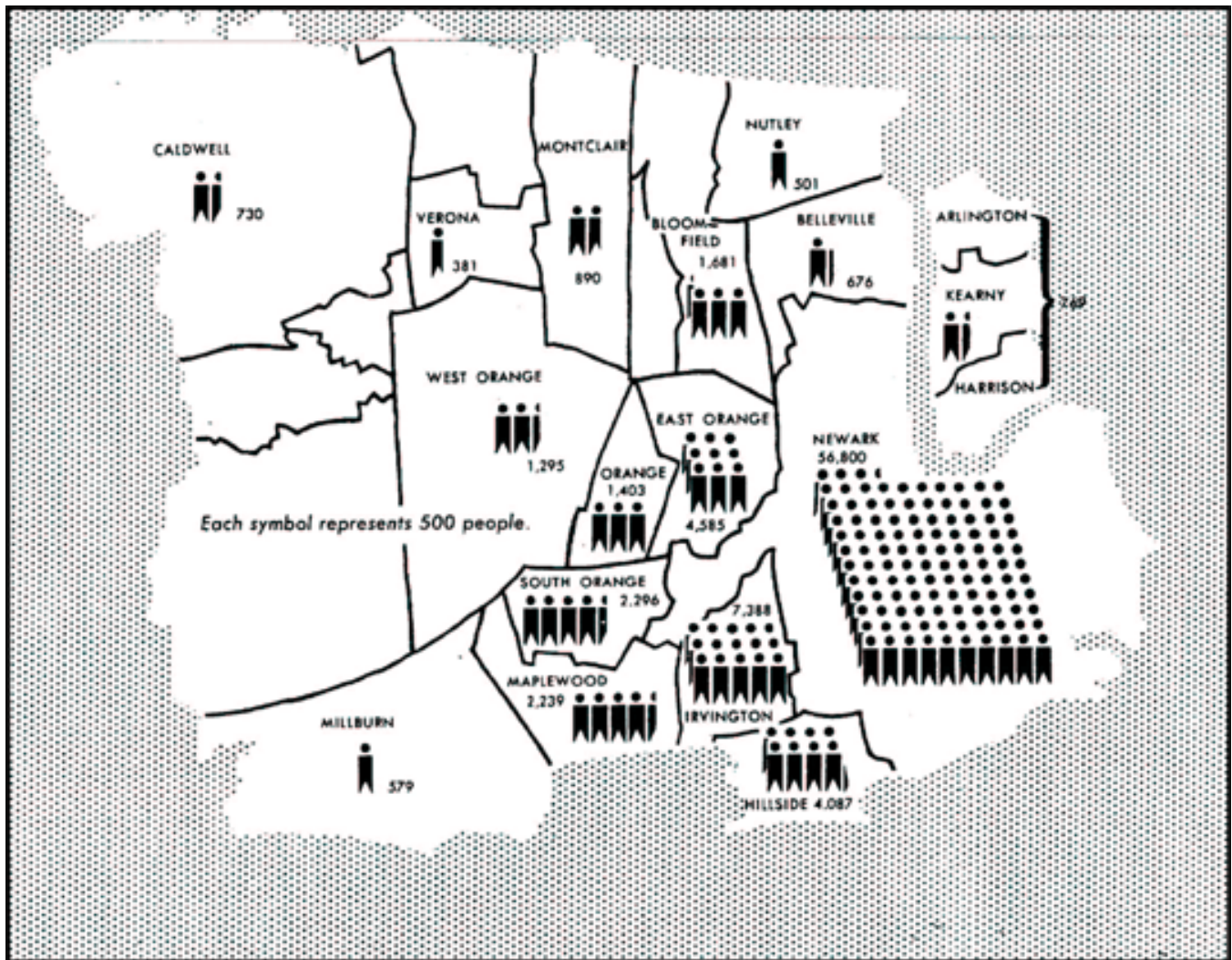


Figure 3 [12]

In fact, recruited by Newark industrialists to take on the menial work in the busy factories, Black immigrants found jobs but in a "Jim-Crow" city as completely and thoroughly segregated as any in the South. White landlords would not rent to Blacks in any of the outlying white ethnic neighborhoods and certainly not in the adjoining Essex county suburbs. What was available was the central city (Wards 3, 6, 7, 14, and 15) known variously as the Uphill District (up the hill from downtown Newark), Uptown District and commonly referred to as the Central Ward. Those Central Ward tenements were some of the worst in the city, and by the 1940's some of the worst in the country -- having been erected before the 1893 depression, with virtually no improvements since their construction. Most buildings were without central heating, many apartments without private plumbing, and some without running water. The Black population in those four wards increased from 3,284 in 1910 to 28,863 in 1940. City-wide Black population went from 9,475 to 45,760 in those thirty years with the total Black population in the Third Ward rising to just over 16,000 (Figure 1, above).

A second wave of some 30,000 Black immigrants came to do the war work of the 1940s and expanded the total Black population to more than 75,000 by 1950.¹³ The combination of poverty and "red-lining" still restricted them to the same center city slums where a 1944 report called Newark inner-city housing some of the worst in the country with one-third of the dwellings said to be sub-standard and whose absentee landlords "gouged these tenants mercilessly." Some 5,000 dwellings were called "beyond all fitness to live in" and "nearly all were occupied by Negro families."¹⁴ Rigid segregation was the rule in Newark from restaurants, to movie theatres, to public bath houses. Service organizations, such as the YMCA, Salvation Army, Boy Scouts and Red Cross provided strictly segregated activities -- for example, not until 1942 did the Red Cross accept blood donations from Blacks, but then distributed the blood only on a segregated basis. Of course neighborhood schools guaranteed class, racial and ethnic isolation and a lack of medical facilities for Blacks insured high rates of infectious diseases and higher death rates.¹⁵

In the Central Ward where almost all of the landlords, store owners, and tavern owners were white (and many Jewish as well), the area continued to be zoned as industrial allowing for the highest population densities, the worst city services, the highest crime, and the jumble of tenements, stores, factories, and stables that created the ghetto in the first place. Newark's population grew from 250,000 in 1900 to 450,000 by the 1930 census. With its city boundaries rigidly fixed and with almost 20 percent of its land uninhabitable, the eighteenth largest city in the country was the third most densely populated, and nowhere more so than the Uptown district.

By contrast, the new Jewish districts were developed within residential zoning restrictions and thoughtful urban planning that kept businesses on the main streets, single through four-family houses on the side streets. In a 1927 front-page article on real estate developer Morris Rachlin, *The Jewish Chronicle* included background on his development in 1906 of Clinton Hill (some 45 acres and the construction of 152 houses) and this judgment of its status:

"Clinton Hill is now considered as important a business thoroughfare as Broad Street, while the residential section remains as restricted and lovely as it was at its inception. It continues to be the choicest and oldest neighborhood in the city. . . . Holds its own against new developments on the old Lyons Farm [Weequahic]. . . .¹⁶

In the novel, aside from those who owned homes, like the Levov's who lived on Keer Avenue, there were virtually no other markers of class distinction. The parents owned small family businesses (bakers, butchers, tailors, opticians, jewelers, clothiers, etc.) usually on the busy main thoroughfares of Bergen Street or Clinton Avenue (though many Jewish merchants still owned stores in the Black Uptown District or on its border) or the fathers were salesmen. If the mothers worked, it was in the family-owned businesses. There were only a very few factory workers in that generation. In short, they were all the same -- white and Jewish. They lived in a city within a city, in a world of their own.

At home after the reunion, Zuckerman tries to sleep but can't: "I'd driven back from New Jersey, where on a sunny Sunday in October, at a country club in a Jewish suburb far from the futility prevailing in the streets of our crime-ridden, drug-infested childhood home. . ." (45). Zuckerman, awash in the memories of that protected and provincial world, considers Swede's tragedy shrouded in Newark's ashes -- the haunted landscape of

a lost world. From that moment Zuckerman, the novelist, is fixated on trying to grasp what had happened to Swede, to imagine his tragedy. The story that is *American Pastoral* culminates in a large effusive dinner party at Swede's estate. It is 1973 and Swede has found Merry living in an abandoned building in downtown Newark having had a religious conversion to Jainism; has learned of his wife's infidelity; has witnessed the moral ambivalence of his liberal friends; and has finally heeded his father's call to shut down the Newark factory. Lou Levov, retired to Florida, had been arguing with Swede since 1964 to get out of Newark. In a long monologue at the party, Lou provides both history and judgment. He is emphatic about 1967 as marking the end. "Manufacturing is finished in Newark. *Newark* is finished":

" . . . I come from the late city of Newark. . . . Look the Irish ran the city, the Italians ran the city, now let the colored run the city. That's not my point. I got nothing against that. . . . In Newark corruption is the name of the game. What is new, number one, is race; number two, taxes. Add *that* to the corruption, *there's* your problem. . . . General Electric already moved out in 1953. GE, Westinghouse, Breyer's down on Raymond Boulevard, Celluloid, all left the city. Everyone of them big employers, and *before* the riots, before racial hatred, they got out. Race is just the icing on the cake. Streets aren't cleaned. Burned-out cars nobody takes away. People in abandoned buildings. *Fires* in abandoned buildings. Unemployment. Filth. Poverty. . . . Schooling nonexistent. Schools a disaster. On every street corner dropouts. . . . Drop outs dealing drugs. . . . The projects -- don't get me started on the projects. Police on the take. Every kind of disease known to man. As far back as the summer of '64. . . . 'Get out,' I said. . . . 'Newark is the next Watts.' . . . Newark will be the city that never comes back." (345)

Indeed, this foreshortened version of Newark history is one also accepted by Swede -- recounted to Zuckerman when they met a few months before the reunion and Swede's death. Again, the rebellion of 1967 was the turning point. "It's the worst city in the world," Swede told Zuckerman.

"Used to be the city where they manufactured everything. Now it's the car-theft capital of the world. . . . Not the most gruesome of gruesome developments but it's awful enough. The thieves live mostly in our old neighborhood. Black kids. . . . They ram cop cars in broad daylight. Front-end collisions. To explode the airbags. . . . Killing pedestrians means nothing to them. Killing motorists means nothing to them. Killing themselves means nothing to them" (24-26).

In these terms, Newark was as much a war zone as Vietnam, white against black, decency against disorder. But Swede stayed on he said, in some degree, out of duty to his long-time employees most of whom were black. He also remained because of "liberal guilt" -- as a way to stay connected with Merry to demonstrate that he wasn't an "exploiter" like the other manufacturers (163).

In 1973, he finally pulled Newark Maid out of Newark to factories in Puerto Rico where labor was willing and plentiful. Swede explained the "realities" of glove manufacture, arguing that unions and lack of skilled workers made domestic manufacture unprofitable. And as Zuckerman concluded, ". . . but when he was unable to stop the erosion of the workmanship, which had deteriorated steadily since the riots, he'd given

up. . ." (24). Zuckerman imagined Lou pleading with Swede to move out and paternalistically raging against the upheaval that was destroying his life's work because "his" black workers can't or won't maintain quality or refused to work hard:

. . . A whole business is going down the drain because that son of a bitch LeRoi Jones, that Peek-A-Boo-Boopy-Do. . . . But they took the city and now they are going to take that business . . . and they will leave it *all* in ruins! And that will do them a world of good! They burn down their own houses. . . . Don't fix 'em up -- burn 'em down. Oh, that will do wonders for a man's black pride -- a totally ruined city to live in. A great city turned into a total nowhere! . . . And *I* hired 'em. How's that for a laugh? . . . 'You're nuts, Levov' -- this is what my friends . . . tell me -- 'What are you hiring schvartzes for? You won't get gloves, you'll get dreck.' But I hired 'em and treated them like human beings . . . my wonderful friends look up from the paper and they tell me they ought to take the schvartzes and line 'em up and shoot 'em, and I'm the one who has to remind them that's what Hitler did to the Jews. . . . They are telling me to shoot the schvartzes and I am hollering no, and meanwhile I'm the one whose business they are ruining because they cannot make a glove that fits . . . when I am arguing with these fascist bastards, Seymour, Jewish men, men of my age who have seen what I've seen. . . . *I am arguing against what I should be arguing for!* (164)

Despite the anger, Swede made clear to Zuckerman that his father loved the old Newark, just as he loved Newark (and Zuckerman, of course, loved it too), "What happened to Newark broke his heart," Swede said. The city was "butchered to death by taxes, corruption and race." Swede hung on for seven more years while he watched all the other whites leave -- "everyone, fled the smoldering rubble. . ." (269). And finally, Zuckerman imagined Swede "sitting alone in the last factory left in the worst city in the world" (268).

II

Newark was a thriving city right up to the end of the 1920's. Even with the brewing industry shifted into the underground economy, Newark's factory life was robust, as Newark historian John Cunningham reported:

"The city had 1,668 factories in 1925, with an annual payroll of \$90 million and Newark continued to boast that no other town manufactured a greater variety of products. . . . Most of the factories were small, employing fewer than thirty. But there were giants among them: Clark Thread Company, Westinghouse, Weston, Balbach's, Baker & Company, J. Wiss, Ward Baking Company, Tiffany, Pittsburgh Plate glass (making paint in Newark), Benjamin Moore, Murphy Varnish, Mennen, General Electric, Fischer Baking Company, Conmar and Johnson & Murphy, shoemakers.

"Leather, the leading industry since the 1790s, still held top place. . . . Weston and Westinghouse kept Newark near the top among . . . manufacturing electrical and radio products. . . . Kolster Radio Corporation . . . occupied five buildings in Newark in 1928, employing 3,000. . . .[17](#)

However, Paul Stellhorn's study of depression era Newark demonstrates that the city that "made everything" was already slowly losing factories and industrial jobs in the 1920s with a shift to a white-collar economy. Banking, insurance, county government, communications, and transportation became the dominant corporate employers (Public Service, New Jersey Bell Telephone, and Prudential for example). With the rapid expansion of mass transit and the frenzied construction of new highways, the modern pattern of suburban residency (in restricted white communities) and commutation was already a fixture by the mid-1920s as tens of thousands of white, suburban commuters streamed in and out daily. No longer did workers, owners, and financiers live together in the city. As Stellhorn explained, the ruling elite and wealthy professionals vacated the city almost completely -- moving to upscale Essex county bedroom suburbs or down the Jersey shore to Spring Lake (Irish) or Deal (Jewish). In 1925, the Chamber of Commerce magazine, *The Newarker*, for example, could review this pattern and contemptuously declare that "No one lives in Newark."[18](#)

In fact, prompted by the quotas imposed on European immigration in the mid-1920s and the push to complete the final construction of several large scale public works projects, such as Penn Station, the city subway, and the Wanaque reservoir system, many Newark industries were short of unskilled workers. Employers, as already mentioned, actively recruited Black workers from the South. From 1920 to 1930, the number of Blacks employed in unskilled factory work (mainly men) and domestic service (mainly women) doubled. For the few years prior to the beginning of the Depression, Blacks were fully employed. However, the Jewish Welfare Board reported that by 1933, the number of factories had already dropped to 1160 with total wages paid down to \$40 million. In short, since the mid-1920s, race was central to Newark's economic trajectory, but essentially, invisible to a teenager walled off in the South Ward.[19](#)

As for corruption, that had a markedly racial dimension too. The 1913 Progressive Era initiative failed to incorporate Newark into a regional political framework with the neighboring towns in Essex and Union counties. In its place Newark adopted the commissioner/mayor form of government which intended to be an improvement over corrupt ward politics. Under the new commissioner/mayor plan, there were now only city-wide elections for five commissioners: Public Works, Public Safety, Parks and Public Property, Revenue and Finance and Public Affairs. Then the five Commissioners selected the mayor; usually, but not always, the commissioner with highest vote count became mayor. Under this system Uptown Blacks had no political leverage and were essentially disenfranchised since they were still a city-wide minority. With few civil service statutes, the commissioners ran their domains as personal fiefdoms linked to the party machines, the business elite, the Catholic Church, and the gangsters. For example, in the 1930-1950 period, the Commissioner of Public Safety was a top police officer on leave from the department who in turn appointed other officers (also on leave) to administrative positions. In short, the entire public safety network was all white, mainly Irish, and thoroughly implicated in protecting the bootlegging and gambling for which Newark became famous in the 1920s.[20](#)

The new political power that emerged in the 1920s came from organized crime. Italian and Jewish gangsters became "entrenched" during Prohibition and helped to corrupt the police and judicial system and maintain powerful influence with both major parties, shaping political careers in local, state and even national elections. The Jewish wing was controlled by Abner (Longy) Zwillman whose power base was the Uptown district and Ruggiero (Richie the Boot) Boiardo who was in control of Little Italy (Ward 1) and the Italian North Ward (Ward 8). For example, Newark's one Jewish mayor, Meyer Ellenstein, from 1933 to 1941 was a Zwillman creation. The label that "everything was

for sale in Newark" had its origin in the rise of the Newark mobs in the 1920s. However, throughout the 30 years of Zwillman's dominance the "wide open" area of Newark was the Central Ward -- speakeasies, gambling, prostitution -- all rooted in the Black neighborhood of the city core and all safely insulated from the white periphery -- part of the *quid pro quo* between the police and the mob, not an uncommon urban arrangement.²¹

In sum, the political structure combined with the racial, ethnic and class divisions created a city that was still easy to control and to exploit -- with city government and most of its agencies (including housing, police, education and social services) as venal and racist as any city in America. In Newark, apartheid flourished. While Roth clearly understands this, he does not make the connection between the enclave that was Weequahic and the exploitation of Black immigrants who were generally young and poorly educated. The industrial decline that really began in the 1920s accelerated in the 1950s with Newark losing half of its manufacturing jobs by the early 1960s. Once wartime manufacturing ended, the Black community was left with no work and inhabiting one of the most congested and run down ghettos in the country. It seems fair to say that Roth's haven in Weequahic was possible because the Central Ward existed.

III

In *I Married A Communist*, Zuckerman's memories of "old" Newark are again invoked as he interrogated his own recollections and those of Murray Ringold, his former high school teacher, and brother of Ira, the fallen hero of the second volume of the trilogy. The central focus of the novel is the anti-communism of the McCarthy era that helped to destroy Ira's wildly successful radio career, but there are important episodes that re-enforce Roth's sentimentalizing of the protected Weequahic neighborhood and romanticizing of Newark in the 1940s.²² Murray provided Zuckerman with some of Ira's early history growing up in the tenements near the tracks in downtown (the same area where Merry camps out on her return some 60 years later) and then moving to the equally dilapidated slums of Little Italy in the Italian First Ward. Ira was a big, tough and street-smart kid but with a sensitive soul -- the only kid to cry at the famous Canary Funeral:

"It was a blessing, you know, that we didn't grow up in the Third Ward with the poor Jews. Growing up in the First Ward, Ira was always a loudmouth kike outsider to the Italians, and so however big and strong and belligerent he was Boiardo could never perceive him as local talent. . . . But in the Third Ward. . . . There Ira wouldn't have been an official outcast among the kids. If only because of his size, he would probably have come to Longy Zwillman's attention. From what I understand, Longy who was ten years older than Ira, was a lot like Ira growing up furious, a big, menacing boy who also quit school, who was fearless in a street fight, and who had the commanding looks along with something of a brain. In bootlegging, in gambling, in vending machines, on the docks, in the labor movement, in the building trades -- Longy eventually made it big. But even at the top, when he was teamed up with Bugsy Siegel and Lansky and Luck Luciano, his closest intimates were the friend he'd grown up with in the streets, Third Ward Jewish boys like himself. . . . Christ, Meyer Ellenstein, another street kid from the Third Ward ghetto -- when he was mayor of Newark, Ellenstein all but ran the city for Longy." (66-67)

Murray's stories triggered Zuckerman's own recollections of the two-year period from 1948-50 of adoring friendship and infatuation with Ira. Zuckerman's nostalgia included memories of educational "excursions" with Ira to the non-Jewish neighborhoods, especially to the working-class districts of the North Ward, Down Neck, and Third Ward -- ". . . where the Negroes had come to occupy the streets and houses of the old Jewish immigrant slum" (91). Ira would talk to everyone about the evils of the "capitalist system" and the need for democracy. Zuckerman remembered him in front of a barbershop on Spruce Street just around the corner from the Belmont Avenue tenement where his father had lived as a boy.

. . . For me it was, as Wordsworth describes the days of the French Revolution, "very Heaven": "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive./But to be young was very Heaven!" The two of us, white and surrounded by some ten or twelve black men and there was nothing for us to worry about and nothing for any of them to fear: it was not we who were their oppressors or they who were our enemies -- the oppressor-enemy by which we were all appalled. . . . (92-93)

By the fall of 1951, the red witch hunt in the entertainment industry was gaining strength and Ira was to be one of its victims as well. Zuckerman's connection to the communist left lasted just two years from 1948 to 1950, but even though he found the struggle against exploitation exhilarating, he turned away from it, just as he did from Newark. At the end of his six days of listening to Murray's attempt to understand Ira's tragic destruction, Zuckerman learned that Murray had also "finally" removed himself from Newark; he hadn't lived there for more than twenty years.

Murray said that he stayed on too long -- even after the "riots" the only white family remaining on Lehigh Avenue. He had his principles: ". . . I can't betray my teaching, I can't betray the disadvantaged of Newark. 'Not *me* -- *I'm* not leaving this place *I'm* not fleeing. My colleagues can do as they see fit -- I'm not leaving these black kids'. . ." (317). He agreed to finish out his teaching career as head of the English department at South Side (now Shabbbaz High School):

"I wouldn't leave the city, you see. I wasn't going to move out of the city where I had lived and taught all my life just because it was now a poor black city full of problems. Nobody could teach these black kids, and so they asked me to. . . . Discipline that was the whole job. . . . Worst ten years of my life. . . . I wouldn't say the disenchantment was devastating. . . . But the experience was devastating. Brutal. (317)

Like Swede's tragedy, Murray's vision of Ira's destruction is represented, in part, by Roth's portrait of volcanic upheaval that destroyed their common "pastoral" world -- both the fictional and real Weequahic.

In the third volume, Zuckerman imagines the tragedy that became of Coleman Silk's life -- the light skinned Black who repudiated his race to live white, though with a swarthy complexion and nappy hair he accepted the world's judgment that he was Jewish. In *The Human Stain*, the childhood sanctuary has been transposed to middle-class East Orange, one of the first Newark suburbs, but now also completely Black and poor.[23](#)

In East Orange, where mostly everyone was white, either poor Italian -- and living up at the Orange edge of town or down by Newark's First Ward

-- or Episcopalian and rich -- and living in the big house up by Upsala or around South Harrison -- there were fewer Jews even than there were Negroes. . . . (88)

. . . so the neighbors were on the whole friendly with the ultra-respectable, light-skinned Silks. . . . The big apartment house at the corner remained all white until after the war. Then, in late 1945, when colored people began coming in at the Orange end of the street -- the families of professional men mainly, of teachers, doctors, and dentists -- there was a moving van outside the apartment everyday. . . . (122-23)

As in the two other volumes, he re-creates the central character's history by introducing a character who is grounded in the past, in this instance from Coleman's sister, Ernestine, who still lived in the family house in East Orange. The house had been bought in 1925, one year before Coleman was born. In Ernestine's presentation not only had Coleman been the smartest kid in the then prestigious East Orange High, but also an athletic star and extraordinarily handsome -- not unlike Swede. The parents were committed to exactly the same work ethic, moral rectitude, and belief in education as Zuckerman's. They had found a way on to a very good street in a very much bounded, secure, and structured neighborhood. However, Coleman wanted no limits on his life, especially in racist America. He turned his back on his "roots" and re-invented himself. At the end of the novel, Ernestine declaimed, in the clearest, most unambiguous terms in the trilogy, the cost of what has been lost. It is worth quoting at length:

. . . I often wrestle with this question of what everything used to be. What education used to be. Urban renewal destroyed East Orange. . . . It scared the merchants to death and the merchants left. . . . Then 280 and the parkway cut our little town in quarters. . . . A devastating intrusion. . . . I used to be able to do all my Christmas shopping on Main Street. Well Main Street and Central Avenue. Central Avenue was called Fifth Avenue of the Oranges then. . . . There was a B. Altman. A Russek's. There was a Black, Starr, and Gorham. There was a Bachrach, the photographer. A very nice men's store, Minks, that was Jewish. . . . Two theatres. . . . All of life was there in little East Orange.

All of life was there in East Orange. And when. Before. Before urban renewal. Before the classics were abandoned. Before they stopped giving out the Constitution to high school graduates. Before there were remedial classes in the colleges teaching kids what they should have learned in ninth grade. Before Black History month. Before they built the parkway and bright in 280. . . . Before she drove up the hill to West Orange to shop. Before everything changed, including Coleman Silk. That's when it all was different -- before. And, she lamented it will never be the same again, not in East Orange or anywhere else in America. (331-32).

IV

Once again, Roth is fixated on a vanished world. In this case, East Orange is the base from which Coleman drew his strength, another roseate portrayal of the old neighborhoods as "safe harbors." These were neighborhoods with few poor families, no tenements, and certainly little, if any street, "violence." Indeed, fear for personal safety is one element that Roth exploits to help mark the distinction that he draws between the

"vast slum" of the present era and the sanctuary of the past. The thoughtfulness which Roth usually brings to larger social questions has, in this instance, been replaced by cliché. In fact, it seems to me gratuitous and inflammatory, not unlike the many mainstream magazine pieces that appeared in the decade after the rebellions. The best known and most widely cited was a 1975 essay in *Harper's Magazine* by Arthur Louis entitled "The Worst American City." It stands as a judgment about the "decline" of the industrial city -- with Newark the title winner. The central focus of this piece and much of the mainstream press was crime. For Louis the statistics showed that ". . . anyone planning to spend a lifetime in Newark can virtually count on being robbed someday." His conclusion was also unequivocal and it has remained Newark's defining label ever since, one that Roth does not contradict:

The city of Newark stands without serious challenge as the worst of all. It ranked among the five worst cities in no fewer than nineteen of the twenty-four categories, and it was dead last in nine of them. . . . Newark is a city that desperately needs help.²⁴

In the trilogy, beyond the general sense of disorder after 1967, there are two dramatic instances of street crime and personal violence to establish the distance between the sanctuary of the old world and the miasma of the new. From Roth's perspective, the "modern" Newark violence overwhelms even the most committed Newark citizens. As discussed above in section III, at the end of *I Married A Communist*, Murray poignantly admits that he doesn't live in Newark anymore; he said that he stayed on too long -- even after he was mugged twice, once at gun-point. Still he didn't leave. It required the death of his wife, Doris for him to be forced out. He told Zuckerman that Doris was murdered in a street mugging, hit in the head with a brick as she crossed the street from Beth Israel hospital to home. She was killed for a pocketbook that held no money, he said. Twenty years later, he still feels terribly guilty for her death, sacrificed her to his "civic virtue" and his principles he says.

Second, in *American Pastoral*, Swede's principled and guilt-ridden decision to stay on in Newark has been discussed already, but he too had been attacked in the street, his car stolen at gunpoint! From Swede's perspective Newark was awash in violence as he explained to Zuckerman at their dinner which opens the novel. Swede said Black teenagers were riding around Newark in stolen cars, cars as "murder weapons," right in the old neighborhood:

. . . Bergen near Lyons is where I got rammed. Remember Henry's, 'the Sweet Shop,' next to the Park Theatre? Well, right there, where Henry's used to be. Took my first high school date to Henry's. . . . Took her for a black-and-white soda. . . . But a black-and-white doesn't mean soda anymore on Bergen Street. It means the worst kind of hatred in the world. A car coming the wrong way on a one-way street and they ram me. Four kids drooping out the windows. Two of them get out laughing, joking and point a gun at my head. I hand over the keys and one of them takes off in my car. Right in front of what used to be Henry's. It's something horrible. . . . (25)

Additionally, in *Patrimony*, at the moment in the narrative when Roth is trying to make some sense of his father's pragmatism and perseverance, he included this anecdote:

"A black kid about fourteen approached him with a gun on a side street leading to their little temple. It was the middle of the afternoon. . . . The black kids prey on the elderly Jews in his neighborhood [in Elizabeth] even in broad daylight. They bicycle in from Newark, he tells me, take their money, laugh, and go home. . . . 'You can have whatever you want and don't need that piece to get it. You can put the piece away.' The kid lowers the gun and my father gives him his wallet. 'Take all the money,' my father says, 'but if the wallet's no value to you, I wouldn't mind it back.' The kid takes the money gives back the wallet, and he runs. And you know what my father does? He calls across the street, 'How much did you get?' And the kid is obedient -- he *counts* it for him. 'Twenty-three dollars,' the kid says. 'Good,' my father tells him -- 'now don't go out and spend it on crap.'" (125-26)

This certainly fits of the trope of Newark in ashes -- heightening the narrative tension between anger at the violence and pathos at the human cost. However, Roth has succumbed to much of the racial propaganda about crime and the related race-inflected shibboleths about Newark's decline. In sum, Roth can't seem to sidestep the intensity of the very short-lived "utopia" that was Weequahic even though he well knows the city's history.

Notes

¹ For example, in Robert Stone's glowing review of *I Married A Communist*, he said, "But the fact is that, besides doing all the other marvelous things he does, Roth has managed to turn his bleak part of Jersey and its people into a kind of Jewish Yoknapatawpha County, a singularly vital microcosm with which to address the twists and turns of the American narrative. With *American Pastoral*, Roth again made something extraordinary out of the unhappy history of Newark and its environs." ["Waiting For Lefty," *The New York Review of Books* (November 5, 1998): 38+.]

On November 5, 1998, Roth received a National Medal of the Arts from President Clinton who said, "What Dublin was to Joyce or Yoknapatawpha County was to Faulkner, Newark is to Philip Roth." [<http://www.clintonpresidentialcenter.org/legacy/110598-speech-by-president-at-presentation-of-medal-of-the-arts-ceremony.htm>]

² John Cunningham, *Newark* (Newark: NJ Historical Society, 1966) 244.

³ Interview: Charles McGrath, "Zuckerman's Alter Brain" *The New York Times* (May 7, 2000): <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/05/07reviews/000507.07mcgrat.html>. Additionally, the well known anthropologist Sherry Ortner has written an ethnographic study of her Weequahic high school class of 1958. Even eight years after Roth's graduation, Ortner demonstrates the provincial and closed world that still prevailed in the neighborhood -- what she called "Jewish hegemony." See Sherry B. Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture and the Class of '58* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003) and "Ethnography Among the Newark Class of '58 of Weequahic High School," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 32.3 (1993): 411-429. On the intersection of anthropology and fiction

in Newark, see Jonathan Schwartz, "Comment: High School Classmates Revisited: Sherry Ortner and Philip Roth," *Anthropology Today* 14.6 (December 1998): 14-16. This view of Weequahic is also endorsed in dozens of interviews conducted by William Helmreich for his study of the development of the Jewish community in an around Newark, *The Enduring Community: The Jews of Newark and Metrowest* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1999). Transcripts are held at the Jewish Historical Society of Metrowest (Whippany, New Jersey).

4 Houghton Mifflin Publishers, Interview with Philip Roth (1998): <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/authordetail.cfm?textType=interviews&authorID=618>>. See also Mervyn Rothstein, "To Newark, With Love. Philip Roth." *The New York Times* (29 Mar 1991): C1.

5 *The Facts* 33 and 110. Much of the painfully slow "urban renewal" in the Central Ward was focused on building the new medical center and expansion of New Jersey Institute of Technology rather than new housing (which eventually was constructed but much later).

6 *The Facts* 124-25. Roth also claims that his father's stories were are an important base for his fiction "Narrative is the form that his knowledge takes, and his repertoire has never been large: family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew. Somewhat like mine" (16). However Roth can't resist interjecting Zuckerman into his biography with an ironical critique of Roth's veracity and interpretation of his own life. Zuckerman doesn't accept the benign nature of Roth's Weequahic life. "You see your beginnings, up to and including Bucknell, as an idyll, a pastoral, allowing little if no room for inner turmoil, the discovery in yourself of a dark, or unruly, or untamed side. (169), Zuckerman thinks the text is too conciliatory and sentimental. After all, where is the "self-hatred" and the attack on convention that marks *Portnoy's Complaint* and the Zuckerman novels. Zuckerman thinks that Newark, family and Jew were all a "detention house" that Roth was escaping as fast as possible.

7 In Helmreich's survey of the rise and development of the Jewish community in Newark and northern New Jersey, the decline is succinctly summarized, but in a clichéd context:

"With the war's end came the belated realization that Newark had been losing its economic dominance for a least two decades before the war. Highways were being built, housing starts were down, industry was leaving, and the quality of life was sinking rapidly as crime, slums, and family dislocation became major social issues. All of the was accompanied biracial polarization that had accelerated as the city's tax base eroded, and which, in turn, affected the quality of services offered to its residents." (11 and note 3, above)

8 See McGrath interview, note 3 above.

9 Louis Menand, "The Irony and the Ecstasy: Philip Roth and the Jewish Atlantis," *The New Yorker* (May 19, 1997): 93. Also, Roth exploits the long tradition of the pastoral as critique of the corruption, sterility, and vacuousness of the modern and urbane world - Roth pays tribute of Milton (whose own difficulties with pride, idealism, and women are well documented), as the novel is divided into three sections "Paradise Remembered," "The Fall," and "Paradise Lost." He also makes a bow towards Elizabethan fantasy in the doomed marriage of Swede to Dawn Dwyer -- Swede's infinite adoration of the perfectly

beautiful woman played out in the rural enclave of Old Rimrock some 30 miles from downtown Newark.

[10](#) "Survey of Newark" by the Jewish Welfare Board July 1940 (Archives of The Jewish Historical Society of Metrowest).

[11](#) Newark Archive, Jewish Historical Society of Metrowest.

[12](#) Newark Archive, Jewish Historical Society of Metrowest.

[13](#) The Census figures for Blacks in Newark prior to 1920 show a total in 1910 of 9,475 distributed in small numbers throughout the city. For example, Ward 3 was 1,356, Ward 6 was 212, Ward 7 1,441, Wards 1 and 8 (Italian North Ward) 615 and 698, and Ward 9 (Weequahic) 313. From Kenneth and Barbara Jackson, "The Black Experience in Newark: The Growth of the Ghetto, 1870-1970" in William C. Wright, ed. *New Jersey Since 1860: New Findings and Interpretation* (Trenton: N.J. Historical Commission, 1972): 47.

[14](#) Cunningham, 299-300. He quotes from a study commissioned by the City on postwar planning.

[15](#) See Jackson and Jackson and also see Clement Price, "The Beleaguered City as Promised Land: Blacks in Newark, 1917-1947" in Wright: 11-45. See also Clement Price "The Afro-American Community in Newark, 1917-1947: A Social History," diss., Rutgers U., 1975. On the catastrophe in the South which prompted the great migration, see the under-appreciated Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941).

[16](#) "Newark of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, With the Stamp of Morris Rachlin, Master Builder, Indelibly Imprinted on Each Phase," *The Jewish Chronicle* (September 23, 1927): 5.

[17](#) Cunningham, 276. The older, traditional Newark industries such as leather, jewelry, and clothing were already starting to leave the city --the upturn in the 1920's was in electronics, chemicals, and bread (with some 137 bread factories in operation). See "Survey of Newark" by the Jewish Welfare Board July 1940 (Archives of The Jewish Historical Society of Metrowest).

[18](#) Paul A. Stellhorn, "Depression and Decline: Newark, New Jersey: 1929-1944," diss. Rutgers U., 1982: 59. For background, see the important anthology: Stanley B. Winters, eds., *Newark: An Assessment 1967-1977* (Newark: NJIT, 1978).

[19](#) Jewish Welfare Board Survey, 12. This is corroborated in Price and Jackson and Jackson, as well. The analogous notion of another protected and homogeneous Newark neighborhood is reported in Michael Immerso, *Newark's Little Italy: The Vanished First Ward* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997). The First Ward was largely demolished to make way, in the early 1950's, for the infamous Christopher Columbus Housing Project and the construction of Interstate Rt. 280 which did little to solve Newark's economic decline. Immerso's book is Roth's source for the Canary Funeral in *I Married A Communist* (see below). It should also be noted that another interstate highway was constructed as part of the national defense work of the 1950's and 60's. This one, interstate 78, bisected Newark in the south cutting off Weequahic from the rest of the city. On the building of the Garden State Parkway and its devastation of East Orange, see discussion of *The Human Stain*, below. Perhaps, the most infamous postwar example was

New York City's Cross Bronx Expressway --the trench that destroyed a dozen neighborhoods.

[20](#) See Stellhorn and also Dorothy Guyot, "Newark Crime and Politics in a Dying City, in Anne Heinz, et.al., eds. *Crime In City Politics* (New York: Longman, 1983): 23-96.

[21](#) For a biography and Newark crime history, see Mark Stuart, *Gangster No. 2: Longy Zwillman, The Man Who Invented Organized Crime* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1985) and also see Alan Block, *East Side/West Side: Organizing Crime in New York, 1930-1980* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1980):129-161. See also Cunningham, Price and Stellhorn. Finally, on the expanse of political and police corruption see Governor's Select Commission on Civil Disorder, "Report For Action," (Trenton, 1968).

[22](#) See Larry Schwartz, "Philip Roth's *I Married a Communist*: Re-thinking the Cold War," *Cultural Logic* (2004).

[23](#) On Anatole Broyard, see Henry Louis Gates, "White Like Me," *The New Yorker* (June 17, 1996): 66-81. Interestingly, Zwillman lived in a high-rise luxury apartment building on Munn Avenue in East Orange before he moved to a house in West Orange; he bought his mother a house in Weequahic

[24](#) (January 1975): 68 and 71. On the fact that street crime statistics are *always* manipulated, see "Introduction" to Heinz. On crime see Guyot and see also Richard F. Sparks, "Crime and Criminal Victimization in Newark: 1996-1976 in Winters: 526-538; Sharpe James, "The South Ward Since 1967A Changing Community, in Winters: 58-64; and Isadore Candeb, "Newark -- A New Perspective on Urban Change," in Winters: 511-518.