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# A Ghetto Within an Island?

## The Satmar Community of Canvey Island

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### ABSTRACT

This study reveals the top-down strategy the Satmar community adopts to claim territory and influence the private and public spaces in the new settlement of Canvey Island. Purchasing the school made it possible to concentrate the community in a compact peripheral area at a relatively low cost. This collaboration is mostly explained by the attractiveness of Canvey Island, which offers an affordable solution to housing problems within an hour drive from Stamford Hill (North of London). The inherent lack of collaborations and cohesion in the veteran local population limits their ability to safeguard their spatial rights and maintain their social practices. Today Satmar is considered one of the most dominant congregations of the Torah world, and the veteran residents of Canvey Island are concerned about its impact on the public spaces, and its possible ramifications.

### KEYWORDS

Group action, Residential segregation, Planning, Interest group, Institutional structure, Satmar, Canvey Island

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude révèle la stratégie descendante adoptée par la communauté Satmar pour revendiquer le territoire et influencer l'espace privé et public dans la nouvelle colonie de Canvey Island. L'achat de l'école a permis de concentrer la communauté dans une zone périphérique compacte à un coût relativement faible. Cette collaboration s'explique principalement par l'attractivité de Canvey Island, qui offre une solution abordable aux problèmes de logement à moins d'une heure de route de Stamford Hill (nord de Londres). Le manque inhérent de collaborations et de cohésion dans la population locale limite sa capacité à sauvegarder ses droits spatiaux et à maintenir ses pratiques sociales. Aujourd'hui, Satmar est considérée comme l'une des congrégations dominantes du monde de la Torah et les résidents originels de l'île Canvey sont préoccupés par son impact sur les espaces publics et ses possibles ramifications.

### MOTS CLÉS

action de groupe, ségrégation résidentielle, planification, groupe d'intérêt, structure institutionnelle, Satmar, Canvey Island

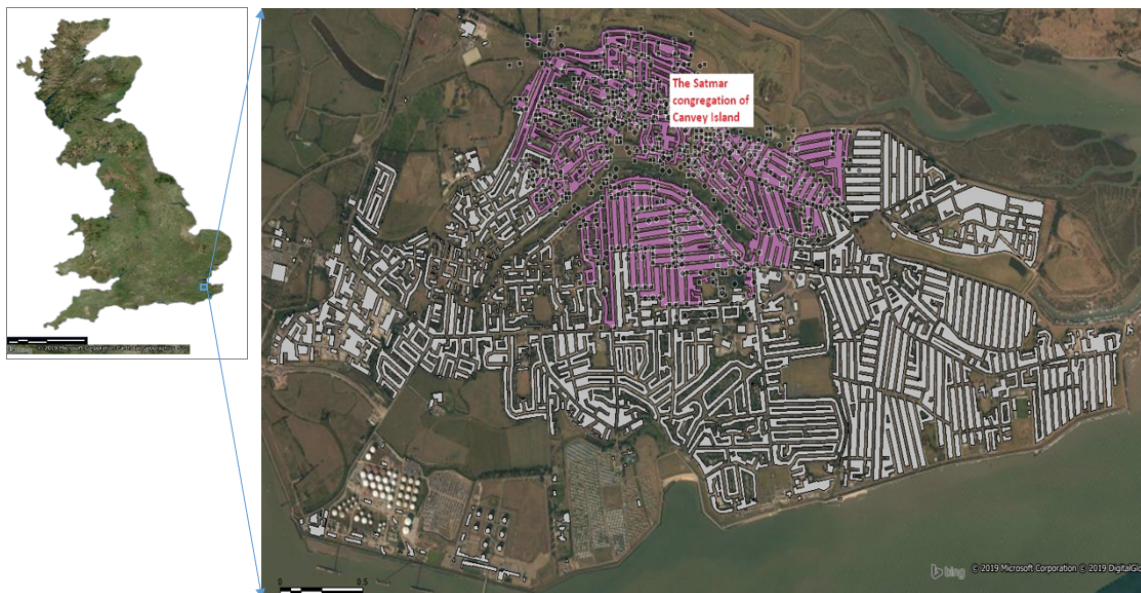
Orthodox Judaism is deeply spatial. It requires that its members live in accordance with *Halakha* (Jewish law), the dominant protocol determining Jewish ritual and translation of the commandments into many aspects of day-to-day living. The objective of the Haredi struggle for territorial segregation is the wish to safeguard the younger generation from the perceived threats of modern culture. The strict orthodox Jewish (Haredi) community is composed of groups and sub-groups (sects), and the residential preferences of its individuals are profoundly affected by the need to live in a strict religious environment. Most of Haredis belong to three main groups: Litvish, Hasidim and Sephardic. All wish to live among "friends", other members of the same group to which they belong but differ in terms of their self-identity and their status within Haredi society. This study reveals the top-down strategy the Satmar Hasidic community adopts to claim territory and influence the private and public spaces in the new settlement of Canvey Island. While Canvey Island offers an affordable solution to housing problems within an hour drive from Stamford Hill (North of London), its veteran residents are concerned about its impact on the public spaces, and its possible ramifications.

The literature assumes that a collective that gathers at a given place and time creates direct cooperation and is defined as group behaviour (Saegert & Winkel, 1990). Clear authority reaches consensus, sets rules and creates an organised segregated pattern. The group emphasises its organised power that differentiates it from surrounded non-organised individuals. When group members realise they are more likely to achieve their goal when acting co-ordinately and simultaneously, they may extend their enclave through group action (Kong,

2001). This behaviour, characteristic of groups such as those purchasing organisations and gated communities, is reinforced in traditional communities where religion acts as social cement (Bankston & Zhou, 1995). In these societies, similar interests and non-territorial norms of control are completed by territoriality that creates a stronger socio-spatial order than is usually found in communities based on the needs of the individuals (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). Today, Satmar is considered one of the most important congregations of the Torah world. It is seeking a housing solution for the growing community of Stamford Hill, and the veteran residents of Canvey Island are concerned about its impact on the public spaces, and its possible ramifications. Canvey Island (fig. 1) is a civil parish and reclaimed island in the Thames estuary in Essex, England, separated from the mainland by a network of creeks. Lying just above sea level, it is prone to flooding at exceptional tides but has nevertheless been inhabited since the Roman invasion of Britain. In 2015, its population comprised about 37,500, inhabiting 10,863 houses and residential buildings. Initially, most of the apartments in Canvey Island were about the same size –68-74 m<sup>2</sup>, though some of them were larger. Canvey Island is mainly populated by white British population, along with small Asian and Black communities; 74% of its inhabitants identify as Christian (including members of The Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and other denominations), 0.2% as Muslims, 0.1% as Hindus and over 16% as having no religion.

The Jewish Congregation of Canvey Island (JCoCI), Ashkenazi Orthodox, was founded on Canvey Island in 1935 as an offspring of Southend community but closed by 1938. In 2016, Haredi families from the Satmar Hasidic group got priced out of the Stamford Hill area of North London, and have been establishing a new community near the former Castle View School, in the Northern part of Canvey island town centre.

Figure 1. Canvey Island, in the Thames estuary in Essex



## 1. METHODOLOGY: THE CASE STUDY OF CANVEY ISLAND

The study constructed a detailed spatiotemporal database that contains exact georeferenced data on Canvey Island newcomers. The first step was to identify the Hasidic territory, within 20-minute walking distance from the school, as Orthodox Jewish communities need to live within a short distance of a synagogue to enable them to obey the laws of the Sabbath which prohibit driving or riding in a car or any other vehicle from Friday sundown until Saturday sundown. The second step was to identify the purchases that took place in this area since March 2016. In each house, the residents were asked about the identity of other residents of the building, and whether they rented or owned their apartment. 53 families indicated that they belong to the Hasidic community of Satmar, based in Stamford Hill, and gave the date of entry into the new apartment. To reconstruct the dynamics of population replacement, 46 veteran residents –who sold their apartments between 2016 and 2017– were identified and interviewed about the sales process: 100% ex-owners were willing to reply to these questions. To complete the fundamental part of this research, 32 interviews were conducted with key figures such as community leaders, Canvey island's Mayor, municipal planners, real estate agents and people from the public.

Canvey Island geographic information system (GIS) was the constructed, based on the layers updated for 2018 provided by the Ordnance Survey. It contains additional layers pertaining to topography, roads, land parcels, and buildings. The characteristics of the research area's apartments and households were organised

as a GIS layer, in which every record in the table is related to the corresponding building. Since most of the buildings are private houses, the collected data was analysed but will not be presented on a map to protect confidentiality.

## **2. TOP-DOWN INITIATIONS: THE HASIDIC COMMUNITY OF SATMAR**

In recent years, demographic, social, and economic pressures have limited involvement of the leadership in the Stamford Hill community's daily life; its ability to enforce group discipline for continued residence within the community has been weakened. By default, the leftovers were driven to establish residence far from the original group enclave, and scouting parties were sent out to Canvey Island, Milton Keynes, Harlow and Westcliff, to check affordability and suitability to the community needs. The geographic separation that got created between the generations threatens the continuity of the community: on the one hand, the population living in the original enclave is aging, and on the other, the lifestyle in the new communities tends to adapt to the new conditions of life, and sometimes adopt a more extreme lifestyle.

Individuals' identification with their community and their desire to raise their children in a similar religious environment evoke conscious ideological and moral recruitment (Flint, 2017). In addition to the threat of non-acceptance to the group's institutions, clear-cut monitory mechanisms ensure compliant behaviour, allowing the leadership to impose discipline and organise matters following its preferences. The expressive incentive for the groups' member is that they would help out in the process of trying to reach the group's goals. The Satmar group is characterised by a well-coordinated institutional structure, organised funding, and members' strong commitment; these characteristics enable them to mobilise dedicated manpower and significant resources to realise the community's segregated preferences.

## **3. EVALUATION OF CANVEY ISLAND'S SPACE-TIME DYNAMICS**

To understand how the group action works, this research examined the penetration of Satmar to Canvey Island since May 2016. The rapid process indicates the abilities of the organised community when it competes with non-organised individuals.

- Community's representatives identified suitable community centre/school for sale, and a benefactor bought Castle View School on the island for the Hasidic pioneers on March 24th, 2016, from Essex County Council.
- Six lone pioneer families identified apartments for sale and moved in over the same weekend in May 2016.
- Massive penetration turns "non-hostile" into "friendly" area with the settlement of forty families (2016-2017).

The rapid movement patterns were well-planned. The designated area was "marked" by the leaders of the community. Pre-planning was evident in the acquisition of properties within a 20-minute walk from the JCoCI, set in the former Castle View School).

## **4. THE HOSTING COMMUNITY**

Canvey Island was voted the most English place in Britain in 2013, with 73% voted to leave the EU (one of the five most pro-Brexit wards). The direct cooperation of the Satmars creates pressure on the residents, comprising individuals with diverse beliefs and interests. Most are autonomous homeowners. The level of familiarity with the Satmar community is relatively low. The residents who live next to the newcomers are very interested in getting to know the Satmar community.

The Deputy Town Mayor of Canvey Island Independent Party explains: "When they did the last census, most people who live on Canvey, instead of putting British, they put English. It's just that they felt that they were English more than anything else... We have heard about them (the Hasidic community) moving to Canvey. Obviously, they've got their own traditions and their own religion and that lot, so that will probably stop them mixing as much as what someone else would. I know that obviously, both communities have got to get used to each other and all that lot, but how much will their religion allow them to be part of the community? Because there are obviously certain things they can't do on certain days and things like that... In a way, I think that they choose to distance themselves. I'm not saying I want them to integrate with us totally, I'm just saying that I think they won't be able to integrate as much, because of the rules of their religion" (BBC, January 9th, 2018).

The veteran residents are interested that the Satmar integrates into Canvey's society, and believe that it is possible to a large extent despite their fear of the impact of this process on the existing population.

## 5. DISCUSSION: GROUP ACTION AS A DRIVING FORCE FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE

This research has revealed the top-down strategy the Satmar community adopts to claim territory, distinguish their abilities and limitations to influence the neighbourhoods' private and public spaces. The in-depth survey indicates the way direct, effective collaborations of individuals of the Satmar community with their leadership led to the new settlement in Canvey Island. Its unique values and lifestyles are reflected in their struggle to occupy space and claim resources, both between the groups and in their dealing with institutional planning systems. Purchasing the school made it possible to concentrate the community in a compact peripheral area at a relatively low cost. This collaboration is largely explained by the attractiveness of Canvey Island which offers an affordable solution to housing problems within an hour drive from the traditional enclave of Stamford Hill. Analysis of collectivism versus individualism in a liberal competitive economy reveals important elements in the ability of a cohesive community with high demographic fertility to harness private interests and to wrest control of space from other groups, thereby creating a "contiguous" Haredi living space.

The Satmar group has deep social and cultural roots and strong mutual interests. The organisation of the group allows communal norms and social ties to further private interests. The group's collective and disciplined activities and territorial behaviour conform to its leaders' spatial preferences.

This behaviour, spreading to the peripheral streets of the neighbourhood, demonstrated that the Satmars are effective strategists in planning, organising, and executing a heterogeneous space that is characterised by its laws, although being also accepted by the veteran locals. In the urban reality, the inherent lack of collaborations and cohesion in the veteran local population limits their ability to safeguard their spatial rights and maintain their social practices. The community inhabits a compact area, and the inclusion of young families increases the population availing itself of communal institutions, and the prestige of the community and its leaders. The boys' school opened at the beginning of the settlement, while the girls' school opened later; in the interim, the girls had to commute daily to Stamford Hill. The increase of the spatial predominance of Satmar questions the veteran residents of Canvey Island about its impact on public spaces.

Despite some resemblances, the organised entry into Canvey Island differs from the classic invasion-succession model (Wirth, 1956), according to which relatively free individuals move spontaneously into higher-status areas using private capital, and also from a racial blockbusting in US cities which involved planned invasions even if the newcomers were not the planners. In both cases, the newcomers created spatial dominance. Since these areas reflect compromises that were made between the preference for segregation and urban constraints, they tend to be heterogeneous. In Canvey Island, the group action was supported by community capital, and organised collaboration and top-down implementation.

A direct collaboration of individuals with their leadership has gradually inserted the cultural language of Satmar into Canvey Island and re-shaped the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable uses. This involves property lines and religious composition (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999), draws the boundaries between identities and provides a utility to the broader mission of creating a new Haredi settlement. Eruv are complex devices consisting of poles and wires that surround communities. Eruv symbolically changes the classification of public or the 'semi-public' space into private ownership. By reclassifying space, restrictions on the 'carrying' (in a Jewish legalistic sense) of items such as walking sticks, wheelchairs and prams are removed, thus giving freedom to people who would otherwise be trapped in their homes over the Sabbath. With this regard, it seems that there is Eruv around Satmar current compound in the former Castle View School, since adults carry books on Shabbat and push baby strollers, and children ride on scooters.

As the process is continuing, the Satmar learned from previous experience. The properties are purchased sporadically, in a way that leads to a heterogeneous residential pattern. By imposing group discipline on people who considered to buy flat in the free market, avoiding homogeneous "ghetto" enclave, opening and co-operating with the local media and mix-housing with the locals, Satmars can obtain a positive attitude from the veteran residents. Previous experience indicates that over time, there will be two entirely separate communities on the island, leading parallel lives. This could work very well based on mutual respect and "each to their own". Despite the Satmars effort to avoid inner community market, it is anticipated that higher demand will increase properties prices. This will improve the equity of those who leave Canvey Island, but decrease the ability of the next generation of Canvey Island's current residents to buy property and may lead to resentment and friction.

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