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INTRODUCTION
Urban History, Arnold Hirsch, and the Second Ghetto Thesis

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In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States experienced a new urbanism. Major American cities were transformed as large numbers of African Americans and new immigrant groups migrated to central cities while an equally significant out-migration of middle-class Euro-Americans moved to the periphery of metropolitan areas. By 1970, most Americans lived in suburbs, not cities or rural areas.¹

By then, many agreed that inner-city poverty was America’s most perplexing problem. “The ghetto is the central domestic problem of American life,” wrote historian Richard C. Wade in 1968. “Not only does it stand mockingly as symbol of the unfulfilled promise of equality, but it also frustrates the attack on other metropolitan issues.”² The rapidity of racial succession in urban neighborhoods between 1945 and 1980 resisted careful and clear historical analysis. By 1980, most American historians made a distinction between the de jure forms of segregation in the Jim Crow South and the de facto pattern of residential discrimination characteristic of the urban North. Arnold Hirsch’s Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960 (1983) changed the debate.³

Hirsch demonstrated with compelling evidence that the social and spatial structures of a major northern city were determined less by the benign factors of “the market” and more by government complicity and support. Between 1940 and 1970, a state-sanctioned “second ghetto” with a distinctive form of segregation emerged, supported by white, Euro-American “ethnics” defending their “homeowner rights” and downtown elites striving to preserve commercial real estate. This pattern of racial exclusion was, according to Hirsch, “so pervasive, so deep, that it virtually constituted a new form of de jure segregation.”⁴

The Hirsch thesis challenged not only patterns of residential segregation and racial exclusion. The conflicts Hirsch unearthed in Chicago also spoke to a variety of larger interpretive issues regarding the postwar metropolis in the United States. Several bodies of recent work reflect how Making the Second
Ghetto stimulated a variety of new questions. For example, Hirsch implied that the forces contributing to the “urban crisis,” deindustrialization, and the emergence of “Reagan Democrats” originated in local resistance to racial integration before the antipoverty programs of the Great Society in the 1960s. The turmoil associated with the 1960s could only be understood by the critical but little acknowledged events a decade earlier. Second, Hirsch discovered nearly 500 “communal riots”—violent, racial incidents from 1945 to 1950 largely unreported by the media. These little-known episodes illuminated the emergence of “whiteness” and racially constructed identities among various ethnic groups. As the following essays reveal, Hirsch’s analysis previewed elements of recent scholarship on the social and linguistic construction of race. Hirsch was among the first historians to invoke the concepts of “whiteness” and the “merging of ‘ethnics’” as analytical tools for understanding racial segregation, a contribution still largely unrecognized by scholars of race and whiteness. Finally, that same violence indirectly questioned interpretations of urban riots and rebellions, a literature that frequently construes crowd behavior as a rational, extralegal—even legitimate—vehicle of protest by powerless groups.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Making the Second Ghetto, an appropriate time to assess the influence and meaning of the “second ghetto” thesis. The authors of the following six essays, by admission, have been significantly shaped by Making the Second Ghetto and other writings by Hirsch. Each present different, and sometimes conflicting, evaluations on the impact of the second ghetto thesis. The forum concludes with a reaction and comment by Arnold Hirsch himself.

Essays by Ronald Bayor and Raymond Mohl demonstrate how the second ghetto thesis influenced their studies of Atlanta and Miami, respectively. Bayor discovered remarkably similar kinds of racial exclusion and institutionalized segregation in Atlanta and Chicago, developments that call into question the presumption that patterns of racial discrimination in the North departed dramatically from patterns in the South. By contrast, Mohl found that while the second ghetto model was applicable to Miami, it followed a different trajectory. In Miami, the process began earlier with public housing but later with urban renewal. Miami’s experience also showed how expressway construction, school integration, and new immigration patterns (specifically the large influx of Cubans between 1960 and 1980) were equally important to the postwar process of racial segregation. Even concepts such as “blockbusting” assumed a different meaning in Miami, evidenced by the role of African American realtors such as Wesley E. Garrison and Luther Brooks.

Amanda Seligman and Thomas Sugrue point out how Making the Second Ghetto reflected the influence of Hirsch’s teacher and mentor, the late Gilbert Osofsky. In Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (1963), Osofsky emphasized the spatial elements of segregation, devoted little attention to economics or labor, and placed considerable importance on white power. But Hirsch departed
significantly from earlier work by showing how Ososky’s model of an “endur-
ing ghetto” ignored the fluidity of the “ghettoization” process, particularly
how specific and individual actors played conscious and distinctive roles in
reshaping the neighborhood spaces of postwar Chicago. Along with Heather
Ann Thompson, both Seligman and Sugrue contend that Hirsch ignored or at
least downplayed the role of black agency in his narrative. Yet, at the same
time, he offered new and compelling evidence that residential segregation
originated in the public policies, private boardrooms, and family living rooms
of white Americans.

These and other American urban historians have argued that Hirsch’s model
speaks to a larger pattern of urban development in the twentieth-century
United States. Carl Nightingale maintains that the value of Making the Second
Ghetto goes beyond Chicago and the American polity. “Ghettos” and the lan-
guage employed to analyze and even marginalize the poor—urban crisis, underclass, hyperghetto—have “gone global.”9 According to Nightingale, Hirsch
described an emerging nexus of power relationships and local conflicts
that help explain contemporary conflicts over global power.

Finally, Making the Second Ghetto demonstrates, in the words of Raymond
Mohl, “the power of history.” Patterns of neighborhood development deter-
mine what groups have access to jobs, good schools, reliable public services,
and well-maintained infrastructures. Where you live determines what you
become. Current legal battles such as those described by Mohl still grapple
with the effects of public programs first described and analyzed by Hirsch. The
racial and economic balkanization that characterizes contemporary American
cities are rooted in the private and public policies that created new and distinc-
tive patterns of racial segregation. The way cities look is the product of the
forces described in Making the Second Ghetto. As Thomas Sugrue aptly sum-
marizes, in the American metropolis today, “geography is destiny.”

NOTES

1. By the mid-1980s, a substantial literature documented how government agencies, private developers,
and consumption patterns contributed to the suburbanization of the United States. See Kenneth T. Jackson,
Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York, 1985); “America’s Rush to Sub-
New City,” in Daniel Schaffer, ed., Two Centuries of American Planning (Baltimore, 1988); Fishman, Bour-
geois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia (New York, 1987); John R. Stilgoe, Borderland: Origins of the
American Suburb, 1820-1939 (New Haven, CT, 1988); Henry Binford, The First Suburbs: Residential Com-
munities on the Boston Periphery, 1815-1860 (Chicago, 1984); Michael H. Ebner, Creating Chicago’s
North Shore: A Suburban History (Chicago, 1988); Mark Baldassare, Trouble in Paradise: The Suburban
Transformation of America (New York, 1986); Ann Durkin Keating, Building Chicago: Suburban Devel-
opers and the Creation of a Divided Metropolis (Columbus, OH, 1988); Matthew Edel, Elliot Sclar, and
Philip Lupia, Shaky Palaces: Homeownership and Social Mobility in Boston’s Suburbanization (New York,
1984); John Archer, “Ideology and Aspiration: Individualism, the Middle Class and the Genesis of the


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