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Timothy J. Gilfoyle
Loyola University Chicago, tgilfoy@luc.edu

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Introduction: Urban History, Arnold Hirsch, and the Second Ghetto Thesis Redux

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Timothy J. Gilfoyle¹

Abstract

The death of American historian Arnold Hirsch, in 2018, generated multiple reexaminations of his profoundly influential “second ghetto thesis.” Hirsch’s landmark *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940 - 1960* (1983) is considered among the most important books on twentieth-century American history published in the past half century. In 2003, contributors to a special issue of the *Journal of Urban History* reflected on the twentieth anniversary of Hirsch’s second ghetto thesis. More recently, a new generation of urbanists have emerged who build upon and challenge Hirsch’s work. This forum highlights this new generation.

Keywords

Simon Balto, Chicago, Ta-Nehisi Coates, N. D. B. Connolly, Lilia Fernández, Arnold Hirsch, D. Bradford Hunt, Destin Jenkins, public housing, second ghetto, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Rhonda Y. Williams

The historian Arnold Hirsch died in 2018. Hirsch’s passing generated multiple reexaminations of his profoundly influential “second ghetto thesis.” Obituaries in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* recounted the importance of his *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (1983).¹ Retrospective examinations at the Urban History Association Biennial Meeting in 2018 organized by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 2019 highlighted the importance of Hirsch’s research.² Ostensibly about the city of Chicago, *Making the Second Ghetto* offered a new paradigm by which to understand twentieth-century urban race relations in the United States, paving the way for an explosion of research on urban politics and racial segregation in the postwar era. Historian Thomas J. Sugrue ranks *Making the Second Ghetto* “among a handful of the most important books on twentieth-century American history in the last 40 years.”³ The influence of the book has extended into the twenty-first century. “[I]f you want to understand modern Chicago, [you can’t do without Hirsch’s work,” proclaims the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates. “Every time I hear someone speak about ‘black on black crime’ in Chicago, I want hurl a hardcover of *Making the Second Ghetto* at them.”⁴

¹Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:

Timothy J. Gilfoyle, Department of History, Edward Crown Center, Loyola University Chicago, 1032 W. Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60660, USA.
Email: tgilfoy@luc.edu

Hirsch argued that Chicago city officials, center-city business interests, university leaders, and ordinary white citizens addressed the growing African American population by building or “containing” public housing in existing black neighborhoods. From 1945 to 1950, in at least 485 incidents documented by Hirsch, neighborhood whites violently attacked African Americans using public spaces or residing in previously all-white neighborhoods. These “communal riots” represented a form of urban terrorism and discouraged white leaders from integrating Chicago neighborhoods. Instead, city officials adopted a “domestic containment policy” similar to the American Cold War effort to contain communism throughout the world. Public housing served as the containment tool to build a “second ghetto” on top of the old one.⁵

Before Hirsch and *Making the Second Ghetto*, the most important studies of public housing were written by social scientists.⁶ Hirsch’s research contributed to an outpouring of historical and sociological research on low-income and public housing.⁷ This new literature included examinations of growing up in public housing,⁸ positive views of public housing,⁹ how residents fought for reforms and created communities,¹⁰ and the impact of public housing on segregation.¹¹ Significantly, Hirsch motivated a new generation of historians to test the “second ghetto thesis in other cities,” some of whom found the pattern repeated in Detroit, Philadelphia, Seattle, St. Louis, and other cities.¹² Most recently, D. Bradford Hunt has provided a concise summary and analysis of this considerable literature.¹³

In 2003, contributors to a special issue of the *Journal of Urban History (JUH)* reflected on the twentieth anniversary of Hirsch’s “second ghetto” thesis. They debated the applicability of the Chicago model to Atlanta and Miami, challenged Hirsch’s periodization of the first, second, and third ghettos, criticized his failure to recognize any significant African American agency, acknowledged that he was among the first historians to employ “whiteness” as an interpretive paradigm, and considered the globality of the ghetto.¹⁴

Since that special *JUH* issue in 2003, a new generation of urbanists have emerged who both build upon and challenge the work of Arnold Hirsch. This forum highlights this new generation. Most of them first encountered Hirsch as graduate students and the diversity of their writing and research interests reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory legacy of Hirsch’s second ghetto thesis. For example, Simon Balto studies the policing of African Americans in twentieth-century Chicago.¹⁵ N. D. B. Connolly’s research concentrates on the intersection of race, real estate, and politics in Miami.¹⁶ Lilia Fernández has examined the history of Latinos in Chicago.¹⁷ Destin Jenkins is interested in the impact of global capital and the history of municipal debt in late-twentieth-century American cities.¹⁸ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is a former community organizer who writes on African American politics, social movements, and racial inequality in the United States.¹⁹ Rhonda Y. Williams is a journalist-turned historian whose research examines low-income black women’s and marginalized people’s everyday lives, politics, and social struggles.²⁰ The multiplicity of subjects—policing, real estate, ethnic communities, global finance, social activism, race relations, and African American life—captures, engages, and moves beyond Hirsch’s influential second ghetto thesis.

Simon Balto addresses complaints that Hirsch ignored the role of African American agency. Balto argues that such criticism misses the point, that Hirsch was investigating the white political and economic power structures of Chicago, not African American resistance to those structures. Balto defends Hirsch’s decision to focus on white actors rather than black ones, which in certain respects anticipated Carol Anderson’s “white rage” thesis in documenting white resistance to integration. Balto points out that Hirsch’s condemnation of white liberals and his willingness to name names was simultaneous with the 1983 election of Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago, a veritable “political revolution” in American urban politics, and one in which compelled urban historians to reassess the racial structures and racialized institutions in the urban North. The moment was opportune for Hirsch’s examination of “spatialized power” in Chicago.²¹

N. D. B. Connolly proclaims that *Making the Second Ghetto* is more than a book about Chicago or the urban North. Indeed, the text is “among the most important books in the evolution of Southern history.” Hirsch did more than simply relegate the *de jure* (South) v. *de facto* (North) paradigm of American race relations to the historiographical dustbin;²² he foresaw how the non-systemic, nonstructural ways of understanding race relations in the South were in fact replicated in the North. Connolly proceeds to explain how certain arguments for “Southern exceptionalism” and Southern “colonialism”—pervasive among generations of American historians well into the 1980s—obscured the shared social and racialized subcultures that promoted similar and often overlapping folkways and behaviors found in Southern rural countrysides and Northern urban neighborhoods. Hirsch, “as a student of spatialized power,” in Connolly’s words, forced American historians to acknowledge that white supremacy knew no regional boundaries.²³

Lilia Fernández offers a personal account of the impact of Hirsch on her scholarly trajectory. Fernández grew up in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, for a time lived in a basement apartment similar to the “rabbit dens” Hirsch described, passed the Robert Taylor Homes on her way to her public magnet school, and witnessed the racial succession of neighborhoods like Back of the Yards in the 1980s. “What *Making the Second Ghetto* did for me when I first read it as a young graduate student, was validate and confirm my childhood experiences,” admits Fernández. “The severe racial and economic disparities I lived and witnessed over two-and-a-half decades jumped off those pages in black ink.”²⁴ Like Balto, Fernández rejects critiques of Hirsch for ignoring black agency. She applauds Hirsch for providing a new and more detailed evolutionary explanation about the creation of the postwar inner-city housing crisis, the adoption of new structures which reinforced segregation and inequality, and “how the powerful preyed upon the powerless.” Having grown up among African Americans, Fernandez notes, “I did not need an explanation about how black people responded or how they fought back because I had observed these things myself.” She summarizes, “Black folks resisted and fought injustice when possible, but mostly they lived their lives in the midst of difficult circumstances.”²⁵

Destin Jenkins recommends that historians follow the money. Hirsch, Jenkins points out, concentrated on the making of the ghetto. But an equally key element in the story was destruction of the ghetto. While Hirsch highlights the efforts of blockbusters and panic merchants, he never discusses deindustrialization or how “the peddlers of debt” profited from the dismantling of the ghetto. Jenkins urges historians to consider the converse of Hirsch’s revelation of systematic mob violence: how was such violence “made hidden,” isolated, rendered invisible? Why did media, corporate, and public institutions devote considerable resources to bury this “urban guerrilla warfare?” By ignoring the role played by bankers and financial institutions, Hirsch reflected how urbanists studied cities in the 1980s. Only by following the money, Jenkins believes, are Hirsch’s larger arguments about the centrality of federal policy in creating the second ghetto confirmed. In this telling, “urban renewal was less the product of battles between conservatives and reformers, and more a story of the successes of the ‘champions of private enterprise’ in demanding and controlling urban renewal.” Jenkins argues that historians should build upon the foundation created by Hirsch and link local violence, battles among liberal reformers and business executives, to larger social processes of capital accumulation. Doing so reveals how violence influenced the cost to borrow.²⁶

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor reinforces the economic themes emphasized by Jenkins. Working as a tenant advocate for a housing rights organization in the early twenty-first century, she assisted in the legal representation of tenants, mostly African American women, facing eviction in housing court, many of whom lived in conditions more reminiscent of the nineteenth century, much less the twenty-first. As she “watched sadness, exasperation, hopelessness become homelessness in the courtroom,” she searched for answers and discovered *Making the Second Ghetto*. For Taylor, the mob violence masquerading as “white innocence” that Hirsch uncovered was white terrorism. Indeed, the twentieth-century fixation with the so-called “Negro Problem” masked the

fundamental reality of pervasive white violence, murder, and mayhem. Segregated African American neighborhoods represented “the value of extraction.” Land installment contracts, rent-to-own schemes, refabricated apartments, predacious rents, and exploitative home sales reflected the intimate “connection between financial yields and various methods of racial *exclusion* and *inclusion* in conventional real estate practices,” all of which disproportionately affected African Americans. Sadly, she demonstrates, this framework remains intact.²⁷

Rhonda Y. Williams argues that public policies—supported and implemented by white citizens and state actors presented as “neutral,” the quintessential “standard” or some “race-less” aspirational “norm”—not only punished African American city residents, but also rendered black people invisible. She also maintains that while Hirsch provided a trenchant critique of white power, his book failed to engage the voice of African Americans. As a result, even when black people make cameos, they are still invisible or “illegible.” For Williams, the incisive question “black women: where they be suffering?” demands that historians see this absence and, in their recognition, use this moment as an opportunity to both question how historians frame stories and interrogate archival absences and sources (such as the photographs in Hirsch’s book) to find the voices of the subjects, the locations and historical moments, and the politics of physical spaces, and how they bear witness to “low-income black women as they ‘be’—be human beings experiencing and imagining for their families all of what that means. Surviving. Suffering. Challenging. Acting. Living.” Whereas Hirsch and other historians might interpret such images through the lens of disorder and despair, Williams argues that, by reading archival sources differently and more fully, they also may proffer other perspectives, in this instance, glimpses of order and hope. She concludes by encouraging urban historians to keep systems of power and people’s humanity in dialogue, and not lose sight of the ways that institutions of higher education, which employ many urbanists and historians and low-wage workers, continue to maintain the structures of institutional and spatial racism.²⁸

This new generation of historians reflects the complicated, contradictory, and even paradoxical legacies of Hirsch’s second ghetto thesis. Some praise Hirsch for prioritizing political and economic power and are less willing to criticize the absence of African American agency in *Making the Second Ghetto*. Others, however, argue that the absence of African American voices should serve as a departure point for future historians to challenge historical narratives of urban power and inequality, to more empathetically comprehend the lives of “second ghetto” residents. Hirsch had important agendas—demystifying white innocence, making visible white terror, and linking those phenomena to white political and economic power. Yet, while the malignancies of racism and inequality generated powerful contexts within which African American life was created, that history cannot be summarized by victimization, violence, and oppression. “We are also duty-bound to tell *all* of these stories to construct multi-dimensional understandings of Black life,” Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor reminds us. “Hirsch provides one part of the framework to make sense of the contemporary reality and the practices that made it so.”²⁹

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Notes

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Author Biography

Timothy J. Gilfoyle is professor and former chair of history at Loyola University Chicago. He is the author of *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex* (1992), *A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York* (2006), and *Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark* (2006), and editor of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Urban History* (2019). He is a former president of the Urban History Association.