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Ever a Divided City?
Segregation, Fragmentation, and »the Problem of the Color-Line« in Twentieth Century Urban History

»For decades, urban history in the United States has followed a disheartening narrative line of suburban affluence and center-city despair – a story with a strong and bitter subtext of racial segregation,« Mr. Bloomberg said to loud murmurs of approval from his audience. »But in today’s economy, that division makes losers of cities and suburbs alike.«1

In a speech at the beginning of his second term, the mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, thus wrestled with an issue – perhaps the issue – that had plagued his predecessors in that city, and practically every other American community of any size, over the course of the twentieth century: the corresponding fissures of race, class, and geography in urban America. In short, it has become impossible to discuss any of those issues without becoming entangled in all three. It is true that the segregation of urban space along the lines of class and employment has been examined by scholars of the earliest manufacturing city as well as the high industrial metropolis.2 And other studies have looked at the way the U.S. city sorted its inhabitants, or at least their spheres of activity, in terms of age, gender, and even sexuality.3 But above all, scholars of the urban experience have consistently focused their attention on the concept of race, and particularly upon the history of African Americans in the city.4 Given the task of a brief overview of recent English language historiography on segregation, this essay will take a cue from W. E. B. Du Bois and confine itself to the question of the color-line in the twentieth century U.S. city. As recently as 2004, researchers remain interested in »how several generations of immigrants from Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia came to see and experience the city, especially by the second half of the twentieth century, as a place dominated by blacks.«5 They have noted the dominance of this theme, almost in isolation:

»Open any newspaper, listen to most news reports, catch the words of many politicians bemoaning the decline of the central city, and for years the images used to accompany the message pictured a

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black face. Since the 1960s, against the backdrop of race riots and general despair, the words black, inner city, ghetto and problems became connected and at times interchangeable. Oftentimes the stories produced appear as if blacks inhabit the inner cities alone. In this world there are no Asians, Latinos and Latinas, Native Americans, or whites. In this world the central cities are divided from power structures, businesses, labor unions, politics and adjacent suburbs. In this world race and racism exist within a tightly bound space divorced from the larger society. Why is this?

Yet tightly bound racial segregation was not a characteristic of American cities forever and at all times. In the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial segregation, historian C. Vann Woodward developed an influential thesis, published first in 1955 (and as recently as 2002) as The Strange Career of Jim Crow, arguing that formal, systematic racial segregation did not emerge, even in the deep South, before the turn of the twentieth century. Scholars have debated the timing of segregation ever since, but all have agreed about the urban setting for its development. The path to racial segregation, however, was not immediately clear to American urbanites. Despite confinement of most blacks to poorer districts, in the view of historian Kenneth Kusmer, »it seems doubtful that anything even remotely resembling a real black ghetto existed in American cities, north or south, prior to the 1890s« (with the partial exceptions of New York and Chicago).

Instead African Americans were integrated amidst Irish immigrants and other working class populations, if not in the immediate vicinity of affluent homes they served. Similarly, a scholarly re-examination of the turn of the century urban landscape encountered by W. E. B. DuBois when he researched The Philadelphia Negro, his foundational 1899 study of race in the city, observed that »all blacks lived in close proximity to whites«, »none of the wards was majority black«, and »as a result, poor blacks and whites came into contact to a degree unimaginable in the late twentieth-century city.«

Even as larger numbers of African Americans began to migrate into cities – particularly during and after World War I – the sense of a firm black / white color line was complicated by the presence of immigrants recently arrived from Southern or Eastern Europe, groups whose own sense of identity within the American polity was in flux. By creating ethnically isolated enclaves, immigrants often tried to insulate themselves from violent racial clashes (such as Chicago’s 1919 riots) and thus constituted what Arnold Hirsch has called a »transient third tier« beyond black or white. Mixing imported prejudices with American racist attitudes by the end of the 1920s, however, these groups solidified around an identity of »white ethnics« that would provide a durable racial consciousness in US urban and political life. Thus, initially separating themselves on the basis of national origin, Italians and other immigrants learned to be »white« and justify segregation on that basis.

6 Ibid.
During the 1960s and 1970s, historians examined the impact of racism on the formation of segregated black ghettos in northern cities, emphasizing the poverty and other social ills concentrated within them.\textsuperscript{12} In contrast to that »first ghetto« school, newer studies have emphasized the resourcefulness, strength and dynamism within these segregated black communities in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{13} As African Americans began moving northward, whites in cities like St. Louis scrambled to exclude them from civic institutions and establish a segregated, »Jim Crow City«. In response, however, the newcomers created a parallel set of institutions that nourished the black community’s own leaders and civic life (as well as providing an organizational base to challenge segregation later).\textsuperscript{14}

The »great migration« of African Americans to urban areas was not only a feature of northern cities; if anything Southern city dwellers were more explicit and legalistic about the process of segregating the burgeoning white and black populations. In Birmingham from the 1920s onward, planners utilized zoning in to insure that the South’s most industrialized city was also its most segregated, devising elaborate legal responses to court challenges (as when racial zoning was declared unconstitutional). Such obstinacy in fact prevented the application of pent up black housing demand to the city’s housing market, at least until the new, post-World War II city planning tools of urban renewal broke the status quo by displacing black neighborhoods into white areas. By that time, however, diminishing numbers of whites would remain in the city anyway.\textsuperscript{15} Similar stories can be told about the distinctively modern, bureaucratic process of racial segregation across the urban South – in Atlanta, Louisville, Nashville, Charlotte, or even Orlando – over the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{16}

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Northern segregation was enforced formally and informally in the first half of the twentieth century, including the frequent application of white-on-black violence. Afri-

can Americans who challenged the boundaries of de facto housing segregation in northern cities were liable to be met with deadly force, as demonstrated in Kevin Boyle’s National

Book Award-winning account of the 1925 mob that came to expel a new black homeowner from his previously all-white Detroit neighborhood. The work of Thomas Sugrue exposes how the white working class opposed (at times violently) the arrival of African Americans in Detroit’s neighborhoods and workplaces from World War II onward, thereby undermining the possibility of integration as well as progressive interracial political coalitions. Surveying »Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods« across the entire twentieth century, Stephen Grant Meyer finds violent white hostility endemic in both northern and southern cities, and notes that such clashes reached their apex in the 1950s.

The mid twentieth century also manifested increased public intervention into conditions in American cities, particularly on the part of the federal government by means of the congressional housing acts of 1937, 1949, and 1954 (among other legislation and appropriations). Recent studies continue to emphasize the dismal record of urban renewal programs from the 1940s through the 1970s, ineffective at best but all too often counterproductive with regard to the conditions of African Americans in U. S. cities. In some cases, this was because officials and policymakers were more interested in promoting economic development than redressing urban inequalities.

There is also evidence, however, for more deliberate malice toward blacks in these policies. The most influential work of the last generation on the study of racial segregation in post-World War II cities has been Arnold Hirsch’s 1983 study Making the Second Ghetto, recently reissued in a new edition and also the subject of a 2003 special issue of the Journal of Urban History (vol. 29). Hirsch showed how white Chicagoans used slum clearance, public housing and other urban renewal programs to eradicate the black ghettos created in the first half of the twentieth century, only to replace them with even more racially and economically segregated public housing projects. Federal, state, and local government urban initiatives thus served to concentrate, stigmatize, and insulate African Americans even further from the American mainstream. In Hirsh’s wake, historians have

17 Sean Lang, Segregation and Violence in the USA 1900–50, in: Modern History Review 16 (2005), p. 23.
detailed the way a »second ghetto« was replicated in cities across the country – the only major debate being whether this outcome was the intentional goal of discriminatory policies or the unforeseen result of financial pressures and demographic shifts.\(^24\)

Similarly, historians find the hand of government is visible in another great migration, the suburbanization of the U.S. population. A 1994 survey by the *Journal of Urban History* of the most influential urban historians singled out Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier*, a 1985 book which has itself as a standard text on suburbanization in the decades since publication. Jackson emphasized U.S. public policies (especially mortgage programs and transportation priorities), which promoted white suburban development while neglecting urban, minority constituencies.\(^25\) He also drew attention to the practice of »redlining,« whereby banks denied loans to residents in areas deemed high-risk – often defined on the basis of race – from the Depression onward. Jackson argued that the federal government directed the private banking sector to practice such discriminatory financing by means of maps produced by New Deal agencies. More recent studies of lending patterns, however, indicate that banks did not rely on such government maps to make lending decisions, while public programs did in fact offer loans to minorities.\(^26\)

Nevertheless, exclusivity of various kinds – social, economic, as well as racial, ethnic and even religious – was built into the American suburb from its inception, primarily through deed restrictions. These »restrictive covenants,« well-established by the end of the nineteenth century, either explicitly forbade the sale of property to undesirable groups or else they mandated certain standards with the intention of preventing any change in neighborhood character.\(^27\)

But the picture of a lily-white, affluent suburban preserve is incomplete, according to new research. Even if such exclusionary arrangements were in effect for many, perhaps the majority, of prominent suburban developments, a number of historians have recently pointed out other, more inclusive settlements on the urban periphery. In distinction to organized speculative subdivisions or even workmen’s housing in company towns, however, these were not coordinated undertakings. Yet already by the beginning of the twentieth century, working class immigrants were acquiring small parcels of land on the outskirts of cities from Toronto to Los Angeles and constructing do-it-yourself houses.\(^28\) Of all the »white ethnics,« Jews were among the earliest to leave urban neighborhoods during the first blush of the automobile suburbs in the 1920s. Historians have pointed to the relative portability of Jewish congregations, in contrast to rigidly delineated parish boundaries, as an explanation for »why the Jews left Boston and the Catholics stayed.«\(^29\)

And throughout the twentieth century African Americans also strived and occasionally even successfully managed to carve out suburban homesteads.\(^30\) But like the ethnic en-

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\(^{28}\) Richard Harris, Unplanned Suburbs. Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900 to 1950, Baltimore 1996.


claves of the inner city, working class suburbs would also become racial battlegrounds in the period after World War II, as white homeowners continued to defend their stake in the American Dream in racially segregated terms.31 That said, some recent studies have suggested that whites’ flight from the cities and their concomitant backlash against liberal urban coalitions may have been less a result of racism than disillusionment from the diminishing returns of economic and social policies.32 Such is the story in one recent account of post-World War II Baltimore, but it also fits with Chicago’s West Side, where black migrants inherited a neighborhood already in decline from neglect during white administration, with whites already on the way out.33

The 1960s represent a key turning point for ideas about racial relations in the city, given the collapse of support for urban renewal programs as well as successive summers of rioting by African Americans in many cities. Urban historians, however, have generally tended to focus either on the antecedents or legacies of this period, rather than focusing directly on the so-called »urban crisis«. The black rioting and liberal political crises of the 1960s seem less aberrational, for example, when placed within the context of white mob violence throughout the twentieth century. African American activism created pressure for a legal and political sea change, notably including the outlawing of segregation in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the collapse of the Jim Crow system also produced renewed confrontations and population shifts; the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education brought forth a wave of scholarship addressing the white backlash and other unintended consequences of the civil rights movement.34 A study of Detroit suggests, for example, that despite longstanding racial animosities, whites did not actually flee that city until African Americans achieved political power (electing the first black mayor) in the 1970s.35

Upon the desegregation of southern cities like Atlanta by the 1960s, many whites not only withdrew from shared spaces like golf courses, buses, and parks but then also sought to withhold political and financial support from such public amenities. Such »tax revolts« represented a kind of »white flight« that was not simply geographic but also represented ideological shifts toward privatized, racially-exclusive social realms.36 Even communities that lacked the explicit jure programs of segregation found in southern cities underwent a similar political and spatial shift, as in the case of the racial polarizations between Oakland and the suburbs of San Francisco’s East Bay. The protection of white suburban property rights vis-à-vis the black inner city came to stand in for the direct racial con-

frontations of the earlier periods when whites and blacks cohabitated within the same urban political economy.37

Once de jure segregation within the city had given way to de facto segregation between increasingly black cities and predominantly white suburbs, civil rights advocates attempted to remedy these spatial inequalities through busing schemes aimed at integrating the suburban and central city schools. The 1971 Supreme Court case that upheld such forced busing (*Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*) originated in Charlotte, North Carolina, as that city prided itself for embracing school desegregation and enjoyed significant economic benefits from its relative racial harmony.38

However, suburban whites did resist court-ordered busing in Charlotte from the early 1970s onward, but they eschewed racial justifications through a language of »color-blind populism« that proclaimed local control, property rights, and »middle-class innocence« in segregation.39 It was actually in the North, notoriously in the traditional Irish working class neighborhood of South Boston, that forced school desegregation engendered violent white opposition in the 1970s. Meanwhile, Boston’s more middle class suburban whites favored the political and legalistic tactics seen in Atlanta or Charlotte over such mob opposition.40

Such forced school desegregation initiatives were abandoned in almost every city by the 1980s. Discrimination and segregation in the areas of employment and housing would also prove persistent throughout the final decades of the century. Updating the 1968 survey of urban conditions by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (also known as the *Kerner Report*), a 1998 study noted that, in the thirty years since urban riots prompted a national self-examination, conditions for poor, minority city dwellers had in fact deteriorated, becoming ever more insurmountable and isolated.41 The scholarly debate about the lingering conditions of urban inequality was revived in the 1980s by sociologist William Julius Wilson, who suggested that the movement of industries out of northern cities was leading to the development of a permanent urban underclass, perpetuated through social pathology.42 In response, some sociologists pointed to the persistence of segregation over the 1970s to explain the disproportionate effect of deindustrialization on black poverty rates; others contrasted African Americans with successful new immigrants to the post-industrial city, noting that blacks were largely excluded from factory jobs in the industrial era anyway.43

Historians led by Michael Katz joined the discussion by the early 1990s, in an attempt to intervene in the public policy discussion by attacking the very concept of a post-industrial urban underclass for providing little more than the conventional stigmatization of individuals in poverty. Instead, they argued for turning attention to »processes at work

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over a very long span of time and to the ideas and politics that generated and sustained them.«44 These would have to include not simply family or individual pathologies but »structural transformations of the economy; the working out of racism in time and space; the consequences of institutional development; the reshaping of urban space; and the activities of the state.«45 Scholars would continue to interrogate the effects of deindustrialization.46 But there was no disputing the fact that by the 1970s and 1980s, vast urban areas of the United States – from Detroit to North Miami, Watts to Camden – were witnessing more concentrated, racially segregated urban poverty than ever before.

Given such conditions in the deindustrialized »rustbelt« just as »sunbelt« cities across the American South and West experienced unprecedented growth, it should hardly come as a surprise when the editors of the 2004 volume, *The African American Urban Experience*, announce that Great Migration reversed itself: »During the last third of the twentieth century, the return migration of blacks [from North to South] rose to nearly 50,000 each year.« But even more salient has been the rate of black suburbanization, »especially in northern and western cities«: »Indeed, by the turn of the twenty-first century the magnitude of black migration to the suburbs had surpassed the Great Migration to American cities.«47 Meanwhile, by the 1980s, a generation after the phenomenon of »white flight,« affluent young white professionals (often raised in suburban enclaves) began to resettle in the very urban areas previously abandoned to poor minorities. While these movements were not generally expressed in terms of the turf wars of earlier decades, they almost inevitably initiated rising real estate prices that in turn put pressure on such economically marginal groups.48

In the fall of 2004, new analysis of 150 years of U.S. census data revealed that late twentieth century Americans were more geographically mobile than any time since the mid nineteenth century.49 One year later historian Robert Fishman argued that American cities were experiencing a broad new pattern of intra-national migration, encompassing new immigrants, businesses, African Americans, and the white middle class, which will eventually »reurbanize precisely those inner-city districts that were previously depopulated.« In Fishman’s view, the urban crisis has passed, as trends including suburban dispersal, concentration of poverty, and even rising crime rates began reversing their late twentieth century trajectories in the 1990s. Most importantly – for our purposes here – »as white middle-class in-migration becomes more widely distributed,« Fishman sees indication of »at least the softening « of dynamics from »the period of gentrification, when the boundary between the privileged and the rest was razor sharp.«50 Combined with other indicators that are beginning to suggest rising levels of employment, home ownership and mortgage availability for African American urbanites, there may be room for optimism. For if urban history has painfully recorded the sad implications of W. E. B. Du Bois’ all-too-apt 1903 prediction that »the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line«, then the softening of these boundaries of race and class would certainly bode well for America’s communities in the twenty-first.51

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45 Ibid.