“I love teaching Urban Studies graduate students. They are fun and smart, and they always bring interesting things to the table.”

On October 20, 2006, Professor Amanda Seligman presented the first colloquium of the Urban Studies Programs’ 2006-2007 Colloquium Series. Her presentation was entitled, “Nonviolence and Three Riots in Chicago: Bystanders, Victims, Children and Counter-rioters.” The dialogue that ensued during the session was intriguing, particularly regarding Professor Seligman’s experiences with the project. She indicated this research venture is one that she has “picked up,” “put back down,” and “come back to” numerous times over the years. It was encouraging to hear that a faculty member of Amanda Seligman’s caliber could experience a barrier in her work similar to what the rest of us face on a more regular basis. We were interested in learning more about Professor Seligman as well as the processes she has gone through while exploring this particular topic. We readily agreed that Professor Amanda Seligman should be the first faculty member profiled in the new Urban Studies Programs’ e-journal, e.polis.

Professor Amanda Seligman received her Ph.D. in History from Northwestern University. She has been a member of the UW-Milwaukee faculty since 1999. Seligman has authored numerous articles and in 2005, she published Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago’s West Side (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Block by Block evolved from the research Professor Seligman did on her dissertation.
The following excerpts are from an interview conducted with Amanda Seligman by Urban Studies Programs’ graduate students, Barbara Wise and Chris Hammelev.

**Interviewer:** How did you get involved with History, what sparked your interest?

**Seligman:** I was a classics major as an undergraduate and everyday after school in my senior year I would go to my room to knit and listen to ‘All Things Considered’ and I realized I was much more concerned with the present than the ancient world. I also took some social history classes my junior year that changed my outlook and took all that fancy schmancy playing that we’d done in classics and turned it into something that was empirically grounded. I ended up taking a year off before graduate school, and did good works, realized good works weren’t for me, and went to graduate school. I thought I would give history a try and here I am.

**Interviewer:** So it wasn’t something you set out to do?

**Seligman:** No, it was actually something I just stumbled onto. The first American History class I took was with James McPherson, and he had just won the Pulitzer Prize. I was like “whoohoo” I’m taking a class with someone who won the Pulitzer. It was in that course that he gave a lecture that literally changed my life. It was a lecture on historiography. Not how historians talk about the past, but how historians talk about the scholarship about the past and it made so much sense of the world, like why somebody who wrote about the civil war in the 1920’s would have such a really different outlook about it than somebody writing about it in the 1960’s. So it took the interpretive play of the Classics and turned it into something that actually made more sense, and I thought, I better explore this more.

**Interviewer:** McPherson was someone who had an incredible influence on you. Is there anyone else who influenced you?

**Seligman:** Well in Graduate school I had two mentors. One was my advisor Henry Binford, who is a wonderful human being, in addition to being a really good scholar. He is a model that I aspire to be, not only as a person but also as an advisor and teacher. Also Ann Durkin Keating, an editor I worked with at the Encyclopedia of Chicago. I did a lot of writing under her and got to know her very well. Both of them are actually suburban historians and they both have influenced my thinking about how to write about American suburbs.

**Interviewer:** How did you become involved in the Urban Studies program?

**Seligman:** I was recruited through the History department. Since I worked in an urban field and all my research is about Chicago, it made sense to join the Urban Studies faculty. Urban History is my field of interest but I’m slowly shifting towards Public Policy History.

**Interviewer:** You have done quite a bit of research about Chicago; can you tell us something about that?

**Seligman:** Well I wrote a book called “Block by Block” and that is about the white westsiders that lived in areas that were subsequently inhabited by African Americans that was about fifteen to twenty years prior to the racial transition of the west side.
**Interviewer:** Your current research project concerns the bystanders, the children, and counter-rioters present at riots. At your colloquium, you had indicated this is a project; you have picked up and put aside a number of times, why?

**Seligman:** I have always been fascinated and compelled by urban rioting. When I first started my dissertation in 1995 my plan was to do an environmental history of riots in the 1960’s. I wasn’t actually trained as an environmental historian and I never really figured out what that meant. My dissertation research shifted to what ultimately became ‘Block by Block’, but I continued to take notes about riots, sort of stored it away, and it all eventually made it to my outline. My advisor, Henry Binford said, “You notice something about those riots that nobody else has, which is the ‘life goes on’ thesis.” He was referring to the fact that after one of the riots, within a week, a neighborhood on the west side had gone back to having a meeting where they had gone on about normal neighborhood sanitation issues as if the riot hadn’t occurred. It struck me that the riots which are suppose to change everything, didn’t change everything. When I finished Block by Block, I finally had a chance to pick up that “life goes on” thesis and it evolved into a focus on the children, the bystanders, and the non-rioters piece.

**Interviewer:** What have been your roadblocks to this research?

**Seligman:** Where I have been stuck intellectually is figuring out the significance of the fact that there were so many non-rioters on the scene. I think it is intrinsically interesting to know that there were so many people who were at riots, who were non-rioters or even counter-rioters, but trying to frame the significance of that knowledge in scholarly terms has been a roadblock to me. So by putting the piece down and coming back to it, I am hoping I will come back to it with fresher eyes and understand its influence a little bit more.

**Interviewer:** Have you run into any roadblocks with any other projects?

**Seligman:** One thing that makes History different from the other social sciences in Urban Studies is that you can’t set up an opportunity to obtain information you want because if the information hasn’t been obtained and stored away in the archives you don’t have access to it. So there are some things you might want to know more about and simply cannot find out about.

**Interviewer:** What would be your dream research project? Imagine the absence of time and funding constraints?

**Seligman:** One thing I love about this job is that if you can conceptualize your research project, you can execute it. I would have to say it would probably be a public policy project….or maybe a project where I can read a lot of letters or advice columns.