

– DEBATES & DEVELOPMENTS

– GENTRIFICATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PERSONAL ETHICS

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Abstract

Gentrification, leading to displacement, is an increasingly recognized social problem. Individuals who are confronted with tight housing possibilities but have adequate incomes confront personal ethical issues on whether to act in ways that may contribute to displacement of lower-income residents, and researchers working on housing issues may be particularly concerned. In order to work out an ethical position, clarity is first needed on the differences among the various aspects of gentrification. The working definition used here is that gentrification includes the danger of displacement. A public policy response is thus required to deal with its social injustices. Specific steps are suggested for the development of such policy. Secondly, the suggestion is made that the individual choice of whether to move in or not is, importantly, a personal ethical choice and should take into account both the economic and political impact of the move itself but also the contribution that can be made through collective and political action by an in-mover to deal with the injustices of gentrification. However, it is also an ethical choice for the professions involved and their associations.

Introduction

As if the solutions to the problems of gentrification weren't difficult enough, these are complicated for many at a personal level because they themselves are objectively, willy-nilly, part of the process. The titles of two absorbing essays published recently are indicative of this: 'Gentrifier? Who, me? Interrogating the Gentrifier in the Mirror'¹ and 'On Being Both the Wolf and the Lamb'—the former from a scholarly journal, the latter from the stately *The New York Times*.² For anyone concerned with social justice or personal as well as professional ethics, these can raise critical questions:

- How should gentrification be defined—as neighborhood displacement and/or physical upgrading and/or economic upgrading and/or social upgrading?
- From a social justice point of view, what are the best policy approaches to gentrification?
- From an individual ethical point of view, what is the appropriate ethical position anyone confronting personal decisions about their residence should take towards it?
- What is the appropriate professional ethical response?

1 John Joe Schlichtman and Jason Patch, 'Gentrifier? Who, me? Interrogating the gentrifier in the mirror', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.4 (2013), pp. 1491-508.

2 Erika Anderson, *The New York Times*, New York Region, 21 February 2014, p. 61.

The nature of gentrification

'Gentrification' as it is often used confuses four distinct processes: demographic displacement, physical upgrading, economic upgrading and social upgrading. In this essay I use the term *gentrification* based on its original and still predominant meaning of displacement of a lower-income population by a higher-income one through some combination of three forms of upgrading:³

- Economic upgrading—*uppricing*
- Physical upgrading—*redevelopment*
- Social upgrading—*upscaling*.

Economic uppricing comes first, because it is the increased economic value of the neighborhood, specifically of its location, namely, the land on which it sits, that first attracts not only economic investment but also physical improvement and the attendant social desirability that entices other groups to move there—the 'rent gap' about which Neil Smith wrote.⁴ The private physical forms of upgrading and redevelopment that follow provide a strong motivation for parallel public investment, and this, in turn, contributes to the changing social composition of the newer population—the upscaling and yuppification of which Sharon Zukin and many others have written.⁵

Physical upgrading in the context of gentrification differs from urban renewal or urban redevelopment in their traditional United States forms in that, although all are fundamentally market-driven and involve combinations of public and private actions, this physical upgrading connected with gentrification is predominantly privately undertaken, while traditional redevelopment and urban renewal are predominantly public actions.

Any of these forms of upgrading, while generally led by private actions, are typically done in combination with some public actions, even if this involves only the granting of building permits. What to do about gentrification is thus an appropriate and indeed important issue for public policy, and the relationship of gentrification to social justice and ethical public policy is an important matter for public concern and governmental policymaking.

Displacement may be immediate or slow, direct or prospective (of current residents or of prospective in-movers), it may be racially inflected, and it may vary by range of change (what income groups, what physical changes, what prices, what cultural expectations), what public actions are involved (eminent domain, zoning, building codes and their enforcement, garbage collection, school quality, policing practices, subsidies, taxation policies, and so on), and what social/demographic changes are involved (white/dark/black, immigrant, singles, elderly, and more).⁶

When displacement is produced by any of these upgradings, the combined process should be called gentrification, and it is useful for clarity, particularly in political discussions, to limit 'gentrification' to such situations of displacement. For upgradings can indeed take place without displacement and bring with them quite different sets of costs and benefits. Uppricing without displacement can have an effect on empty land or on land whose continuing residents are pleased at the increase in the value of their properties. Physical upgrading may bring substandard or lower-income housing up to code with subsidies to avoid displacement and may provide benefits to an entire community,

3 The literature on gentrification, even on its definition, is extensive. Good collections are Loretta Lees, Tom Slater and Elvin Wyle (eds.), *The gentrification reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) and Neil Smith and Peter Williams (eds.), *Gentrification of the city* (Boston, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1986). Both include my own contribution entitled 'Abandonment, gentrification and displacement: the linkages in New York City'.

4 Neil Smith, *The new urban frontier: gentrification and the revanchist city* (New York: Routledge, 1996)

5 Sharon Zukin, *Naked city: the death and life of authentic urban places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

6 See Tom Slater's chapter 'Missing Marcuse: on gentrification and displacement', in Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (eds.), *Cities for people, not for profit: critical urban theory and the right to the city* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 171–96.

city or region, with no disparate impact on any particular group. Cultural upgrading may be along lines desired primarily by existing residents and not be seen as attractive to prospective in-movers from the outside. The economic development resulting from upgrading might conceivably provide enough additional income to resident households to enable them to afford higher prices and not be forced out of the neighborhood. However, upgrading without displacement is historically very exceptional and not considered gentrification for the purposes of this article.

The social justice view

What should the goals of public policy be then?

Gentrification is a socially created problem, and the answer must be addressed in the first place by social policies. The problem should be tackled comprehensively through a city-wide housing plan established through democratic and participatory planning, with binding guidelines aimed at creating an adequate supply of housing across all income ranges and prioritizing measures to provide decent and affordable housing for those who are not provided for in a profit-driven market. But planning for housing for lower-income residents cannot be separated from city-wide planning that considers the impact of patterns in all neighborhoods of a city, including middle- and upper-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods affordable to lower-income households. Every move, even a move towards luxury housing in high-income neighborhoods, affects the provision of lower-priced housing elsewhere too, through a ripple pattern of real-estate pricing changes. Such a coordinated approach should:

- Require that all new construction or major renovation throughout the city be of mixed-income housing, in sensitively planned developments with publicly established and legally binding prices and occupancy policies, ranging from mandatory provision of given proportions of affordable units up to the consideration of benign quotas in exceptional circumstances.⁷
- Avoid any undesired or unplanned displacement of residents from affordable units, establish strict eviction controls, including barring eviction unless alternative suitable accommodations can be found. Increases in rents should be limited through regulations considering equity to tenants as well as to landlords.
- Provide for some middle-income housing for potential gentrifiers in working-class neighborhoods, but in numbers and under conditions acceptable to existing residents. Those conditions should be established by having existing working-class neighborhoods democratically determine the limits of such development, such as through effective Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) proceedings in defined community boards in New York.⁸ The conditions should include measures preventing market-driven increases in housing prices through rent regulation and by promoting limited-equity and income-controlled occupancy, as in the case of community land trusts. In addition, it should encourage a rise in the incomes of existing residents through general economic policies and community economic development.
- Utilize all available public powers to avoid displacement. It should strictly limit the ability of upper-income households to control occupancy of their neighborhoods through zoning, provide for confiscatory taxation of the profits of spec-

7 Benign quotas govern admissions policies to racially integrated housing to supplement quotas for minority-group members, with ceilings on the admissions of such members in order to preserve a mixture of residents. For the complicated pro and contra arguments, see Peter Marcuse 'Benign quotas', originally published in *Journal of Intergroup Relations* Spring (1962), n.p.; reprinted in Alan F. Westin (ed.), *Freedom now* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

8 Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) requires specified applications for changes in land-use regulations to one of New York City's 59 community boards for advice before being submitted to the City Planning Commission for a formal vote.

ulative real-estate transactions, press for rent controls throughout the system and impose specific property value taxes dedicated to subsidizing the provision of housing under the first two conditions mentioned here.⁹

It is unlikely that such actions will be easily or fully implemented in any private market economy in the near future. But efforts to adopt them can be transformative. And efforts to implement them can help move decision making on residential patterns from the market (which reflects the inequalities and injustices of the capitalist system) to the public sector, where the terrain for decision making is substantially more democratic than in the market sector (even if there are severe limits).

The individual ethical view

If the world of available residential real estate is, crudely, divided among dilapidated housing, working-class/lower-income neighborhoods, middle-income mainly suburban neighborhoods and rich and effectively exclusionary neighborhoods, and if 'decent gentrifiers like us' don't want to live in suburbs for a variety of good reasons, where can they go? Either up or down. They can't go up, because they don't have the incomes: units are too expensive, often gated and racially exclusive, and/or remote from work. Can they find affordable units in existing integrated, well-located neighborhoods? Such neighborhoods are limited, subject to strong upward pressures, and thus part of a pattern that often forces even successful gentrifiers to move on. So they are tempted to move down the economic housing ladder, to working-class neighborhoods, where they displace those already there. Clearly, this is a set of Hobson's choices for moral gentrifiers.

The issue is raised perceptively in the aptly named and sensitive article by John Joe Schlichtman and Jason Patch in this journal, 'Gentrifiers are people too'.¹⁰ Yes, they are indeed people, and from the very beginning, studies have shown that they are often just like those who study them, and just like those who are reading this. Damaris Rose, in the early days of research on gentrification, pointed this out;¹¹ Neil Smith labeled them pioneers on a new frontier and studied them.¹² But what makes the decent people they describe displace other decent people with lower incomes? I argue that it is not their moral turpitude, but their lack of affordable alternatives of equivalent quality and accessible location. They are, like those they displace, the victims of powerful economic forces that are operating through the market and are significantly influencing public urban-policy economic forces operating in a private market characterized, to quote Neil Smith again, by a return of capital to the city.¹³ Cultural factors also play a role, but I believe only secondarily. The point here is that many gentrifiers have limited options and morally they are in a more difficult position than they often wish to acknowledge.¹⁴

Schlichtman and Patch provide an excellent ethnographic account of some gentrifiers and set forth a useful framework for evaluating their reasons for their conduct. Here, however, I want to focus on the issues of individual ethical conduct and related public policy, rather than the variations on individual motivation and behavior.

9 For some further details at the local level for New York City, see Peter Marcuse, 'To control gentrification: anti-displacement zoning and planning for stable residential districts', *Review of Law and Social Change* 13 (1985), pp. 931-45. For specific guidelines of general relevance, see blog #46 at pmarcuse.wordpress.com. State and national actions are needed to make many of these locally focused actions effective.

10 John Joe Schlichtman and Jason Patch, 'Gentrifier? Who, me?'

11 Damaris Rose, 'Rethinking gentrification: beyond the uneven development of Marxist urban theory', in Damaris Rose, *The Gentrification Debates* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 195-210.

12 Neil Smith, *The new urban frontier*.

13 Neil Smith, 'Toward a theory of gentrification: a back to the city movement by capital, not people', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45.4 (1979), pp. 538-48.

14 Sharon Zukin, 'Gentrification: culture and capital in the urban core', *Annual Review of Sociology* (1987), pp. 129-47.

Schlichtman and Patch point out that some young urban researchers are reluctant to engage with questions of gentrification out of embarrassment that they are themselves gentrifiers. It is an honorable dilemma. But social justice may not avoid all individual injustices: what social justice may provide for one may cause individual injustice for another; two persons may each have different and just claims to a certain benefit that is in limited supply, say admission to a particular educational institution, but a decision needs to be made between them, and the loser may justly feel aggrieved. A young researcher able to pay more for a given apartment than another with a slightly lower income may find that other person justly aggrieved, but his or her refusal to bid will not help produce a more just distribution of apartments—unless it is part of a social movement, for example, for boycotting a landlord or adopting rent controls.

Individual young researchers live in a market economy and should conscientiously explore how their individual decisions on where to live can best contribute to a socially just distribution of apartments. Buying a residential unit as an investment to speculate on it and make a profit on resale should be ruled out. They may, however, well find that the contribution they make by their non-speculative choice of apartment is less than the contribution they can make to limiting gentrification by their political activity, their solidarity with neighborhood movements to limit gentrification, the use they make of their research skills, including their findings from their own personal experience, their solidarity with neighborhood movements to limit gentrification, and their impact on the cultural acceptance of real-estate norms that push for all property to be put to its best—read most profitable—uses, displacement simply being collateral damage.

Of course there are different kinds of gentrifiers, just as there are different forms of gentrification. There are extensive case studies of how different individuals directly involved in a process of gentrification have reacted differently to it and have, in fact, become leaders in campaigns to avoid or ameliorate its negative consequences. Artists, preservationists, educators, historians, journalists and, indeed, real-estate experts all have different capabilities that can be brought to bear constructively on the problems that their neighbors or potential neighbors may face.¹⁵ And then there are ‘marginal gentrifiers’ who may actually help to enliven and strengthen the neighborhoods into which they move by their presence and contributions to the community.¹⁶ But all of them affect gentrification processes in two ways: first, through the simple economic impact of their in-moving, and secondly, through their conduct, politically and socially, after they move in. It is the ethical implications of the inevitable, sometimes small, sometimes significant, but always present, economic impacts of the move in, as differentiated from its political and social handling, which is the issue being addressed here.

What decision an individual should make on whether to move in, in a gentrifying situation of which displacement is part, is a question to which no simple general answer can be given and, ultimately, the answer will depend on what alternatives are available. However, a decision should always be made in full awareness of all its implications. One thing should be clear: there are ethical issues involved. These issues can be categorized as belonging to one of two types: for some, professional ethics are at stake, for others more purely personal ethics are involved.

The issues facing researchers who consider gentrification from a planning point of view (namely, issues concerning policy) differ from the issues discussed in the ethnographic literature, where the issue is most frequently the impact that research has on those subjected to it or the researcher’s own involvement in the research. In this

15 Damaris Rose, ‘Rethinking gentrification’.

16 For a good review, see Luís Mendes, ‘Marginal gentrification as emancipatory practice: an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of the creative city’, *RCCS Annual Review 5* (2013) [WWW document]. URL <http://rccsar.revues.org/513> (accessed 14 November 2014).

article, the issue is rather the researchers' own lives outside their research: in terms of most definitions of professional ethics, this would fall outside the scope of the research, being regarded instead as a matter of private personal conduct that concerns who to live with, what to eat, where to go on vacation, and so forth.¹⁷

However, while the choice of where to live is a private, personal matter, it can indeed raise personal ethical issues such as the ones that Schlichtman and Patch concerned themselves with. What decision an individual should make on whether to move into a gentrifying situation of which displacement forms a part, is a question to which no simple general answer can be given; the answer must ultimately depend on what alternatives are available. It may also be defended as an inevitable compromise between the ideal and real, particularly for those whose incomes do not give them a wide variety of affordable choices. If the researcher concludes that the evidence shows gentrification to be unjust, then the decision to take personal advantage of it may be considered theoretically hypocritical, but in reality necessary. In any event, it should be made in full awareness of all its implications. And that leads to the issue of professional ethics.

The researcher's professional ethical view

To what extent professional ethics in fields related to social policy require professional action to serve the interests of social justice is still an open question. The Code of Ethics of the American Institute of Certified Planners, for instance, includes the statement that planning must 'serve the public interest'. It states:

We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.¹⁸

This statement, however, appears in a section entitled 'Aspirational principles', which are differentiated from the Rules of Conduct 'to which we are held accountable'.

Promoting the displacement of the disadvantaged is, today, without doubt, technically considered professionally undesirable, but planners are not held accountable for doing so. Perhaps, a researcher whose own work reveals that support of gentrification is a policy that 'opposes [the] needs of the disadvantaged' has a special obligation to actively 'urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs'.¹⁹ If the gentrifying researcher's research supports efforts towards such alterations and is used to buttress campaigns against gentrification—the course suggested here—the net result of the residential decision may be both professionally and personally ethical.

The actions of young researchers studying gentrification impose ethical obligations on them. These obligations include involvement in collective and political actions that are likely to contribute as much (or more) to curing the ills of gentrification as their choice of where to live. It is their obligation to draw conclusions from their own research, and as they learn more of the injustice that gentrification causes, to become actively engaged in the fight against it, to use their research skills to spread

17 An excellent overview is provided in Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*, seventh edition (Boston and New York: Allyn & Bacon, 2004), Richard E. Ocejo (ed.), *Ethnography and the city: readings on doing urban fieldwork* The Metropolis and Modern Life series (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) and in Mitchell Duneier, Philip Kasinitz and Alexandra Murphy (eds.), *The urban ethnography reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

18 From Section A: 1f), available at <https://www.planning.org/ethics/ethicscode.htm>

19 From <https://www.planning.org/ethics/ethicscode.htm>

recognition of those injustices, in order to help formulate and implement the kinds of measures suggested under the social policy response above. That is the hard-core ethical obligation confronting them.²⁰

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20 And, indeed, on all planners--see Peter Marcuse, 'Professional ethics and beyond: values in planning', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 42.3 (1976), pp. 264-74, reprinted in Donald Hagman, *Public planning and control of urban and land development: cases and materials*, second edition (Minneapolis: West Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 393-400, and in Martin Wachs (ed.), *Ethics in planning*, fourth printing (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2013) and Peter Marcuse, 'A just code of ethics for planners', *Progressive Planning* 198, Winter (2014), pp. 16-19.