

Gentrification and the Displacement of Minorities: Urban Citizenship

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AUTHOR BIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores gentrification and questions of inequality. While minority communities have long been segregated and treated unfairly, gentrification has brought these inequalities to the forefront. The disparity between minority groups and their wealthier, white counterparts grows as gentrification continues to displace them into neglected areas. Rising housing costs reduce the supply of affordable housing, preventing them from benefiting from the economic growth and increased availability of services that come with increased investment. Communities attempting to achieve economic revitalization without the disruption that displacement brings face a challenge from gentrification.

Keywords: Gentrification, Displacement, Minorities, Economic Revitalization.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, cultural differences have divided American society, allowing minorities to be denied resources due to their geographic location. While minority communities have long been segregated and treated unfairly, gentrification has brought these inequalities to the forefront. The disparity between minority groups and their wealthier, white counterparts grows as gentrification continues to displace them into neglected areas. Existing residents, many of whom are minorities, are displaced as rising housing costs reduce the supply of affordable housing, preventing them from benefiting from the economic growth and increased availability of services that come with increased investment. Communities attempting to achieve economic revitalization without the disruption that displacement brings face a challenge from gentrification.

Gentrification

Gentrification has a long history in the U.S. because it excludes many minority groups and maintains the traditional social hierarchy along urban-rural lines. However, as racial categories have come to take on new meanings under new economic conditions, the perception of gentrification has shifted over time. Redlining and racial covenants have prevented Black families from renting or purchasing homes in certain neighborhoods for decades, particularly during the Jim Crow era. This contributed to the formation of densely populated, impoverished communities of color across the U.S. Gentrification has evolved since then, and minority communities have become prime targets for property speculators, though it has taken on a more subtle form as a result of laws prohibiting explicit segregation. As a result, gentrification calls into question the concept of urban citizenship, which can be defined as a citizen's relationship with urban spaces and their

individual or collective engagement within them. Although some may argue that the positive effects of gentrification outweigh the negative, its use in urban policy to displace minority communities culturally and physically undermines the fundamental basis of citizenship—specifically urban citizenship—to a greater extent.

Many of the contributing factors to gentrification stem from the complexity of different social standings, as exemplified by racial redlining, which allows for the further displacement of minorities, highlighting the history of urban revitalization. As the importance of cities grew in the 1900s, banks and the stock market began to fail, resulting in the Great Depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt created a series of emergency relief programs in response to the Great Depression, one of which was the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC). Many people of color were offended by the HOLC's decision to map most of the neighborhoods and label many of them as "hazardous" in red ink: racial redlining.¹ It's no coincidence that many of these communities were mostly made up of people of color. The HOLC would assist homeowners with mortgages by lending low-interest money to refinance existing mortgages and by originating new mortgages. Many people of color were denied access to federal emergency funds because of maps labeling communities of color as "hazardous," although they were just as affected as white people by the Great Depression. This prompted gentrification because it resulted in higher living costs and amenities that weren't equally available to all residents. Historically redlined areas frequently have a "rent gap," or the difference between the property's potential value and current housing

¹ Neilson Voyne Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005). 15.

prices.² Urban housing's prime location, combined with historical underinvestment and low rent prices, makes it appealing to young professionals, developers, and investors looking to profit from the gap in property values. In San Francisco, 87% of gentrifying neighborhoods were previously designated as "hazardous."³ The HOLC's discussion of racial redlining relates to urban citizenship because many minorities have been denied equal resources in comparison to other groups of people solely because of where they live.

While Ruth Glass, a British sociologist, coined the term "gentrification" in 1964, gentrification patterns can be traced back to urbanization and the development of suburbs during the Great Migration in the U.S.⁴ Due to a decrease in the demand for agricultural labor, urbanization resulted in a population shift from rural to urban areas, primarily farmers moving to cities.⁵ Similar aspects of urbanization can be applied to gentrification, such as pollution, poor public health, and limited access to resources that were only available to wealthy white men. As a result of their social status, many minority communities lacked adequate resources. Minorities gathered in ethnic clusters in the early 1900s, but their resources were often insufficient in comparison to their white counterparts.⁶ As a

result of the sudden increase in population in urban areas, gentrification emerged as a concept in which systemic racism allowed minority communities to have fewer opportunities than new farmers, eventually leading to their forced displacement. Because white farmers would be given more opportunities than people of color, urbanization justified the disparity between white and minority communities. The physical displacement of the lower, working-class during urbanization is linked to the concept of urban citizenship because it acted as an accelerator for the shift in community diversity, allowing ethnic groups to be forced out. The Great Migration was the movement of six million African Americans from rural Southern America to urban areas in the Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970.⁷ In response, there was a sudden exodus of white people from urban areas to suburban areas, motivated by economic and racist ideologies.⁸ The growing popularity of suburbs, which were off-limits to most minority homebuyers due to many racist obstacles such as racial redlining, was due to newly developed transportation systems and a booming postwar economy.⁹ The Great Migration resulted in gentrification as a result of racial hierarchy, allowing white people to flee cities as they became more integrated, allowing suburbia to become safer and more resourced. Ethnic groups didn't have "unalienable rights," as their right to life and the pursuit of happiness was severely limited as a result of historically racist ideologies and subsequent displacement.¹⁰ Urbanization, racial redlining, and the Great Migration are some of the causes of

² Ph.D. Hannah De los Santos, "From Redlining to Gentrification: The Policy of the Past That Affects Health Outcomes Today," Primary Care Review, May 26, 2021, <http://info.primarycare.hms.harvard.edu/review/redlining-gentrification-health-outcomes>.

³ Francis Pearman, "Gentrification and Academic Achievement: A Review of Recent Research," Review of Educational Research, October 13, 2018, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0034654318805924>.

⁴ Smith, "The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City", 22.

⁵ Francis Pearman, "Gentrification and Academic Achievement: A Review of Recent Research".

⁶ Francis Pearman, "Gentrification and Academic Achievement: A Review of Recent Research".

⁷ Smith, "The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City", 126.

⁸ De los Santos, "From Redlining to Gentrification: The Policy of the Past That Affects Health Outcomes Today".

⁹ Smith, "The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City", 126.

¹⁰ Smith, "The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City", 126

gentrification because they allowed for the forced displacement of people through the use of racial hierarchy and racist ideologies.

During gentrification, poorer minority neighborhoods are frequently converted to high-end communities with expensive housing options such as high-rises, causing physical displacement of minorities and challenging minorities' basic rights. As property values rise, the neighborhood's original residents are pushed out in a variety of ways. First, as building prices rise, the gap between the price of the building and the income the landlord receives from renting the building widens, resulting in higher rent prices and the physical displacement of low-income minority residents.¹¹ Ordinary living spaces are converted to luxury buildings due to the potential for large profits, which means that landlords purposefully displace minority residents to convert these areas into areas that are perceived to be nicer. Developers also attract new residents with higher incomes because of the improved services and amenities that many minority communities lack. The influx of these new, wealthier residents puts pressure on the housing market, resulting in inflated rents and prices, effectively displacing low-income residents. For example, a corporation in New York's Chinatown applied for a special zoning permit to build an apartment on a plot with rent-control housing, and the developer had already evicted many Chinese tenants before the city decided whether to issue the permit.¹² Residents claimed that the corporation forced them out of the building by depriving them of services, harassing them, intimidating them with gangs, and setting fire to it.¹³ This is related to citizenship because low-income people of color are disproportionately affected by displacement.

Many minorities are being forced out of their neighborhoods due to rising costs, resulting in fewer community networks, which encourages these citizens to move elsewhere. Citizens have the right to equal access to community resources; however, many high-income groups now have the power to shape city policy to protect themselves from further gentrification as a result of forced displacement.

People with higher economic status have more power and resources than low-income minority residents because they deny them their fundamental rights to equal access to opportunities and to live freely. For example, according to a newspaper article written by M.P. McQueen in *New York Newsday*, the protesters featured in the article are members of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a network of community-based organizations that advocates for low- and moderate-income families led by minorities.¹⁴ The city believed that a variety of projects, such as residential neighborhood renovations and the development of major commercial strips, would reduce crime, increase job opportunities, and improve overall neighborhood safety.¹⁵ Instead, gentrification forced many lower-income residents to relocate due to rising housing costs. The article demonstrates how cities promote gentrification by implementing public projects to 'clean' up the city, resulting in the creation of even larger, stronger gentrified areas because of cultural displacement. While the protest was largely unsuccessful, it did create movement, nuance, and conversation between the two groups—the wealthy whites and the poorer minorities—as gentrification would be viewed in two very different ways as poorer communities were forced to relocate due to rising housing costs. As a result of certain social and economic

¹¹ Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin K. Wyly, *Gentrification* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011). 15.

¹² Lees, Slater, and Wyly, "*Gentrification*", 48.

¹³ Lees, Slater, and Wyly, "*Gentrification*", 48.

¹⁴ M.P. McQueen, "Housing's Income Scale Draws Protestors," *New York Newsday*, October 29, 1989.

¹⁵ McQueen, "Housing's Income Scale Draws Protestors," *New York Newsday*.

standings, higher-income residents would physically evict low-income minority residents from neighborhoods and deny them their basic rights as urban citizens, posing a challenge to urban citizenship as many minority communities would be forced out, lowering their engagement in urban spaces.

In addition to physical displacement caused by rising property values and coercive tactics, gentrification can also result in cultural displacement, as low-income people of color are excluded from newly planned spaces in gentrified areas. The urban planning shift from "fostering community formation" to "investing the city with money and consumption-oriented spaces that resemble suburban shopping malls that exclude low-income people of color" is common in gentrification efforts.¹⁶ Rather than community integration, there is selective development and enforcement of boundaries between different areas.¹⁷ Furthermore, when developers construct houses, they do so for high-income white families rather than diverse groups.¹⁸ These spaces call into question the concept of citizenship because they disproportionately exclude people of color by forming communities for wealthy white people. A complex array of private and public actions at the local, regional, state, and federal levels shape the development patterns that lead to gentrification. Minorities' citizenship is challenged as gentrification dismantles and destroys minority communities by forcing them out of their neighborhoods, culturally displacing an ethnic group by specifically building houses for their white counterparts, and discouraging

integration within communities.¹⁹ In this housing market, minorities frequently face severe discrimination, which poses a challenge to urban citizenship as gentrification reconfigures the urban landscape by shrinking residential options for disadvantaged residents while expanding them for more advantaged residents.²⁰ While rising home values put pressure on low-income minorities, racist ideologies were prevalent, allowing for the cultural displacement of minority groups by excluding people of color and creating spaces designed to push people of color out, ultimately challenging the notion of urban citizenship as racist ideologies were used to perpetuate the belief that gentrified neighborhoods were better.

Many argue that gentrification's benefits outweigh its drawbacks because it promotes development, rapid economic investment, and consumer and entertainment-related projects. An increase in resource allocation to schools, stores, and other developments is directly related to the influx of more affluent residents and people of privilege. For example, a newspaper article titled "New Shopping Hub: Convenience, Quality, and Safety" describes how a new shopping center in New York was opened, and while it was very convenient, it also managed to raise the taxes and rent of the surrounding areas as it attracted many people to the center.²¹ Many smaller businesses were forced to close as a result of the shopping mall's construction and their inability to compete with the larger clothing. Many were outraged because it forced poorer families to seek housing elsewhere due to rising costs. Long-term effects of the shopping center led to

¹⁶ Lees, Slater, and Wyly, "*Gentrification*", 272.

¹⁷ Lees, Slater, and Wyly, "*Gentrification*", 272.

¹⁸ Lance M Freeman, "Commentary: 21st Century Gentrification - JSTOR," 2016, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328278>.

¹⁹ Maureen Kennedy and Paul Leonard, "Dealing with Neighborhood Change a Primer on Gentrification- Brookings," 35.

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/gentrification.pdf>.

²⁰ Smith, "*The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*", 35.

²¹ Bryant Mason, "New Shopping Hub: Convenience, Quality, Safety," *Daily News*, August 11, 1975.

the city developing more gentrified areas by creating more expensive residential neighborhoods, which eventually attracted more people to the urban neighborhood as the borough's overall wealth grew as poorer communities were forced to relocate due to rising costs.²² The negative effects of gentrification outweigh the positives in terms of urban citizenship, physically and culturally displacing residents through exponentially rising property prices, coercion, or buyouts.²³ Gentrification can be seen as beneficial if the changes are carefully planned with community input and participation and result in greater socioeconomic and racial integration.²⁴ However, this is rarely the case because higher home values attract affluent families, effectively pushing minorities out. Gentrification's positive effects contribute significantly to the further gentrification of minorities. Furthermore, because of the ramifications of forced displacement of minorities due to increased home values, the negative effects outweigh the positive. As a result, in addition to increased economic investment and home values, there is a growing gap between gentrified and non-gentrified neighborhoods, reflecting systemic inequalities between ethnic groups and their white counterparts.

While some may argue that increased home values and economic investment have had a greater impact on the fundamental basis of citizenship than the forced physical and cultural displacement of minority communities, However, inequities and disparities in gentrified

neighborhoods between minorities and their white counterparts directly reflect inequities and disparities in how society views and values white people and people of color, implying that people of color have a moderated citizenship in comparison to white people.²⁵ While gentrified neighborhoods provide minorities with unequal access to resources, the implications and ramifications of gentrification furthering the cultural and physical displacement of minority communities exemplify how people of color are undervalued and not viewed as equal citizens by society. For example, a study of Census and American Community Survey data in 380 metropolitan areas found that 25% of the neighborhoods were "ascending," meaning their median incomes had doubled, their share of residents with a college degree had increased by 14%, their share of residents working white-collar jobs had increased by 15% and housing costs had doubled.²⁶ This example demonstrates how gentrification and residential selection are governed by a long-term racial hierarchy. These findings help to explain how neighborhood racial inequality is reproduced during urban transformations and accurately determine how often a neighborhood's rise in economic status corresponded to a drastic change in its racial and ethnic composition.²⁷ While inequalities between people of color and white people are often abstract and intangible, gentrification, its causes, and its consequences are qualitative measures that convey and evaluate how society views minorities as second-class citizens with limited access to

²²Smith, *"The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City"*, 158.

²³Smith, *"The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City"*, 158.

²⁴Conor Wilson, "Book Review: Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State by Samuel Stein," LSE Review of Books, July 15, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2019/09/27/book-review-capital-city-gentrification-and-the-real-e-state-state-by-samuel-stein>.

²⁵Wilson, "Book Review: Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State by Samuel Stein".

²⁶Sandra Feder, "Gentrification Disproportionately Affects Minorities," Stanford News, February 5, 2021, <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/12/01/gentrification-disproportionately-affects-minorities/>.

²⁷Feder, "Gentrification Disproportionately Affects Minorities," Stanford News.

resources and opportunities compared to white people.

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