

**D.W. Gibson**, *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York: Overlook Press, 2015. ISBN: 9781468308617 (cloth); ISBN: 9781468313017 (paper)

**Peter Moskowitz**, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood*, New York: Nation Books, 2017. ISBN: 9781568585239 (cloth); ISBN: 9781568585246 (ebook)

**John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill**, *Gentrifier*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781442650459 (cloth); ISBN: 9781442623842 (ebook)

Gentrification is a framework for understanding one way that cities change, a certain form of urban reinvestment of capital in which people with more money, often white, displace people with less money, often people of color. It originated in the academy and has long-since become part of popular discourse. In the city where I live, New York, it is a rare social gathering where gentrification does not at some point become a topic of lively and even heated discussion: Which neighborhood is next, and why? Can it be stopped, or even tamed? Is it bad? Whose fault is it?

The three recent books reviewed here all seek to contribute to, and bridge, the scholarly, public, and political conversations about gentrification. They all deploy academic research on gentrification to make sense of particular experiences of it in American cities (none make use of the growing body of work on comparative global gentrification; see Lees et al. 2016), and to make recommendations for action. Taken together, they give a sense of what is and is not being translated between these spheres.

One was written by a group of three academics, the other two were written by journalists. All will be of interest to radical geographers.

The journalist who wrote *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* was raised in New York City's West Village, the neighborhood that inspired Jane Jacobs' (2011) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, which was first published in 1961. After college, Peter Moskowitz returned home to discover that he had been priced out of not only his neighborhood, but his borough. He found himself both lamenting the hyper gentrification of the West Village, where multi-millionaires have now replaced the upper middle class residents who replaced the bohemians, and uncomfortable with his role as a gentrifier in a series of increasingly remote neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens. Moskowitz is a white, gay, middle class man now based in Philadelphia, an increasingly popular home for people priced out of, or disgusted by, New York.

*How to Kill a City* builds on several years of Moskowitz's reporting for outlets including *The Guardian*, BuzzFeed, and Gawker. Aiming to go beyond the typical media coverage of gentrification as a trend fueled by consumer choice, Moskowitz ties together stories from New Orleans, Detroit, San Francisco, and New York that focus on the root causes and often invisible losses of gentrification. The volume was published by Nation Books, and Moskowitz's analysis is grounded in a leftist framework, drawing heavily on Neil Smith's theory of the rent gap and his later work on gentrification and the global circulation of capital (see Smith 1979, 2002). Capitalism is not the only villain here, though, nor is economics the only explanatory framework: white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism also have important roles to play.

However, while Moskowitz does favor a structural analysis, *How to Kill a City* does not present an abstracted version of city life, all policy and structural violence. It is animated, throughout, with the first-hand stories of people on all sides of this experience,

particularly people of color and low-income people who have watched their neighborhoods become unrecognizable and unlivable, or have been displaced, or are fighting displacement.

Moskowitz uses ideas from the academy to make sense of what he is finding in the field and provide a deeper context for the current realities of gentrification, deploying different theorists and authors to analyze each city: Jason Hackworth (2007) on the neoliberal city and Philip Clay (1979) on the stages of gentrification for New Orleans; Richard Florida (2002) on the creative class and Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) on segregation in cities for Detroit; Rebecca Solnit (with photographer Susan Schwartzenberg) (2002) on the violence of gentrification and Harvey Logan and John Molotoch (2007) on the city as a growth machine for San Francisco; and for New York City Jane Jacobs (of course), Sarah Schulman (2012) on gentrification of the mind and Julian Brash (2011) on urban planning and hypergentrification. However, he does not always simply plug these theories into what he finds in the world. He tests them, modifies them, and evaluates them along the way. For example, he suggests that we should add a stage zero to our understanding of the stages of gentrification, a stage in which the actions of policymakers create the conditions to allow gentrification to happen: the fiscal crisis of the 1970s in New York City, the neoliberal response to Katrina in New Orleans, or Detroit's bankruptcy. This book is clearly the product of an interested and engaged student of urban studies as well as a city-dweller struggling to make sense of the changing landscapes of power and privilege they encounter. It is a struggle that is productive, and the result is a volume that serves as a readable, engaging introduction to many of the key ideas, especially from the Left, that help us to understand cities.

*Gentrifier* was written by academics, but is not a traditional academic monograph. Co-authored by John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill, it was published by University of Toronto Press as part of the UTP Insights series, which

produces “brief books offering accessible introductions to the ideas that shape our world”. The one-word title and dramatic red, black and white cover hint that this book will be bold, perhaps provocative, and indeed it is. Peter Marcuse, in the introduction, calls it “a brave book”. The three authors, all university professors (two sociologists and an anthropologist) who study cities, out themselves as gentrifiers, which they define as a “structural position enacted when particular personal choices coincide with particular structural tendencies—tendencies that are embedded in accumulations of neighborhood injustices and contemporary global capitalism itself” (p.187). They note that, in fact, it is likely that a majority of those who study and organize against gentrification are gentrifiers, but that this fact is rarely if ever acknowledged in their scholarship. What new insights might be brought to the conversation about gentrification if scholars made use of their own experiences?

Using what they describe as an auto-ethnographic approach, the authors write about their own decades of experiences renting apartments, buying and selling homes, selecting schools for their children, interacting with neighbors, and participating in public life in a variety of gentrifying neighborhoods, in cities including New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Diego. Schlichtman is white, married to a black woman, and father to mixed race children; Patch is white, married to a white woman from Greece, and a parent; and a Hill is a black single father and prominent public intellectual. Each comes from a different class background, but all now benefit from the privileges and stability that come with being full-time tenure track faculty. They interweave these personal accounts, all written in the third person, with lively engagements with theoretical and political debates about gentrification, which I expect would be accessible to a newcomer but also interesting to those well-versed in these conversations. These engagements are lively because the authors are invested in them—they are seeking perspectives and information that will help them to make sense of the ethical dilemmas, guilt, and joy they

experienced living in gentrifying neighborhoods. It is important to note that the authors' own experiences are not the only original data on which they draw. They also take public dialogue about gentrification, in forms from blog posts about how to be a "good gentrifier" to discussions at public events, as key information for analysis. This is an effective way to build a two-way dialogue between public and academic conversations about gentrification.

In making sense of all this, the authors position themselves as attempting to develop a middle ground between those who explain gentrification as a matter of consumer choice and those who understand it in political economy terms, between structure and agency, noting the limitations of each approach. In an attempt to clarify their concepts and provide a theoretical framework that is robust yet flexible, adaptable to the very different cities they are writing about and both individual and structural levels of analysis, they present an "analytical multi-tool" that looks at housing choice in terms of money, practicality, aesthetics, amenities, community, authenticity, and flexibility (p.29). There is a pattern to their sections on politics and theory: they tend to lay out the right- and left- (and very left-) leaning points of view on each issue, and end by saying it is complex and locally variable. For example, on inclusionary zoning, those on the Right may see it as leftist, ideologically-driven social engineering, while those on the far Left may see it as a right-wing plot to scatter poor people, destroy their cultural centers, and keep them from organizing as a political plot (p.198). The authors are well-aware that they risk being self-serving, defensive, or even "whiny" as they attempt to stake a position in this complex terrain, as both academics and gentrifiers. But by making themselves and their choices part of the analysis, they have produced a unique and important contribution to the progressive literature on gentrification, one that truly does work in the much-sought middle ground between supply and demand side explanations of this form of urban change.

In contrast to *How to Kill a City* and *Gentrifier*, the author is not a main character in *The Edge Becomes the Center: An Oral History of Gentrification in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Journalist and white New York City resident D.W. Gibson is not invisible, though. He serves as tour guide to New York City's landscapes of gentrification and conductor for the chorus of voices he brings together in his book. His writing, in italics, frames the transcribed and edited words of his narrators. He tells us what they look like, how they gesticulate, what kinds of cars they drive and how they take their coffee. Still, as is fitting for an oral history book, the narrators take center stage. They are diverse and include a mix of public figures—like Paula Segal, the Ukrainian-born lawyer who founded a nonprofit that helps communities identify and get control of vacant land, and Daniel Squadron, New York State senator trying to avoid talking about gentrification and still have something to say about housing—and relatively unknown New Yorkers—like Raul, a middle-aged Puerto Rican pot dealer from the long-gentrified Lower East Side, and Barbara Williams, president of the residents' association of her Harlem public housing complex. *The Edge Becomes the Center* has 29 short chapters and no table of contents. Readers are not meant to cherry-pick the voices they hear, but to read from one to the next to the next, being carried by Gibson from the Victorian home of a Brooklyn-born black poet turned real estate agent to the Volvo of the Jewish real estate developer bustling around Bed-Stuy to the Lower Manhattan office of the Chinese contractor who works for him, and onwards to the end of the book, where we meet a series of activists who are questioning the commodification of land.

Each of these books, in fact, closes with some kind of policy recommendations, or suggestions for action. It is no accident that the final narrators in *The Edge Becomes the Center* are all talking about land, and what it means to treat land as property, or not: Rob Robinson, a formerly homeless activist who advocates for direct action to take control of urban land as a solution to both homelessness and gentrification; Jerry the Peddler, a

former squatter who now owns his apartment as a limited-equity, low-income co-op; a 79 year old Brooklyn homeowner under pressure to sell the place she has lived and worked in for over 50 years; and the college professor who founded a social club in her shuttered storefront Greek diner to help her keep the building. Gibson concludes that a world in which relationships to land are almost always filtered through money and capital will always have something like gentrification in it. A way forward must begin with the valuation of what political economists would call the use value of urban spaces and the vibrant human lives that take place in and make them. This is a fitting conclusion for a work of oral history that so powerfully foregrounds the complexity and the beauty of everyday life, even the life of real estate developers.

*How to Kill a City* ends with a more straightforward list of policy recommendations, tools which Moskowitz argues have been proven effective, but are too often ignored in an American political reality where the fact that cities must act as growth machines is now taken for granted and anything that smacks of socialism is easily dismissed. He includes land banking, community planning, increased taxes on the wealthy and an increased minimum wage, increased density and the infrastructure to support it, public housing, and rent-regulation. Even more explicitly than Gibson, he also argues that we must find ways to value the non-commodifiable things in life.

The authors of *Gentrifier* embed their policy suggestions in a particular historical analysis. They ask what we would see if we framed our thinking about gentrification in the context of the issues that were considered crises in 1970 by progressive urban planners: urban disinvestment and residential immobility, white preferences for segregated neighborhoods, and the proliferation of sprawl. Why is gentrification not the solution to these crises of a half-century ago? Does condemnation of gentrification make progressive urbanists unable to recognize examples of just urban development? Really, what they are asking is what a positive progressive vision of the city (“within the current

capitalist system” [p.173])—not just a condemnation of gentrification—should look like now.

They argue, for example, that low-income inner city residents moving to the suburbs should not all be assumed to be victims of gentrification, and that while suburban areas are undoubtedly changing and in many places are less desirable than they were 50 years ago, they can still be places of educational and economic opportunity (p.174-175). Similarly, they argue that it is not fair to condemn gentrifiers for wanting to live in diverse urban neighborhoods just as we condemned their parents for wanting to live in homogeneous suburban towns (p.175-176). Inclusionary zoning and scattered site public housing should be acknowledged as potentially viable solutions to economic segregation, especially if they are the product of genuinely community-led planning processes. All of these analyses take capitalism and the entrenched poverty it produces as given, and they tend to leave out white supremacy as a significant factor shaping personal and policy decisions.

The authors of *Gentrifier* use Peter Marcuse’s (2009) writing on the class politics of the right to the city to move forward from this point. Marcuse legitimates the alienation of those (like the authors) whose material needs are met, but whose social needs are not met by the segregated and otherwise oppressive society in which they live, but he also acknowledges the different and urgent needs of those who are materially insecure. Many of those most vocally opposing gentrification are early gentrifiers trying to shut the door behind them. Others are long-time residents seeking control of and input into a process that affects them deeply. The authors of *Gentrifier* propose the building of relationships of solidarity between these groups, knowing that it will be messy. They also use Marcuse’s (2013) work to categorize different approaches to gentrification: neoliberal, which celebrates the market’s genius for bringing land to its highest and best use and the individual’s ability to self-maximize; ameliorative, which does not seek to



tame the market, but to offset some of its more painful effects on the poor via charity; and transformative, which prioritizes democratic governance over the will of the market (p.188-191). It is on transformative policies that they focus: capping of property taxes for low-income residents, laws to protect renters, inclusionary zoning, regional planning for transportation and economically integrated housing with a recognition that suburbs can be lively and diverse under the right conditions and, most importantly, a powerful role for local community voices to shape the policies that shape their lives. Low-income people moving to the suburbs is not a problem. Low-income people being forced to move to the suburbs because they have been displaced from their inner-city neighborhoods is. At the same time, community control of planning can be used to exclude people of color and low-income people from wealthier, whiter areas. No policy solution has inherent political values. The authors identify community benefits agreements with developers and community land trusts as possible mechanisms to allow for community control in the absence of formal local political structures.

In contrast, Moskowitz is less confident in the potential for progressive policies to address the ills of gentrification: “Gentrification does not mean that the suburbs are over, or that cities are becoming more diverse. All it means is that our geography of inequality is being redrawn. Gentrification is not integration but a new form of segregation. The borders around the ghettos have simply been redrawn” (p.117). In a country where land relationships are grounded in the dynamics of settler colonialism, “gentrification is in our blood” (p.215). He concludes that “while there are ways to ameliorate gentrification under lightly restrained capitalism ... there will be no solution to the crisis without true economic and racial equality” (p.214). How do we achieve that? He cites the Black Lives Matter movement as a point of hope in a political landscape lacking organized large-scale resistance to gentrification and ends by describing his own shift towards more active, if

small-scale, resistance: attending neighborhood meetings, seeking rent control in his building, even helping strangers on the subway.

All three of these books conclude that urban redevelopment will take on the characteristics of gentrification and lead to displacement as long as land and housing are commodified, cities are structured to function as growth machines that privilege exchange value and the lives of the wealthy over use value and the lives of everyone, and structural inequality creates unequal power relationships based on race, class, and other forms of difference. All three end with full-voiced pleas to readers to become more engaged urban citizens and find ways to fight the commodification of everything that so deeply shapes neoliberal urban life, although none provides more than isolated anecdotal evidence that this is possible. Each of these books seeks to connect with a broad public, using the lively first-person voices of city-dwellers (including the authors) to bring academic and activist debates to life and make new contributions to them. Taken together, they both portray and contextualize a truly broad array of experiences of gentrification, experiences which can and should be brought into the many conversations about gentrification happening all over our cities, day and night.

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