

Political Potency in a fragmented neighborhood?

How moral legitimizations of affordable housing discourses enable precarized inner city demographics to counter displacement logics

Brigitte Zamzow

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Countering neoliberalisms: Solidarities across race and class?

In Brooklyn, New York City, a privileged community recently negotiated deep affordable housing construction and preservation goals during a rezoning process which was publicly dubbed as the first “just” rezoning (The City of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio 2021; Bellafante 2021). Whilst not interrogating whether a truly just rezoning has been achieved or not, the most interesting observation about the public discourse is that it seems to mark a historic shift in the city’s neoliberalized social habitus and its planning practice; deviating from a politics and lifestyle logic that legitimized the continuous erosion of subsidized housing and displacement based on race and class (Goetz 2011; Shmaryahu-Yeshurun 2021; DeFilippis und Fraser 2010; Fraser und DeFilippis, James and Joshua Bazuin 2012; Zamzow 2020), and progressing on to an idea of a (more) redistributive practice based on equitable access to housing (Steil et al. 2021; Zamzow 2021b, 2019). In this new effort backed by Fair Housing regulations, New York City geared its latest rezoning projects towards inner-city predominantly white and affluent neighborhoods instead of underserved predominantly black neighborhoods (The City of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio 2021; Levin et al. 2022).

Precarization of the US-American white middle class

Increasing societal polarization enabled by a neoliberal economic and political (and arguably societal or at least societally practiced) system leads to a shrinking middle class. However, being pushed out of the middle-class does not equate to entry into what has become known as the working-class with the onset of industrialization and urbanization. What ‘Western’ societies have grown into can be better described as a societal setup that divides into the very-wealthy (“the 1%”) and the precarized (“the 99%”) (Piketty 2014).

What I have studied in my case study is a new political potency arising from precarized and vulnerabilized societal groups concentrated in specific areas of the urban core. They engage in solidarity

practices to an extent that might have more potency for diversity than the Civil Rights Era in the US or during the student revolts in Europe at the end of the 1960s, which to a large extent were all based on housing issues as well.

Researching practices of solidarity through a case study

While it is epistemologically and empirically not easy to grasp which scale of political practice to investigate on such an entangled issue, I used a social-constructionist approach to politics: The act of policy-making and reacting to it, no matter on which scale, is inherently made by people. As I suspected that a change in wording and the approach to the policy of creating and maintaining affordable housing had occurred, my hypothesis was found true by a document analysis of the policy documentation of affordable housing by the last mayoral administration of Bill de Blasio 2014–2021.

Zooming out on the grander scale of federal policy, I was able to trace how the presidency of Barack Obama had fundamentally shaped the approach taken on affordable housing issues on an urban level (Zamzow 2022): The study *Where we live. Fair Housing NYC* published by the city's administration in 2021 (The City of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio 2021) had taken Obama's policy implementation requirements based on the 1968 Fair Housing Act despite President Trump's suspension of the rule seriously and published the study with policy suggestions. Vulnerabilized groups had been given specific voices reaching to the conclusion that all affordable housing tools available to the urban policymaking system would be geared toward equitable distribution of resources by access to housing, thereby integrally reorienting De Blasio's rezoning efforts toward affluent communities of the urban core.

Gowanus and SOHO/NOHO were both handled as possibilities to advance Fair Housing efforts via just rezonings mainly because of their demographics (Zamzow 2021b). I opted for Gowanus because the neighborhood had already received some attention due to de Blasio's infill plans for one of the public housing estates and seemed more complicated and richer in the imaginations it attracted from diverse stakeholders. Between March and June 2021, mid-pandemic, the final political participation process held by the local community board on affordable housing being built took place digitally.

The case study: Gowanus, Brooklyn

Gowanus is a post-industrial port district boasting a toxic river. It is still part of New York City's inner city belt in Brooklyn and is surrounded by hypergentrified Brownstone Brooklyn districts. More than 60% of its inhabitants are white, the median income per household is \$125,000 and therefore well above NYC average (NYU Furman Center 2018).

On the western side of the canal reside mainly top-earning white families with an income of more than \$150,000 per year. They live right adjacent to public housing residents with an average income of \$15–20,000. The former Latinx population in the south has been displaced from the private market due to adjacent rezonings in the 2000s. The eastern side is slightly more economically and racially diverse. The African American population also decreased since the year 2000 from 11.2% to 6.1% and they mainly live in public housing (ibid.). Consequently, the community here is socially fragmented and suffers from high social inequality. The community board consists of a 90% white middle- and upper-class body (participant observation 10/05/2020).

The public participation process: Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP)

What I want to draw special focus to in this article is the mechanism with which a very fragmented group of people appropriated the negotiation space that was opened by the city through the advisory approval process. There is a lot of hard evidence on what the community achieved, for example the implementation of a Racial Impact Study, and the highest amount of renovation funding for the social housing blocks owned and operated by the local housing authority NYCHA (New York City Housing Authority) in the neighborhood thus far (!). What I want to focus on however, is the extraction of the social networks and learning process of doing Housing Justice within the community board's decision process.

Speech acts by white middle-class residents during the meetings clearly show the ethicized legitimization of ensuring equitable access to housing in this neighborhood. Phrases like these keep reoccurring:

“It is our moral obligation to open up our neighborhood”

“Housing is a human right. Let's make the American Dream possible for people to find a home here.

“We should be open. New Yorkers are the best thing about New York.” (Participant observation 06/03/2021)

I want to use the last Land Use and Landmarks meeting where the final resolution was negotiated as an example of the complex inner logic of this ethical project. The final public hearing with over 160 online and offline testimonials had taken place one week prior. The main focus is on the dynamics between two characters who enjoy great standing in the neighborhood.

(Un-)Visible power dynamics: Whose voice, whose neighborhood?

The following description of a situation that occurred during the final decision process shows the inability to reflect holistically on white dominance by the mainly white, well-off community board on the one hand. However, it also shows that despite differing views and opinions, priorities and decisions based on a common value system were made that ensured that black and Latinx communities in public housing would be able to stay in the neighborhood (participant observation 06/17/2021).

Mike Riley¹ is a white, very progressive, feminist, well-educated and deeply empathetic man in his 30s and quite new to the mainly-white community board. He has been appointed to serve as chair of the final hearings. His parents moved to Gowanus in the 1990s giving him a chance to climb further up the social ladder and become a lawyer. His interest lies openly and genuinely in making this neighborhood livable and enjoyable for a diverse set of people. Valerie Smith is president of one of the public housing blocks. Although she has served as an active community leader in the neighborhood in various roles, she, too, has only recently been appointed to the community board. She is one of the very few People of Color there.

Valerie has to join the zoom meeting via her phone because she does not have a stable internet connection and therefore faces some trouble digitally raising her hand so she can speak. After another board member has expressed his opinion on mixed-income housing being a better solution than “all-in-one-block public housing” because there might be a “healthier ratio” between the “normal” rent-paying people and the others, she interrupts him without waiting to be called her turn.

Mike encourages her to speak. She starts very politely by thanking the board for letting her speak and by adding that she listened to everyone from the board and the community during this evening.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

She then makes her first point that the additions that the board is formulating tonight in order to approve the rezoning are not enough when comparing them to the decade-long toll the whole participation process has had on the black community in Gowanus. She expresses frustration that after all, all that is politically possible right now is a resolution that is not in any way a mandatory guideline for the developers and for the city moving forward.

She then allows herself to become more emotionally invested as she speaks. She says that there is still so much prejudice and quasi-knowledge on the differing realities in this neighborhood which makes it almost impossible for someone like her to bear these conversations. She finds it difficult, and she finds it sad. She says:

When people here are talking about affordable housing, they are forgetting my people. They are forgetting the poor. They are forgetting the underdogs of our society for generations who cannot and will not be able to afford this housing. It seems like this is not a concern for this board. So I will have to work with my brothers and sisters. It is with sadness that I will be voting against this motion. All the concern that we as community residents have lived with for more than 20 years. Having sewer overflow and rain. Having people have to spend hours pumping out their cellars. It is time that we as a community take into consideration everyone within our community. All those who are not as candid as we are, who can speak for themselves! (Participant observation 06/17/2021)

Her speech act manifest the manifold, smart decisions that have to be made in order to advocate as a public housing resident. She reveals that she does not only serve as the president of her public housing block, but is also committed to local interest groups which fight for daily repairs in the desolate buildings. She then goes on to mention broken elevators, the lead scandal and heat and electricity outages that happen on a daily basis. What she does not mention this time but on several other occasions is how especially during COVID-19, zoom meetings concerning the Gowanus' rezoning and the public housing privatization were oftentimes held simultaneously.

Mike responds to her and he is obviously very touched and thanks her. However, he then gives his opinion on the language used in the resolution and contends that its intent is mandatory in the way that is structurally possible for a community board. If this did not come across in the wording of the resolution, then it is a failure of the writing. He cannot help but sounding patronizing in how he explains to a grown and very experienced woman how city politics work in New York City. What Mike fails to realize is that Valerie talks about the multitudes of life's realities and inherent power dynamics. She talks about equitable access and space for letting concerns be known inside the community board. She talks about equitable access to city services and security. She talks about affordability for all the people who live here but who do not have the resource nor the voice to attend.

What I am sketching with this situation is a community that is eager to learn and in the middle of a learning process but will have to work through a lot of prejudice and internalized power patterns. To do Housing Justice, then, is a process rather than a fixed state of planning or policy practice. And it is painful.

Consequently, it is evident that it can be laid down spatially where the negotiation around *Housing Justice* happens. In this example it is manifested in the public housing grounds and a 100% affordable housing building called Gowanus Green.

Conclusion: Which neighborhoods succeed at fostering solidarity based on moral grounds?

What the ethnographic data suggests is that in Western, capitalist, democratic urban cores, there are white middle classes living in very close proximity with what William Julius Wilson had coined the Truly Disadvantaged in the 1990s, in German “Benachteiligte” (Zamzow und Krahl 2020). They are located in specific areas of the current neoliberal commodified and privatized inner city, in areas that have not undergone full gentrification or inversion² (Damiano 2021).

Some middle-class families might depend on their generated material wealth, as especially inhabitants over the age of fifty are homeowners in Gowanus, but also in a slightly younger generation that does not own property but is engaging very visibly in Gowanus’ public life via arts fairs, the opening of cafes and bike shops and identifying with more of an alternative lifestyle, also reflexive of their chosen career paths as artists, teachers, professors and so on (Field diary 12/07/2022). They have strong social and cultural capital at their disposal which enables them to advocate aggressively within neighborhood politics. This is where the connection to vulnerabilized groups comes in. African-American residents of Gowanus might be intersectionally more disadvantaged than their white middle-class neighbors and have an entirely different motivation to engage in political participation. But the reason why they stand in solidarity now is because this demographically and materially secures their lives in the neighborhood which they would be priced out or neoliberal-lifestyled out of next. The argumentative logic the white middle-class inhabitants of Gowanus use is of a moralized or ethicized fabric (Zamzow 2021a).

It is also evident that it needs a very specific demographic to garner this sort of conflictual but productive solidarity. It is happening in inner city belt neighborhoods where a diverse set of people come together sharing the experience of financialization pressure manifesting in displacement fears and/or perceptions of the familiarity, livability and diversity and overall potential of their neighborhood declining. They drive the idea of equitable access to housing to ensure that they can also stay put in their neighborhood.

A theory on the Urban that fits: Moral Economies

In urban studies, conceptions on morality are typically drawn from Émile Durkheim’s work on morality from a sociological perspective (Durkheim 2009). More recently, reference is made to the French-American anthropologist Didier Fassin and his extensive work on moral economies, especially in the Global South (Fassin 2007, 2010) and on immigration discourses in France (Fassin 2005, 2009a). His approach is primarily used in analyses of internal motivations of protests in the Global South, which face high rates of poverty and inequality. An example is family relations over inheritance in Asia in a society where the state has a less significant role, but also food riots (Fassin 2009b). Closer engagement with the literature demands engagement with the distinction between morality, norms and values, which cannot be further addressed in the context of this article. Fortunately, it is not necessarily relevant to the epistemic interest of this paper.

Studies on morality stand in two traditions. One is the Marxist tradition in which it is argued that people act purely rationally and always in favor of their own profit (drawing from Immanuel Kant). However, there is a certain dimension of moralist behavior favoring the greater good when interests overlap and corresponding sides promise to benefit from the cooperation, for example during a democratic

² Inversion meaning that the neighborhood “flips”, i.e. white well-off clientele seek out neighborhoods in the urban core and completely change the demography, social and racial setup of the neighborhood, which contradicts the Chicago model of the wealthier you get, the further one might move out of the center.

decision-making process. Marx describes three bases for which self-sacrifice becomes rationally legitimate, and therefore constitutes the basis of moral motivations, which are equality, universality and general norms (Miller 2021).

The second tradition consists of Niklas Luhmann's reflective theory of morality and is based on the view that morality is grounded on the coordination of actions of participating stakeholders, their interactions, rules, conventions, and thus a system of conflicting definitions of, for example, justice (Horster and Luhmann 2016). In the context of this work, then, stakeholders negotiate what is determined to be good, or which alternative readings, that are fought over, persevere. In the process of this negotiation, multiple decisions and outcomes then emerge that ultimately lead to progress, depending on which reading was able to convince the most entities in this case.

Building on both traditions, it stands to reason that the social arena of a moral economy exists in its process of two intertwined and constantly rearranging groups, the *challengers* and the *maintainers*. The maintainers will be looking to reassert a status quo, whereas the challengers will challenge that mindset with their interpretation of what is just or fair. In the case of Gowanus, this would manifest in each sub-point negotiated during the rezoning decision. Each subgroup re-forms into new conglomerates at each decision-making instance.

The literature that has emerged to this point has been particularly concerned with affected populations that are labeled as poor. I took a slightly altered approach in that I investigated more affluent groups and sub-groups and their motivations for solidarity with more vulnerable groups. Current studies on migration (Nieswand 2021) and on Urban Ethics take a similar conception on morality into consideration and study middle-class alternative urban movements in particular (Dürr et al. 2020; Ege und Moser 2021).

Solidarity through precarization: A common value system

As I am drawing from Wilson's underclass concept (Wilson 2012 [1987]) and Wacquant's precariat in describing stigmatized spaces in a neoliberal era (Wacquant 2007; Wacquant 2008), I might want to call this unique demographic an inner-city precariat. Wilson's disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods have vanished because of gentrification, or diversification at the expense of the vulnerable. Instead, we find fully gentrified neighborhoods with no urban life or political potency whatsoever, but also neighborhoods that become drivers in an anti-neoliberal approach to planning.

These neighborhoods differ starkly from gentrified neighborhoods based on their demographic, but also based on lifestyles and life choices. Norms and values are diametrically opposed to a neoliberal discriminatory paradigm. Consequently, one group might be highly educated, choose a non-materialist lifestyle and opt for meaning in their everyday jobs and engage actively in their community's concerns. Another group might be faced with more intersectional disadvantage, structural racism and discrimination, which is why an active choice of a lifestyle might not be at the center of their self-imagery. Their everyday concerns revolve around a high capacity of immediate problem-solving skills and a multitude of active engagement, as in this case with everyday repairs, total privatization of the local housing authority and a decade-long revitalization process of their neighborhood.

Although the wording 'precariat' bears negative connotations I chose to use it in order to connect two interest groups that choose to not follow a neoliberalized paradigm and who together form an urban moral economy. Literature suggests that the precariat neither owns a collective identity due to differing individualized lifestyles and life situations, nor does it become politically potent. I would argue that this notion has to be reevaluated. This *new* precariat that is spatially visible and concentrated might not define themselves over a common disadvantage, but they do unite over a common nemesis of neo-

liberal capitalism made tangible in the materialized spatial guise of housing, the basic need common to all classes via rising rents and displacement.

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