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Sean Anderson
College of DuPage

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Gentrification and Chicago

by Sean Anderson

(Geography 1105)

Gentrification is the process of renovating the housing and other buildings in a neighborhood in order to increase property values, bring in high value restaurants and shops, attract more affluent residents.¹ The term was coined in 1964 by British sociologist Ruth Glass. Since then the term has been met with both admiration and criticism. As will be made clear, by looking at Chicago and the surrounding neighborhoods, gentrification has more impactful negatives than positives. It continuously tends to have many undesirable consequences that seem to fall disproportionately on low income minorities. While gentrification may be impossible to curb, it is vastly important that the negative impact become known in an attempt prevent further harm from being done.

Despite the fact that gentrification of urban neighborhoods negatively affects low income minorities, it is very easy to get caught up in its appeal. There are a number of potential benefits that gentrifying a deteriorating area can have on the economy as well as on the people and safety of certain neighborhoods. Advocates for gentrification may argue that restoring old buildings helps keep hold of an area's past. If these building were allowed to be torn down or to deteriorate to a point unrecognizable, part of the past could be lost forever. By restoring these old buildings, a community becomes revitalized. A sense of history and culture can be preserved. Aside from this preservation, proponents of this argue that gentrification can leads to great economic growth. According to J. Peter Byrne at the Georgetown University Law Center, "increases in the number of affluent and well-educated residents is plainly good for cities, on balance, by increasing the number of residents who can pay taxes, purchase local goods and services, and support, and support the city in state and federal political processes."² These areas are no longer falling apart and attract a whole new demographic. Instead of a population of people who may have been struggling to get by, groups of people who are financially stable are now drawn to the same place that years earlier may have seemed uninhabitable to many. This new population of people has money to spend and they seem interested in investing it in the neighborhood. With more money being used, these areas are able to continue to modernize. New restaurants, bigger businesses, and the creation of better living quarters are all results of gentrification.

These new businesses continue to advance the perception that gentrification is a largely positive phenomenon. According to Jacob L. Vidgor, "as a centralizing force, gentrification could potentially improve labor market outcomes for central city residents by offsetting spatial mismatch... residential gentrification might cause a reallocation of jobs in personal service industries and retail

¹ Rowlant Atkinson. "Introduction: Misunderstood Saviour or Vengeful Wrecker? The Many Meanings and Problems of Gentrification." *Urban Studies*, 2003. Pp. 2343-2350

² Peter J. Byrne. "Two Cheers for Gentrification." *Howard Law Journal* 46 (2003): 405-32. Accessed April 29, 2016.
<http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1936&context=facpub>.

trade towards central cities.”³ Advocates argue that there will be more job opportunities that are brought into these areas that may have been lacking business before. People like Vidgor say that this may actually cause more low income people to stay in these gentrified neighborhoods. They could be awarded job opportunities that had been lost to them before the buildup. One has to just walk down the street of the many gentrified neighborhoods in Chicago to see that the creation of jobs through new restaurants, franchises, or cooperate retail stores. Whether it be Logan Square, Wicker Park, or the former area of Cabrini Green; everywhere there are abundances of stores like Starbucks or Target. These all could serve as a haven for those seeking jobs.

Supporters may also argue that crime rates dramatically decrease in areas that have become gentrified. According to experts, “... middle- income people commit less crime than do those on lower incomes- the displacement of the latter by the former should reduce crime.”⁴ With the new housing and businesses a certain demographic tends to move into gentrified areas. This group is heavily white middle class citizens. Many supporters of gentrification continue to argue that this group of people usually commit less crime than those who are displaced. These “experts” believe that the low income minority people who previously inhabited these places are more prone to violence and illegal activity. When middle class white families move in, theoretically the crime rates should plummet.

At surface level, these make gentrification seem like a no brainer. Who wouldn’t want historical preservation, more job opportunities, and less crime? In reality, supporters fail to grasp the underlying affects gentrification actually has on not only the built up neighborhood, but the city as a whole. While white middle class citizens may benefit from this process, gentrification has a number of undesirable consequences that have fallen disproportionately on low income minorities. These consequences include, but are not limited to, expensive housing and building costs that displace minorities throughout the city, the loss of cultural identity for many neighborhoods which are replaced by a global landscape indistinguishable from other urban areas through the city, and the increase in crime rates through the rest of the city as those prone to criminal activity are scattered.

One of the biggest negative results of gentrification is the increase in both building and housing rents. As neighborhoods are built up, the price of living also rises. This leads to a decrease in affordable housing. One only needs to look to Logan Square and Humboldt Park to see these results first hand. On June 6, 2015 Chicago’s new elevated trail and park system opened on the Northwest side. The 606, or Bloomingdale line, is a \$95 million project that converted an old 2.7 mile elevated railway into a greenway reserved for recreational use. While the mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, celebrated the opening as a way to unite neighborhoods, many in the area fear that this opening is actually a “double-edged sword.” Alderman Robert Maldonado stated, “At the beginning, when this was being discussed, they thought it would be a nice amenity for the community and they supported it... I told them, ‘Be careful, this is going to drive up rents and assessed values.’ Now they are worried about the impact to long-term residents and other residents.”⁵ The new trail connects a number of different areas that have been going through

³ J. L. Vidgor (2002). Does Gentrification Harm the Poor? [with Comments]. Brookings-Wharton papers on urban affairs (ArticleType: research-article / Full publication date: 2002 / Copyright © 2002. Brookings Institution Press), 133-182.

⁴ Phillip Feldman. *The Psychology of Crime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

⁵ Greg Trotter and John Byrne. "Chicago's New 606 Park Stirs Gentrification Fears." *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 2015. Accessed April 17, 2016. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-606-bloomingdale-trail-gentrification-met-20150605-story.html>.

development the last few years, from Bucktown to Humbolt Park. As of last May, prices had already increased to a median of \$477,500 for detached single-family homes in Logan Square, an increase of 27.5 percent from only two years before. While this may be good for those who own property, the 65 percent who do not are at risk of being priced out.⁶ A number of these at risk are lower income minority citizens. One example is Eric Nunez, a Mexican- American student, who has lived in Logan Square all of his 15 years. Nunez fears that his family will not be able to stay much longer if things continue to change so quickly. Nunez was one of around fifty teenagers that protested near The 606 trail to try and draw attention to the fact that Logan Square has become increasingly unaffordable for some families.⁷ This is just one example of the effect gentrification continues to have in neighborhoods throughout the city. In July 2015 in Chicago, rents of two-bedroom apartments had increased by 5.2 percent a year since 2012. That amount to more than 20 percent over four year.⁸ More affluent residents are drawn to the new development. Developers realize this and increase their prices without a second thought of who may be adversely affected. This example of Logan Square is just a snapshot of what is happening through the rest of Chicago. Paul Levin, a long-time resident and Executive Director of the Logan Square Chamber of Commerce, attempts to get this point across using an analogy with cake:

“Logan Square was always a neighborhood that had a good mixture of economic classes. The illustration I usually use is the layer cake... Into the 1970s and the 80s, the middle [income bracket] got thinner and the top got thinner and the bottom [bracket] got bigger. But then in the 90s that started to change again slowly. And we’re back now where the middle and top layer are at least two thirds, if not more of the cake. The low income population is down again.”⁹

The lower income population is directly affected by this increase in. These people are being forced out of neighborhoods and homes they had occupied for years. In the 70’s and 80’s most of the people that moved into Logan Square were Latino families, mostly Puerto Rican. Today the demographic tends to be younger, single, and white.¹⁰

It would be one thing if these landlords and realtors were just a product of the times and allowed a natural process of development to take place. Instead they use extreme and sometimes even illegal measures to displace minorities from their living quarters. This is greatly evident by looking at Albany Park in Chicago. In Albany Park in 2014, ownership of an apartment complex at 4834 N. Springfield Ave. changed hands to Barnett Capital LLC. Residents saw this as an opportunity to get much needed repairs done. They brought in building inspectors who recorded a number of code violations. When informed about these repairs, the owners either ignored the requests to repair, or quickly and poorly attempted a fix. Following the requests, the owners gave 30

⁶ Trotter and Byrne

⁷ Joe Ward. "'We've Been Pushed Out,' Logan Square Teens Protest Gentrification." Logan Square Neighborhood Association. December 16, 2015. Accessed April 30, 2016. <http://www.lsna.net/news/3341>.

⁸ Darryl Holliday. "Logan Square, Avondale Rents Are Through the Roof, Market Analysis Confirms." DNAInfo. July 4, 2015. Accessed April 30, 2016. <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20150702/logan-square/logan-square-avondale-rents-are-through-roof-market-analysis-confirms>.

⁹ Brienne Callahan. "Campaigning for Change in Logan Square." Gapers Block. August 18, 2008. Accessed April 17, 2016. http://gapersblock.com/detour/campaigning_for_change_in_logan_square/.

¹⁰ Callahan

day eviction notices to the residents. Housing coordinator Antonio Gutierrez stated, “For now they are in their rights to give eviction notice, but it seems like Barnett Capital really wants to evict them because they are organizing... That is not legal, that is retaliation.”¹¹ Gentrification continues to displace residents throughout the city, and at times these landlords’ tactics are highly illegal. They continue to be effective though because many people do not know their rights and abide by the illegal practices. “They tell people the police are going to come, sometimes not even giving them 30 days’ notice... We’re seeing things like threatening to call immigration. We’ve seen threats about cutting lights, electricity, gas, hot water, which is completely illegal and they cannot do.”¹² These owners take advantage of the lack of money and resources these low income minorities have in order to advance their business, no matter what the cost.

In the past, Chicago has been praised for its extensive cultural diversity. People used to be able to go into different neighborhoods and immerse themselves into cultures completely different than the ones they experience every day. This cultural diversity seems to be shifting in the face of gentrification. The demographic and landscape tend to be changing from unique to certain parts of the city, to a global landscape indistinguishable from other areas in Chicago. The cultural identity is continuously being lost as neighborhoods are becoming “revitalized.” Humboldt Park is one area that greatly demonstrates this phenomenon. Humboldt Park traditionally has had a very strong Puerto Rican, Mexican, and African American population. Gentrification has continuously threatened areas like this by making them more and more white. “Between 2000 and 2010 the Hispanic population of the Humboldt Park Community area decreased by 4% and the black population decreased by 23.8%. At the same time the white population increased by 30.1%.”¹³ This steady flow of white community members has started to threaten the cultural traditions of a typically diverse area. The implementation of Riot Fest here shows just how much of a problem this has become. Riot Fest is a punk music festival that was thrust into Humboldt Park in 2012. Protestors believe that Riot Fest absolutely has contributed to gentrification which in turn has caused systematic racism and a loss to cultural identity. The organizers of riot fest have demonstrated this racism simply by their beliefs of what an ethnic minority means to a community. “People thought we were crazy for choosing Humboldt Park in Chicago, but we knew we were right... Humboldt is fast becoming its own economic engine... and we are proud to be a part of that rehabilitation.”¹⁴ The organizers of the festival believe that the community was broken just because the mere fact there was a strong ethnic population. It demonstrates the idea that the occupation of minority neighborhoods by a white population is for their own wellbeing. This racist ideology, while on a smaller scale, is the same sentiment that has been seen for hundreds of years throughout the world. In Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa white Europeans have been advocates and perpetrators of colonialism that has caused a great loss of an ethnic identity and stability in these regions. As stated, while the scale may be different there are many parallels to the thoughts introduced by Kipling in his poem, “The White Man’s Burden.” The poem was written in response to the US imperialism on the

¹¹ Michael Joyce. "Protesters Speak Out Against The Gentrification Of Chicago's Albany Park Neighborhood." *Progress Illinois*. November 9, 2015. Accessed April 17, 2016. <http://progressillinois.com/quick-hits/content/2015/11/09/protesters-speak-out-against-gentrification-chicagos-albany-park>.

¹² Joyce

¹³ Jessica Kassanits. "Riot Fest & the Gentrification of Humboldt Park." *The Chicago Monitor*, September 10, 2014. Accessed April 29, 2016. <http://chicagomonitor.com/2014/09/does-riot-fest-support-gentrification/>.

¹⁴ Kassanits

Philippine Islands. Kipling states,

“Take up the White Man’s burden-
send forth the best ye breed-
... Your new-caught, sullen peoples
Half-devil and half-child...”¹⁵

Kipling believed that as the “superior race” it was their responsibility to show the rest of the world the right way to live. As was the common belief at the time, the white race was much more advanced and civilized while others were savages and underdeveloped. This example of defacto segregation mirrors the ideology of Riot Fest organizers when they believe it is their responsibility to help the Humboldt Park area by forcing a music festival on the people. Fortunately, the people of Humboldt Park had their voices heard. After a number of protests, the organizers had decided that after three years, Riot Fest would be moved to Douglas Park in the North Lawndale community.

While those protests were successful, this has not been the case for a majority of areas that are facing or have faced the threat of gentrification. Areas like Wicker Park and Bronzeville have two things in common. First, their community members tried desperately to stop the gentrification taking place in their neighborhoods. Second, their efforts were futile in attempting to preserve a unique cultural identity. In Wicker Park, “Gone are the places like the Busy Bee, a diner and gathering place for Polish politicians and generation of art-school students. Now there are spaces with pricey menus and beautiful people, high design and dining gimmicks.”¹⁶ In Bronzeville, which used to be heart of the old Black Belt, there is an incoming population of young people who are predominantly Caucasian and seem to only care about nightly drink specials. Gone is the cultural distinctiveness of an area that was the setting of the novel *Native Son*, or the poetry collection *A Street In Bronzeville*.¹⁷ The identity of these historic neighborhoods has been lost as a result of gentrification. This trend will continue to happen as areas throughout the city continue to become “revitalized” and attract a population of white middle-class citizens.

Adding to the destruction of a unique identity and towards the conformity of other neighborhoods is the fact that smaller businesses are being forced out by larger corporations and chain restaurants. At a small scale, tenured residents with local jobs will have a very difficult time competing with newcomers benefiting from global wages.¹⁸ When it really comes down to it, local communities will not be able to afford to stay in business. Larger businesses have the money for increased rent, and the ability to pay their workers more while also keeping their prices down. Recently, coffee has become a sign of gentrification. The mass creation of new Starbucks on every other corner has indicated neighborhoods being built up. Coffee as an indicator of gentrification can be seen in Pilson. Bow Truss Coffee Company stirred outrage by members of the community. Handwritten signs that stated “This is what gentrification looks like!,” “Fresh roasted Gentrification

¹⁵ Rudyard Kipling. “The White Man’s Burden.” 1899

¹⁶ Mara Tapp. “Location Location Dislocation.” *New Art Examiner* 27, no. 8 (May 2000): 42-45. Accessed April 9, 2016. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=9&sid=572d696e-540c-4492-aabb-c8ec204e6907@sessionmgr4005&hid=4201&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ==#AN=505861297&db=ofs>.

¹⁷ Edward McClelland. “The Fastest Gentrifying Neighborhood In Chicago.” 5NBCCHICAGO. Accessed April 17, 2016. <http://www.nbcchicago.com/blogs/ward-room/The-Fastest-Gentrifying-Neighborhood-In-Chicago-161815615.html>.

¹⁸ Jim Russell. “Explaining Gentrification: Global Jobs Versus Local Jobs.” *Pacific Standard*, April 24, 2014.

served here,” and “Wake up and smelllllll the gentrification” were put on the windows of the coffee shop.¹⁹ While Bow Truss is not a national coffee company yet, it is beginning to make a name for itself by opening up in multiple locations throughout the city of Chicago. Local small coffee shops will not be able to compete with their three dollar bottomless coffee deals.

Driving through gentrified areas one sees chain stores and restaurants as well as high end new businesses. Rarely does one see a small mom and pop store that at one point contributed to the cultural personality of the area. When looking back at Riot Fest, the fest did not even allow attendees to bring in food, which hurt the local businesses and restaurants that help give Humboldt its unique identity.²⁰ People were forced to buy from businesses that could afford to send vendors instead of the restaurants that have been a staple of Humboldt Park. This continued destruction of smaller businesses shows how culture stands no chance when competing against gentrification.

Those who push for gentrification make the argument that it will curtail crime in gentrified areas. They believe that if a new demographic of people and respectable businesses enter an area, the crime rate will decrease. These people have tunnel vision and refuse to look at the big picture. They do not take into account those who are displaced from these areas. While crime in the gentrified areas may fall, crime throughout the rest of the city tends to be directly affected. This can be seen when looking at the area 70 acre neighborhood that used to be known as “Cabrini-Green.” Driving around the area today, it is hard to believe the place had been synonymous with gang violence, murder, and drugs. There are now a number of new housing developments, a new Target being built, a Dicks Sporting Goods store, and even a Stacks Fifth Avenue. Since the last of the mid and high-rise housing complexes have come down in 2011, the area has been focused on development. While the influx of middle class citizens and creation of new businesses has been great for some, the poor who used to reside in this area are left with nowhere to go. At its peak, Cabrini-Green housed around 15,000 residents, most of them in the high-rise complexes. This all changed with their demolition. “As for the Cabrini residents who called this neighborhood home until 2011, their whereabouts constitutes one of the greatest mysteries in New Chicago... According to the census data, Chicago has lost 200,000 of its African American residents over the past decade.”²¹ Along with the new businesses there is also an exclusive private school: the British School of Chicago. Many view people like Jitu Brown, a South Side education organizer, believe that the closing of public school to be replaced by private is a way to replace Chicago’s poor minority residents with wealthier inhabitants. “When you shut down a neighborhood school, you send a powerful signal to the people living there: ‘This neighborhood isn’t for you.’”²² The continued push to get rid of minority groups from areas they had previously lived continues to be an idea not fully thought out. Developers and legislatures refuse to think of the adverse consequences throughout the rest of the city. These consequences have inadvertently led to crime that has the city suffering more than twice as many murders every year as does Los Angeles County or Houston.²³

¹⁹ Mary Schmich. "Pilsen Coffee Shop Becomes Target of Anti-gentrification." *Chicago Tribune*, January 28, 2015.

²⁰ Tapp

²¹ Jennifer C. Berkshire. 2014. "There Goes the Neighborhood School." *Progressive* 78/79, no. 12/1: 39-42. *OmniFile Full Text Select (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 2, 2016).

²² Berkshire

²³ Kevin D Williamson. "Gangsterville: how Chicago reclaimed the projects but lost the city." *National Review* 25 Feb. 2013: 26. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 2 May 2016.

To see these consequences, one needs to understand the crime that had taken place in these low- income high- rise complexes. Chicago has a very rich history of organized crime dating back to Al Capone. Organized crime shifted gears in the 1960s when marijuana came on the scene. Chicago's black gangs realized this was a major money making opportunity, and ended up dominating the field. This of course eventually led to cocaine and heroin being introduced to the gangs. While the government policies are currently responsible for the problems gentrification brings, they are also responsible for the increase in gang activity early on. They provided the high-rises which gave the gangs a place to build up their business. With everyone under the same roof, these operations were able to flourish, but still were kept somewhat secluded from the rest of the city. When the projects came down, Chicago's organized crime became much less organized.

“The purpose of tearing down the projects was to regentrify the neighborhoods. And now, where there had been projects, you have chain stores, exclusive restaurants, delis, everything people want. But it also sent those gangs out into the neighborhoods, into new places in the city and the suburbs, places where they had not been.”²⁴

This gang activity has now been spread to areas that even years earlier could not fathom the idea that this sort of violence would infiltrate their neighborhoods. The operation have spread from one node in the projects, to countless amounts of street corners. This has increased the number of gangs as well of factions of those gangs and spread them out. With Chicago and the surrounding cities being the murder capital of the United States, it is estimated that around 80 percent of those are gang related.²⁵ While gentrification itself is not responsible for pulling the trigger, in many areas it is to blame for the increased gang activity dispersed throughout Chicago.

There is no doubt that gentrification has its appeal. The beauty of the old architecture being built back up to reflect the present while still holding onto the past is a positive aspect that is easy for anyone to grasp. This is no more apparent than when walking into a Walgreens in Bucktown that used to be the site of the historic Noel State Bank building. Despite the many good aspects of gentrification, there are still far more negatives that take place as a result. The most impactful being the displacement of large amounts of low income minority citizens from neighborhoods they had occupied for years. This is due to the high rents and even illegal activities that seem to follow the process of gentrification. Neighborhoods in the city also tend to lose their unique cultural luster. Gentrification seems to bring in a population of white middle class citizens, which in turn dissolves the cultural traditions and practices that gave certain neighborhoods their identity. Smaller businesses tend to be forced out of business to make way for larger cooperation. Last, gentrification does not completely stop the crime that had been prevalent in these areas. Instead it just spreads it out to areas around the city that were not subject to such activity before. There is no stopping the massive force that is gentrification. The only thing we can hope to do, is recognize the problems that result from it, and attempt to do everything necessary lessen the impact.

²⁴ Williamson

²⁵ Williamson

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