An Analysis of Gentrification

As Seen in the Modern Day

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The gentrification and commoditization of urban areas— underdeveloped areas housed by the lower socio-economic class and people of color— has become a long-con process that utilizes art as a means of moving "undesirable" residents out of desirable spaces. The term gentrification originated from sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, giving a name to the "displacement of working-class occupiers by middle-class incomers," (Slater 2011, p. 571). The process occurs when the working-class minorities who live in industrial neighborhoods are slowly being nudged out of their homes by landlords raising rent higher and higher. Gentrification is objectively and ethically bad; gentrification is a side effect of capitalism and the American Dream of buying and renovating your own house, while later flipping it for a profit.

There is a recent phenomenon of low-income young adults, often artists or creative types, taking advantage of the low-rent housing and it is their presence that begins the gentrifying transformation. The artists and younger persons bring in the first wave of artisan and trendy storefronts, who later bring in the second wave: middle-class buyers who are willing to pay a higher price for both houses and storefronts as trendy investment opportunities. And, through loopholes in the real estate business, long-established families can no longer afford their homes. Minorities are passively being nudged out of what used to be the cheapest of housing.

This paper will first illustrate the waves of gentrification, using the neighborhood of Wicker Park, Chicago and the likes thereof as examples of this type of cultural and economic change And further, describe how neighborhoods could possibly improve themselves without feeling gentrified or become a target of incoming gentrifiers. Wicker Park is one of many neighborhoods in the United States that have been studied and found to be once predominantly inhabited by minorities and then became a mostly white and middle-class area.

Analysis of Gentrification

The current population of the United States can be pictured as this: 76% are white, 13% are black, and are 18% latino or hispanic (US Census Bureau, 2017). And out of those, the individuals who live under the poverty line are 9% white, 22% black, and 20% are hispanic; that is a total of 13% of the United States (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016). It is easy to look at numbers and see the disadvantage that is placed upon the minorities of the United States, and ask, how is the majority (white people) less affected by poverty than the minority (black, latino, hispanic people)? In an article from the *Western Journal Of Black Studies*, Jonathan Essoka (2010) expands gentrification and segregation as a process that may be something that was born from a possible attempt to allow cultural difference to strive, and then became a difference of environmental quality. A fact that can be seen while driving through urban and suburban neighborhoods—seeing where construction is being done, which roads have potholes, how close houses are to factories, and how close they are to each other.

Essoka hypothesizes that gentrification in the modern times is a result of the effects brought on by escalating housing demands, low rent, and less concern for environmental and social disamenities (Essoka, 2010). Extrapolating further, it is likely the case that restoring brownfields, underdeveloped industrial neighborhoods, is perceived as installing white culture into disadvantaged areas, with or without the intention of gentrification. A phenomena that has been noted by many sociologists is how the arts have played a major part in gentrification, one of which is Sharon Zukin, who specializes in this specific type of artist-induced gentrification.

Zukin's 2008 study revolves around SoHo, a neighborhood in Manhattan, New York City, New York—a district once dominated by manufacturing and low-income housing until artists started moving in, and then major chains took it from there (Zukin, 2008). SoHo is famously known as the original hipster town after the first wave of gentrifiers came, a young community full of life that is stylish, trendy, and hip. SoHo is now also notoriously not a genuine place and is comparable to the non-authenticity of reality television, this happens as the second wave of higher middle-class gentrifiers bring in more commercial and chain buyers. This two-wave form of gentrification is not unique to New York, but rather, the new form of gentrification that can be seen inside and around many major cities in the United States today.

A few states over in Illinois, Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood perfectly epitomizes the effect of consumer choices and how they may attribute to what is perceived as gentrification. A famously long-standing coffee house, called the Busy Bee, in a lower income and mostly Polish neighborhood, was owned and operated by Sophie Madej, who was a Polish woman accompanied by her family (Ryan, 1998). Madej's Busy Bee was an authentic polish cafe and bistro, she was well known for her open and loving heart and her fantastically affordable prices (Albecker, 1998). Madej also noticed that the newer, younger artsy crowd would take up tables without buying more than a cup of coffee, leaving less room for her regulars and causing a decline in business. This slowly lead to it's closing and property buy-out in 1998 (Albecker, 1998). The closing of the Busy Bee was very surprising to the community that had been going there for so long, "it's all the trendy places popping up," said one regular, another blamed it on "yuppies pouring in, rehabbing old homes" and building restaurants that only middle-class patrons can afford (Pallasch, 1998). Madej's Busy Bee could be a stand-in story for countless

minority-owned mom-and-pop shops in the United States who have fallen victim to young investors.

Another coffee house that opened up less than a block away from the Busy Bee was, white-American philosopher and entrepreneur, Tom Handley's cafe Urbis Orbis in 1989. The first "real focal point" of Wicker Park, according to Handley, stating that before his cafe, the only attraction was the few art studios and substantially low housing rent (Huebner, 1997). The newer, hipper aesthetic of the Urbis Orbis coffee house drove more artists and buyers into Wicker Park, a neighborhood that was once known as a risky place to go. Often times, people who live in the suburbs equate urban areas with violence; this is generally due to where news stations choose to show coverage on violent stories. Sociologists would call this an environmental contamination of violence or a prejudice of violence (Teelucksingh, 2007). Handley was not offended by customers staying long, but rather dependent on them to spread the word of his social gathering space—Urbis Orbis was built similarly to an ordinary bar from a reconstructed warehouse, with lots of sitting, standing, and socializing areas, which brought many free-thinking artists into the neighborhood (Huebner, 1997). Handley explains that he implores Ray Oldenburg's philosophy of "The Third Place," as a social place outside of work and home and a means to better the life of the new younger crowd of Wicker Park (Interview, 1997). Contemporary philosophies and movements, like Oldenburg's "The Third Place", are what bring a sense of community to new and incoming residents, but do not generally align with the same leisurely activities as the previous inhabitants when it comes to gentrified areas.

Urbis Orbis became the place to be, as the Busy Bee profits grew smaller and smaller, the Urbis Orbis had even taken the eye of popular magazines as a new landmark, the new place to

be, which brought in more and more consumers. That is until the second wave of gentrification struck Handley, as *New City* named the new "best coffeehouse in Chicago" as Starbucks (Zukin, 2008), and Urbis Orbis thusly closed in 1998. This neighborhood of Wicker Park today can be seen as more culturally ambiguous than obviously gentrified, as it did two decades ago, but it is true that the major of neighborhoods in Chicago look like this, as something that was one a social project but is no longer due to waves of migration from other countries.

Wicker Park, Chicago, Illinois is one of many neighborhoods that was once largely populated by minorities—for Wicker Park, it was the Polish. For most observed and analyzed neighborhoods affected by gentrification, the demographics are often that of African, Latin, and Hispanic descent. Minorities whose descent is caucasian may not be directly noted as victims of gentrification because their minority status is not as visibly noticeable, but are affected nonetheless. In a more recent article written by Sharon Zukin, she deduces three paradoxes that lead to gentrification: it is unanticipated, unimportant, and uneventful (Zukin, 2016). In other words, this social erosive process is too slow to invoke a need for change or action.

Application of Sociological Theories

The three perspectives of Sociology, as laid out in *Understanding Social Problems*, are symbolic-interactionism, conflict theory, and structural-functionalism, three differing views that allows us to interpret social changes on a larger scale (Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 2017). **Symbolic-interactionism** has to do with our individuals, as well as societies, interact with symbols—one example being green means go and red means stop. Sharon Zukin's theory on a "symbolic economy" is described as a means to utilize white culture, in the forms of images and environmental change, to compose public spaces (Shaw, Sullivan, 2011). Images such as an

advertisement with a white women drinking coffee on the side of a coffee house acts as a white "safe space" in a gentrifying neighborhood, images like these symbolize and conduct a feeling of belonging.

Urban and cultural sociologist Samuel Shaw, while researching Portland, Oregon's Last Thursday Art Walks, perceives the art festival's symbolic-economic effect as an installation and monument of "a particular version of [the] place," (Shaw, 2008). When applying **labelling theory** to the first wave of incoming residents to brownfield neighborhoods, the artists and young creative types, one role that aligns with this achieved status is having appreciation of unique aesthetics. Sharon Zukin has implied that the more "interesting" the aesthetics of a neighborhood is, the more likely it to be gentrified (Zukin, 2016). Young artist use words like interesting and beautiful or authentic and ethnic to describe the brownfields they find, and they choose to live in then because it reflects their unique aesthetic role of an artist.

Another role of an artist is to aggregate in public places, to collaborate and be amongst each other. Some may say this is a stereotypical role but it can be seen within coffee houses and even city streets. Art festivals that take place in gentrified neighborhoods are often seen as an explosion of white culture. In Shaw's example of Last Thursday Art Walks, a neighborhood in its first wave of gentrification at the time, the African-American residents felts the festivals were "too white" and did not reflect their culture (Shaw, 2008). It is this type of aggression that drives smaller, minority owned, businesses out of their own block.

The **conflict theory** perspective can be seen as the bourgeois are men with power and the proletariats are men without, are there conflicts between them will perpetuate inequalities (Mooney, Knox, & Schacht, 2017). Within the social problem of gentrification, as well as major

Civil Rights movements, minorities view white Americans as the bourgeois, as someone they are oppressed by. Sociologists John Schlichtman and Jason Patch use two words to epitomize the first, artistic wave of gentrification: "drinking and dancing," whether that be coffee, craft beer, or wines paired with music (Schlichtman, Patch, 2008). It has been noted that participation in such festivities does not make the list of apparent problems with art festivals, but it is more the lack of minority-inclusive art, amenities, and events (Schlichtman, Patch, 2008; Shaw, 2008). The **conflict theory** perspective would suggest these artist showcases and festivals, with free drinks and often accompanied by live musicians, fabricate a fog of entertainment and belonging.

In a "negative extreme" testimonial to Samuel Shaw, one resident professes their perception of the incoming artists as "they're claiming it … like, 'this is our neighborhood now,'" (Shaw, 2008). While Shaw may label this as an extreme opinion, is it more than likely similar to the thoughts of countless minorities in gentrifying neighborhoods. To culminate the detrimental effects of gentrification, the working-class, in underdeveloped residential and industrial areas, are passively being forced into increasingly lower living conditions because their homes happen to be aesthetically alluring.

Hypotheses Towards Social Change

One of the newest construction projects in Michigan is located on the corner of Michigan Street and N. Diamond Avenue, the expansive multi-faceted building will act as a shopping, service, housing, and parking all-in-one structure. The new building, called Diamond Place, is just a few blocks outside of the downtown Grand Rapids' known Medical Mile. Additionally, Diamond Place forms a triangle between two highly white-cultured areas, known as East Town and Heritage Hill. Diamond Place stretches over an entire block with its modern metal top-half

and brick bottom-half exterior; one strange item that I noticed is that the brick wall extends into the exterior of a neighborhood staple.

Diamond Place was constructed on the entire corner block of Michigan St. and Diamond Ave., but on the actual corner, where the two roads meet, is Party Cooler Inc.. Party Cooler Inc. is a party store that has been standing on that corner for nearly thirty years, owned by Chan Kim, an Asian-American businessman, and known as a pleasant shop for purchasing party supplies. Before the establishment of Diamond place, Party Cooler Inc. looked as aged as the any other store on the block, but once something shiny-new was placed right beside it the party store was evidently out-of-date. I have hypothesized that if Kim has either the money or credit to renovate his storefront, to keep pace with the modern aesthetics of Diamond Place, then he may pull himself into the up-and-coming service district.

Currently, the developers of Diamond Place have image on their webpage to portray their view, an artist's rendition, of the building as it is being constructed, in this image the party store was craftily put behind a tree and a large truck (Third Coast Development, 2018). While the artist's rendition of the new apartments available on Apartments.com, neither the party store, nor the KFC across Diamond Ave. are represented accurately (Apartments.com, 2018). One could argue that the artist's intent was to showcase the new building, but it is subtleties like these that make places like the Party Cooler Inc. store or the Busy Bee café disappear. Getting into the mind of a unique aesthetic-seeking investor, as well as an advantageous marketer: businesses will promote other businesses if there is a potential of a symbiotic relationship.

Diamond Place has the opportunity to not use one of their storefronts as a place for their residents to buy drinks and other items they might like to buy in a convenience store. They could

use that space for another businesses that would gross them higher profits in rent income. While it is possible that Party Cooler Inc. will not shut down for certain, there are many loopholes that would allow Kim's property owner to refuse Kim a lease renewal if they chose to do so. And as sociologist Chase Billingham had found, if there is a group of people avid enough to claim land then they inevitably will (Billingham, 2017). In Billingham's hometown example, the city of Wichita, Kansas had become embarrassed of a hotel that once was a monumental staple of their townsquare, but had become a towering cheap motel, consequently the city employed the bank to seize and foreclose the building (Billingham, 2017). If party store owner Kim adheres to the "inevitability" of gentrification, as it has already began, then the most functional step would be to put money towards renovating his storefront.

If stakeholders and leaders of neighborhoods, predominantly occupied by minorities, take the time and money to make changes to property redevelopment, then the residents in those neighborhoods will be able to express their own culture and not succumb to gentrification. This only works if the stakeholders and leaders of these neighborhoods are of the same majority race and culture residing in the neighborhood. In the neighborhood of Hampden-Woodberry, in Baltimore, Maryland, took on community redevelopment with their Hampden Community Archaeology Project (HCAP), starting in 2004, and has worked with the stakeholders and community leaders of Hampden-Woodberry to arrange the most advantageous model of "socially responsible urban regeneration," (Chidester, Gadsby, 2009). This type of arrangement at times can be difficult in some areas that are not close-knit, often times the most influential persons exist within the local church's community and the school board.

The HCAP's mission was to involve the youth of the community to learn and research the history of the gentrification process within their own town, which began to affect Hampden-Woodberry in the early 1990s (Chidester, Gadsby, 2009). Giving younger individuals, children and teenagers, the know-how is socially significant considering youths do not see the change that happens. Most young adults, that are not directly told, are impervious to the effects of gentrification and buy into white culture and go to the hot spots in the "new" side of town. Raising awareness of the effects of gentrification, consumerism, and how individuals can make a change, allows younger persons to be mindful of the changes that happen, and have happened, around then and not simply see what is. While learning and reconstructing are two differing forms of activism towards social justice, educating incoming generations is arguably as progressive.

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