

What's the Fuss About Gentrification?

By Tom Angotti

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Let's stop debating whether gentrification is good or bad. *Gentrification* is not the issue. The real issue is *displacement*.

Gentrification is an ambiguous term and diverts attention from the real problem that neighborhoods are facing in cities all over the world. People are being *displaced* – forced to move by economic and political forces beyond their control – from places they value and have deep attachments to. This forced migration leads many to abandon their jobs and locally-owned businesses. For the privileged few who have many alternatives moving is often an adventure but to working people with limited incomes and few options it is a huge burden. Displacement is especially problematic when, in our racially and ethnically segregated cities, those displaced are disproportionately people of color and immigrants whose histories have been plagued by forced displacement.

“Gentrification” suggests a slowly-moving, natural process of urban change. We are told that all neighborhoods and cities change and that is what makes them so interesting and dynamic. But the issue for most isn't gradual change. Those who are fighting “gentrification” are usually up against dramatic changes spurred by big investors, real estate speculators and developers who usually have political as well as economic capital. The giant special interests undermine local zoning and housing regulations that once protected the local residents. The problem is not change. The problem is that long-time residents have no say in making change.

The debate over gentrification is dominated by neoclassical economists who believe that there are natural laws governing urban development. They overlook the huge surplus of money that is flooding cities all over the world and the enormous public subsidies and tax benefits they receive. The economists belittle the local regulation and planning that helped shape the cities into livable habitats, denouncing everyone opposing the free flow of capital as nostalgic and NIMBYs (Not In My Backyard advocates).

There is a lot we can do to shape our neighborhoods and cities without excluding new arrivals. I support the many neighborhoods in New York City where long-time residents, homeowners and renters, are organizing to stop displacement. They are fighting speculators, unscrupulous landlords, and rising prices. These are disproportionately working class neighborhoods and communities of color, which have a long history of displacement at the hands of public and private sectors. They often denounce gentrification but when we dig deeper what they really oppose is displacement.

What can we learn from them? First, residents and locally-owned businesses need to talk with each other and organize, breaching age, ethnic, racial and language barriers. Everyone needs to learn from the histories of citizen action. Secondly, saving your home also means fighting against the shrinking public domain, as speculation and upscale development correspond with the privatization of public services. Third, we need to demand housing as a right, understanding that “housing” is more than shelter and encompasses community. Fourth, we need to heavily tax and strengthen regulations against real estate speculation. Fifth, we need to strengthen local democracy by struggling to make our governments participatory and socially responsible. Finally, in the United States and in our increasingly global cities, *race matters* and no discussion that does professes color blindness is a complete and honest discussion.