

## Deconstructing Gentrification Todd Swanstrom

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*Posted on January 20, 2026 by gaiapilia*



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## **Can changing the way we understand the process of gentrification open possibilities for political and social change?**

Gentrification is a highly contentious issue. Some see it as a positive process that can revitalize disinvested urban neighborhoods, enhance racial and economic diversity, and expand the local tax base. Others see it as an overwhelmingly negative process that not only physically displaces longtime poor and working-class residents but also erases their local cultural expressions and retail opportunities. In this article I do not take a stand for or against gentrification. Instead, I deconstruct the concept of gentrification in a way that acknowledges the partial truths in both positions, freeing up space for broader political coalitions and constructive public policies.

### **The unitary concept of gentrification: turning the Chicago School inside out**

The way we think about gentrification is rooted in the Chicago School of Human Ecology's invasion/succession model of neighborhood change. For Chicago School thinkers like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, as neighborhoods age, they go through a life cycle (Park and Burgess 1925). Immigrants and industrial workers congregate in the center of the metropolis where the oldest and cheapest housing is located. As their population swells, they invade the next ring of neighborhoods, causing stable working-class neighborhoods to succeed into disordered communities or even slums. Affluent households move away from obsolete housing, eventually ending up in spacious new homes on the suburban periphery. Homer Hoyt, an economist heavily influenced by the Chicago School, viewed neighborhood invasion and succession as a law-like process in which "high rent or high-grade neighborhoods must almost necessarily move outward toward the periphery of the city. The wealthy seldom reverse their steps and move backward into the obsolete houses which they are giving up" (Hoyt 1939, p. 116).

We now know that Hoyt was wrong. Nearly half a century ago the British sociologist Ruth Glass introduced the term "gentrification," rooting her conception within the basic logic of the invasion-succession but turning the directional flow inside out.

*One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower. Shabby modest mews and cottages have been taken over when their leases have expired and have become elegant expensive residences... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed (Glass*

1964, p. xviii; *emphasis added*).

Glass conceptualized gentrification as a process by which the gentry “invades” working class communities in a zero-sum war-like process that, once begun, leads rapidly and inexorably to the forcible displacement of the previous residents and total disruption of the “social character” of the neighborhood.

I call this concept of gentrification the unitary (or invariant) model of gentrification. The central idea is that the many different aspects of gentrification fit together into a coherent whole. Following this line of thinking, for example, Eric Clark argues that gentrification may manifest itself differently in different places—from global metropolises to Scandinavian fishing villages—but the essence of gentrification, the influx of capital that disrupts and displaces communities, is the same everywhere (Clark 2010). Without a careful textual analysis of thousands of scholarly books and articles, it is impossible for me to prove this assertion, but I believe the unitary conception is the dominant way that scholars, practitioners, and even the general public think about gentrification.

## **The world is messy: from a unitary to a contingent concept of gentrification**

The unitary concept of gentrification is not wrong, just radically incomplete. It takes one kind of economically ascending neighborhood and projects it onto all such neighborhoods. I agree with Robert Beauregard who argues that gentrification must be understood as a complex and even chaotic process: “In fact, there can be no single theory of an invariant gentrification process... The emphasis, therefore, must be placed on contingency and complexity, set within the structural dimensions of advanced capitalism” (Beauregard 2010, p. 11).

The unitary concept of gentrification bundles the various aspects of gentrification into one coherent whole. For many critics of gentrification, displacement of longtime residents is analytically part of the meaning of gentrification. Analytically, however, it is possible to separate the core process of gentrification from its many possible effects and research the empirical evidence on their connection. The core idea of gentrification is the movement of higher income households and investment dollars into lower income older communities. Understood this way, gentrification is happening in cities around the world, but how it manifests itself on the ground varies across cities, neighborhoods, and historical periods.

The unitary concept of gentrification masks variation and can lead to a misunderstanding of the process. For example, the unitary conception projects that gentrification targets the poorest

neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color. Neil Smith's bid rent theory (1979) predicts that gentrification is most likely in areas that have been severely disinvested, where developers can profit from the gap between the land rent given its current use and the potential land rent if gentrified. In fact, however, the evidence is clear: the gentrification vector is not aimed at the poorest most disinvested black neighborhoods but more often at working class, often white, neighborhoods with an intact urban fabric.

Another corollary of the unitary conception, the idea that once set in motion gentrification leads inexorably to the forcible displacement of nearly all the previous lower income residents, is also weakly supported by empirical research. Involuntary displacement is notoriously difficult to study. Demographic data showing that a census tract has lost low-income and black households does not prove that those households were forcibly displaced by rising rents from gentrification. Neighborhoods are always changing. Over one-fifth of renters move each year for all sorts of reasons, and they are often replaced by people who look different from them. Neighborhoods may change because of "replacement," not "displacement." This is not the place to summarize the voluminous literature on displacement, but most rigorous empirical research does not support the conclusion that gentrifying neighborhoods have significantly higher rates of involuntary displacement than neighborhoods that are not gentrifying.

Does this mean that gentrification *never* causes displacement and never targets poor black neighborhoods? Of course not. In the hottest market metros, where the supply of "gentrifiable" neighborhoods is low, developers may be willing to take a chance on the most vulnerable black neighborhoods (Hyra 2017). Extreme cases of gentrification in superstar cities may capture much attention, but they do not reflect the diverse pathways of neighborhood change.

Looking at gentrification through the lens of the unitary conception can lead to political polarization and paralysis. If gentrification leads inevitably to the invaders displacing longtime residents, then any efforts to attract newcomers and investment into a neighborhood are suspect. Many efforts to improve communities, including community gardens, green infrastructure, LEED-certified buildings, hiking and biking trails, mixed-income housing, and vegan restaurants, have been attacked as stalking horses for gentrification. As Rick Jacobus, a prominent voice in progressive housing circles, put it in 2013: "The way most people talk about seems to create a black hole of self-doubt from which no realistic strategy for neighborhood improvement can escape."

Perhaps the most serious damage caused by the unitary concept of gentrification is that it distracts attention from the more serious problem of housing deterioration and disinvestment. A recent study

by Matthew Desmond and colleagues at the Eviction Lab examined 6 million evictions in the 200 largest metros. Using four different measures of gentrification, they found no correlation between gentrification and displacement between 2000 and 2016. Based on a strong correlation between formal evictions and involuntary displacement, the authors conclude that displacement is primarily caused by disinvestment and disadvantage, not gentrification and reinvestment (Hepburn, Louis, and Desmond 2023). Notwithstanding this and other studies documenting disinvestment and deterioration as drivers of involuntary displacement, most research focuses on gentrification induced displacement.

The gentrification discourse is a valuable corrective to the Chicago School's depiction of perpetual outward movement by affluent households. In fact, however, we live in an age of *simultaneous urban decline and renewal*—and the dominant trend is still the movement of affluent households away from the poor, not toward them.

## **The truth in the unitary concept: gentrification anxiety**

The unitary concept of gentrification is empirically flawed but in one sense it reflects a crucial reality: low-income and minority residents of cities *perceive* neighborhood change in ways that closely track the unitary understanding of gentrification. The word "gentrification" has come to represent inequities of race and power that operate far beyond the neighborhood scale. The anxieties triggered by gentrification are real and cannot be ignored by policy makers and political activists.

In 2018, we conducted a series of focus groups with St. Louis residents, most of whom were African American (Swanstrom, Guenther and Theus 2018). When given an opportunity to elaborate, angry feelings about gentrification burst out. Respondents viewed gentrification as a zero-sum process in which newcomers invade a neighborhood to benefit themselves at the expense of long-time residents. Displacement was a common theme, often closely associated with race, using terms such as "whitewashing." We asked the participants to identify neighborhoods on a map of St. Louis that were either already gentrified or would soon gentrify. Surprisingly, many areas they identified were neighborhoods in North St. Louis, an area suffering from extensive housing vacancy and abandonment with little evidence of gentrification pressures. When asked to talk about gentrifying neighborhoods, the conversation quickly pivoted to economically declining neighborhoods. In line with rent gap theory, focus group participants viewed neighborhood rise and decline as intimately connected: disinvestment was an intentional effort, they said, to prepare neighborhoods for gentrification. If we had taken a poll, there is little doubt that focus group participants would have endorsed the unitary concept of gentrification.

I am not the first to point out that low-income and minority residents of cities often express fears of gentrification and displacement even when there is little evidence of such pressures (Axel-Lute 2019; Frank 2018; Swanstrom and Plöger 2020). How do we make sense of the apparent disjuncture between the facts on the ground about neighborhood change and people's perceptions of those facts? I argue that anxieties about gentrification express people's fears not about neighborhood change per se but about broader processes of cultural marginalization and political powerlessness.

Gentrification anxieties do not come out of thin air. The term "gentrification" has come to represent the cultural dominance of highly educated affluent professionals in the knowledge economy. You can now "gentrify" just about anything, including "social movements, chai, jobs, American health care, language, Mt. Everest, and gefilte fish" (Mallach 2019). Highly educated professionals dominate the cultural scene and retail opportunities in the urban core. Not surprisingly, less educated lower income denizens of the city resent the displacement of their culture and consumption opportunities. Philosopher Michael Sandel argues that those left behind by globalization, those who work with their hands instead of manipulating symbols in the "knowledge" economy, resent being disrespected and branded as "losers" (Sandel 2020). The meritocratic myth—that those who have college degrees and high paying jobs in the knowledge economy deserve their privileged position and those who lack advanced degrees deserve their low pay and status—fuels anger about gentrification.

Besides cultural displacement, gentrification also symbolizes power inequities rooted in race and class. Lower income residents of St. Louis, especially African Americans, have collective memories of government using the coercive power of the state (eminent domain) to forcibly displace thousands of families to make way for interstate highways and urban renewal projects. Over 20,000 African Americans were displaced by the Mill Creek Valley urban renewal project in St. Louis (Gordon 2008). The term gentrification stirs up those painful memories.

In short, the unitary concept of gentrification captures people's lived experience. Processes of invasion and succession are going on, but they operate not only at the neighborhood level but equally, if not more powerfully, at the societal level. People's feelings about gentrification are just as real as census data about neighborhood change. We ignore these facts at our peril.

## **Conclusion: the way forward**

If gentrification is a complex and contingent phenomenon, then our thinking needs to reflect this reality. Of course, especially in superstar cities with tight housing markets, we need policies, such as [land trusts](#) and [inclusionary zoning](#), to ensure that long-time residents can remain and benefit

from neighborhood change. If gentrification comes in many different varieties, however, including varieties that do not lead immediately to displacement, we do not need to oppose gentrification but rather strive to leverage it for the benefit of all citizens. But in doing this we need to realize that the idea of gentrification activates anxieties about race and power. The best way to deal with these fears is not to deny them but acknowledge them upfront and then pivot to offer evidence that socioeconomic mixing, if planned properly, can be beneficial to both lower- and higher-income residents, and discuss how the community can encourage inclusive development (Volmert *et al.* 2016, p. 29).

Whether gentrification benefits only affluent in-movers or society more broadly depends on the context and one of the most important characteristics of the context is the presence of progressive *political will*. If the local political system lacks the political will to enact anti-displacement policies in hot market communities, no amount of verbal reassurance will matter. An example of meaningful response would be local governments and school districts taxing the unearned increment, as Henry George would call it, of rising land values to pay for public goods and services that are freely available to everyone.

To address problems of economic inequality and racial injustice, we need to act at multiple scales: neighborhood, city, state, and nation. To ignore legitimate fears about broader processes of cultural marginalization and political powerlessness triggered by "gentrification" generates deadlock and distrust. On the other hand, to saddle civic dialogue about neighborhood change with responsibility for these broader processes invites confusion, political polarization and policy paralysis. If we deal with neighborhood change as it is, not as we fear it to be, the opportunity space for broader political coalitions and progressive policies expands.

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ISSN : 2575-5374