

Structural racism is a reality that affects countless areas of life for Black Americans in the United States. Purposefully discriminatory public policy has historically prevented African Americans access to homeownership and quality, affordable rental housing, assets that are fundamental for wealth-building and financial wellbeing in the U.S. At the turn of the twentieth century, especially in the years following World War II, the U.S. saw masses of its white citizens leaving cities for developing suburbs. Black Americans were denied access to homeownership in these suburbs through a variety of discriminatory and exclusionary practices, leaving black communities concentrated in the cities white Americans were fleeing from. Now, as middle-class and wealthy white Americans return to cities, neglected, black urban communities are being redeveloped. With redevelopment comes skyrocketing homeownership and rental costs: forcing the very communities which were barred from the suburbs in the past to relocate once more. This phenomenon is known as gentrification, defined by Merriam Webster as “a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents” (“Gentrification”, 2021). Gentrification and systemic housing inequality are two serious issues facing minority communities in the United States as well as across the globe today.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a prime example of a city in the U.S. grappling with housing inequality and gentrification. A study by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition states Pittsburgh as the eighth most gentrified city in America (Deto, 2019). With growing job opportunities in healthcare and technology industries, Pittsburgh is attracting real estate investment due to greater potential for profit off increased area median incomes. Large real estate corporations are buying out units and raising rent prices exponentially, forcing existing residents

out of their homes (Rooney, 2021). The Pittsburgh Neighborhood Project has done extensive research on gentrification in Pittsburgh. Of 128 eligible census tracts the team analyzed in Allegheny County in 2000, 26 % (20) gentrified by 2015-2019. Of those 26 tracts that gentrified, 58% (15) of them experienced racial and/or economic displacement (Cotter, 2019).

Neighborhoods that experience gentrification and displacement often contain low-income service workers who cannot afford to pay increased rent that comes with gentrification. Gentrified areas, in turn, find themselves with increases in average home values, residents with college attainment, and incomes. The gentrification currently happening in Pittsburgh goes hand-in-hand with severe housing inequality in the city. Housing inequality in Pittsburgh, as well as across the nation, can be traced back to suburbanization and white flight following WWII which emptied out cities across the U.S. While white Americans were able to leave cities for the suburbs, discriminatory housing practices and lending policies barred black Americans from the same opportunities and kept them concentrated in the poorest communities in Pittsburgh (Cotter, 2019). Policies such as the 1933 and 1934 Home Owners' Loan Act and the National Housing Act, as well as the 1944 GI Bill were meant to make housing more affordable for American citizens, yet Black Americans were excluded from these benefits. These policies allowed white Americans to build wealth and grow and transfer assets through generations. Black Americans, not given the same opportunities, still experience the consequences.

The gentrification seen in Pittsburgh can also be seen in cities across the world. Professor Hyun Bang Shin at the London School of Economics and Political Science explores global gentrification in his work, "Planetary Gentrification: What it is and Why it Matters." Shin claims that the forms and trajectories of gentrification vary from place to place, and global gentrifications should not be seen as copies of those in the West. He places emphasis on what he

believes are the two pillars of planetary gentrification: productive investment in the built environment and the commodification of space and rent extraction. The former promotes industrial production and profit but has negative impacts on the reconfiguration of urban spaces, while the latter displaces poor urban dwellers as well as rural villagers. His main thesis can be summarized with this quote: “So, planetary gentrification is really about thinking of an urbanizing society, highlighting the fact that there is the ascendancy of the secondary circuit of capital accumulation, especially the speculative real estate that has become a major phenomenon in major cities around the world regardless of their position in the global economy” (Shin, 2019).

When dealing with social issues such as gentrification and housing inequality, it is important to note any stereotypes surrounding the issues as well as any implicit biases we may have towards the issues. Gentrification and housing inequality can sometimes be regarded as non-issues due to the stigmatization of the poor and poor communities. In many cities, the poor themselves are blamed for causing urban deterioration. This comes from the common misconception that the poor are lazy, dirty, and lesser than those who hold wealth; that they forged their own destinies and must deal with the consequences. Outsiders accuse poor neighborhoods of staying poor because of the laziness of their poor residents. Policies enacted to redevelop poor neighborhoods are created with the assumption that these communities are dilapidated or in need of renovation. Upper-class needs are amplified over the voices of existing residents, and the cultural wealth of these neighborhoods is disregarded in favor of new, polished, more socially acceptable communities (Shin, 2019). I do hold biases that may affect my analysis of this issue. I think that most of this bias lies in the fact that I am someone who values community cultural wealth over economic growth or financial gain. I am incredibly anti-capitalist and do not agree with the exploitation of human beings for profit under any

circumstance. These biases may make me more inclined to ignore possible benefits of gentrification. I can use Conflict theory to limit my own biases because the theory will provide me a framework through which I can conduct research and analyze my findings. For example, I can use Conflict theory to analyze the relationship between those in power (in this scenario: lawmakers, builders, developers, etc.) and those without power (residents of poor communities subject to gentrification).

In East Asia, the state promotes condensed industrialization and urbanization, which in turn leads to state-led gentrification (Shin, 2019). Seoul, South Korea, is a city that is undergoing mass gentrification, gaining the attention of many historians and scholars. State-led gentrification in Seoul is primarily carried out through a program launched in 1984 called the Joint Redevelopment Program, or JRP. The JRP's main tactic is wholesale redevelopment of low-rise, substandard neighborhoods into high-rise, commercial housing estates. Survey evidence of the town of Nangok, Seoul, where the JRP undertook a mass redevelopment project between 1984 and 2003, suggests that nearly 80% of original residents were displaced in the process (Shin, 2009).

Gentrification in Pittsburgh has similarities and differences with global gentrification. The two are similar in the respect that they can be byproducts of productive investment in areas such as real estate and infrastructure as well as commodification of space and rent extraction. These practices displace communities in Pittsburgh as well as across the globe. The main differences between gentrification seen in Pittsburgh and global gentrification can be seen in the tactics of gentrification and the goals of said gentrifications. Pittsburgh experiences consumer-side gentrification, which, according to Professor Hyun Bang Shin, focuses on "the emergence of gentrifiers (that is, new urban elites comprised of professional, technical, and

administrative workers) and their consumption preferences” (Shin, 2009). Global gentrification, like that in East Asia, is defined as production-side gentrification, which focuses on the production of gentrified properties and capital gain from doing so. Gentrification in Pittsburgh is also deeply rooted in a history of discriminatory practices against Black Americans, making it more of a social issue than global gentrification which is driven almost entirely by economic motivations.

Historians now argue that gentrification has become a generalized, globalized strategy of urban redevelopment. They claim that Ruth Glass’ traditional definition of gentrification as a rare, localized phenomenon driven by gentrifiers is no longer accurate. Something that was once reserved to major, advanced capital cities can now be seen across the globe. Anthropologist and geographer Neil Smith argues that we must be aware of “the rapidity of the evolution of an initially marginal urban process first identified in the 1960s and its ongoing transformation into a significant dimension of contemporary urbanism” (Smith, 2002, pg. 439). Gentrification is now a competitive urban strategy in the global economy, focused on the mobilization of urban-real estate markets as opportunities for capital accumulation. Unlike gentrification in Pittsburgh, global gentrification is systematized, led by the state.

Conflict theory can be used to examine the differences in how gentrification manifests in Pittsburgh and in other places across the globe. According to conflict theorists, change, whether it be economic, social, or political happens as a means for those in power to retain that power. Gentrification in Pittsburgh manifests as more of a social conflict, acting as a vehicle to segregate neighborhoods by socioeconomic factors. Through gentrification, wealthy white individuals retain power over poor Black individuals. Globally, gentrification presents as a purely economic conflict. State-led gentrifications carried out by corporate-governmental alliances act as agents of

profit for corporations and bolster economies, which benefits government officials and corporation leaders and keeps them in power.

Two drastically different approaches to gentrification with opposite results can be seen in the towns of Mount Pleasant and College Park, Washington, D.C. Mount Pleasant is historically known for its collective neighborhood activism and efforts to protect long-time residents. When faced with the possibility of gentrification, Mount Pleasant introduced the 1980 Rental Housing Conversion and Sale Act, which then turned into the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, which gives D.C. residents the right to buy their apartment if it goes on the market. The city also partners with the nonprofit District Bridges which works to support local businesses through means such as neighborhood grants and technical assistance. College Park, on the other hand, does not implement anti-gentrification policies like those of Mount Pleasant. Instead, the city has allowed for the closures of local businesses to make room for new residential complexes. Their Lakeland Urban Renewal Plan, intended to prevent flooding, resulted in the displacement of over 100 families and the destruction of two-thirds of the original community (Alvarez, 2021).

In combatting gentrification, it is important to implement policies which protect existing residents of at-risk neighborhoods. Examples include community land trusts, anti-displacement tax funds, and neighborhood protection laws. Loretta Lees, professor of human geography at the University of Leicester, argues that alternative methods of inclusive urban development are just as important as preventative policies. She lists affordability, accessibility, and diversity as the most important aspects of these methods. One promising tactic can be found in “displacement free zones” like that of the Fifth Ave Committee in Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York City. The committee states their mission as such: “to advance social and economic justice principally by

developing and managing affordable housing, creating employment opportunities, organizing residents and workers, providing adult-centered education opportunities, and combating displacement caused by gentrification” (Lees, 2019, pg. 11). Policies like this are likely to be successful because they revitalize neighborhoods without displacing long-time residents. They show that neighborhoods can become better through investment in the existing inhabitants rather than replacing them with wealthier counterparts. Mount Pleasant is a shining example. The city has been able to resist gentrification and retain its long-time residents through policies that put the people, not profits, first.