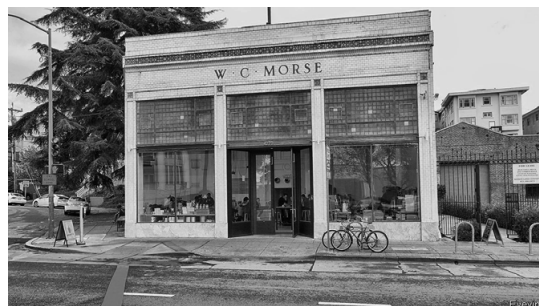


Gentrification

- 1 GENTRIFIER has surpassed many worthier slurs to become the dirtiest word in American cities. In the popular telling, hordes of well-to-do hipsters are descending upon poor, minority neighbourhoods that were made to endure decades of discrimination. With their avocado on toast, beard oil and cappuccinos, these people snuff out local culture.
- 2 The anti-gentrification brigades often cite anecdotes from residents forced to move. Yet the data suggest a different story. An influential study by Lance Freeman and Frank Braconi found that poor residents living in New York's gentrifying neighbourhoods during the 1990s were actually less likely to move than poor residents of non-gentrifying areas. A follow-up study by Mr Freeman, using a nationwide sample, found scant association between gentrification and displacement. A more recent examination found that financially vulnerable residents in Philadelphia — those with low credit scores and no mortgages — are no more likely to move if they live in a gentrifying neighbourhood. These studies 7 the widely held belief that for every horrid kale-munching millennial moving in, one long-time resident must be chucked out. The surprising result is explained by three underlying trends.
- 3 The first is that poor Americans are obliged to move very frequently, regardless of the circumstances of their district, as the Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond so harrowingly demonstrated in his research on eviction. The second is that poor neighbourhoods have lacked investment for decades, and so have considerable slack in their commercial and residential property markets. A lot of wealthier city dwellers can thus move in without pushing out incumbent residents or businesses. "Given the typical pattern of low-income renter mobility in New York City, a neighbourhood could go from a 30% poverty population to 12% in as few as ten years without any displacement whatsoever," noted Messrs Freeman and Braconi in their study. Third, city governments often promote affordable-housing schemes, such as rent control or stabilisation, in response to rising rents.
- 4 9 That does not make them any less real. Residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods who own their homes have reaped considerable windfalls. One original resident of Logan Circle, a residential district in downtown Washington, bought his home in 1993 for \$130,000. He recently sold it for \$1.6m. Businesses gain from having more customers, with more to spend. Having new shops, like well-stocked grocery stores, and sources of employment nearby can reduce commuting costs and



time. Crime, already on the decline in American city centres, seems to fall even further in gentrifying neighbourhoods.

5 Those who bemoan segregation and gentrification simultaneously risk contradiction. The introduction of affluent residents into poor minority districts boosts racial and economic integration. It can dilute the concentration of poverty — which a mountain of economic and sociological literature has linked to all manner of poor outcomes, including teenage pregnancy and incarceration. Gentrification steers cash into deprived neighbourhoods and brings people into depopulated areas through market forces, all without the necessity of governmental intervention. The current government is unlikely to offer large infusions of cash to dilapidated cities. In these circumstances, arguing against gentrification can amount to insistence that poor neighbourhoods remain poor and that racially segregated neighbourhoods stay cut off.

6 What, then, accounts for the antipathy towards gentrification? The first reason is financial.

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7 A second reason gentrification is disliked is culture. The argument is that the arrival of yuppie professionals will alter the character of a place in an unseemly way. 'Don't Brooklyn my Detroit' T-shirts are now a common sight in Motor City. In truth, Detroit would do well with a bit more Brooklyn. Across big American cities, for every gentrifying neighbourhood ten remain poor.

8 The term gentrification has become tarred. But called by any other name — revitalisation, reinvestment, renaissance — it would smell sweet. Take Shaw, a historical centre of black culture in Washington, which limped into the 1970s as a shadow of itself after a series of race riots. Decades of decline followed, in which a crack epidemic caused the murder rate to spike. Today, crime is down. The O Street Market, where one person was killed and eight were injured in a shoot-out in 1994, is now a tranquil grocery store. Luxury flats with angular chairs and oversized espresso machines in the lobby have sprouted opposite liquor stores. At the Columbia Room, a wood-panelled bar with leather chairs, mixologists conjure \$16 concoctions of scotch, blackberry shrub and porcini mushrooms. This is how progress tastes.

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