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LaDeana Phillips
University of Alabama in Huntsville

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Gentrification and Police Brutality

LaDeana Phillips
Department of Political Science

***Abstract* –** This research is an attempt to discover how gentrification and police brutality are related. Drawing on scholarship from social scientists who have researched the implications of gentrification at length and from those who have examined the underlying cause of why the use of excessive force by a security apparatus may occur, I extrapolate a relationship between the two events and conclude that they are in fact related. For the purpose of this analysis, gentrification is defined as spatial segregation through the reclamation of lower-class, urban space by middle and upper-class citizens. This reclamation of urban spaces displaces those of lower socioeconomic classes (typically composed of people of color), colonizes the space for the middle and upper-classes, and relies heavily on legitimized auspices of power such as a police force. Police brutality is defined as the use of excessive force, at times resulting in death, by a publically-funded security force. The research of this paper will suggest that when people of color are conspicuously displaced they become perceived as intruders within their own communities and heightened police surveillance escalates situations of tension into a threat.

First, I will examine the process of gentrification and spatial commodification. By asserting that gentrification is an economic policy of revitalization in a globalizing economy, what follows is a social cleansing that eliminates the obstacles to commodified space. Next, I will move on from gentrification and spatial commodification to the consequences of a "zero-tolerance" policing strategy as it is examined in the context of whether gentrification has increased crime to the point of its necessity. The concluding analysis shows how recently gentrified areas and the use of increased police surveillance result in use of excessive force by a policing mechanism.

I. Gentrification: Class Warfare in Urban Centers

Consider that the composition of a neighborhood, be it urban or rural, is the result of an economic reality. Those who can afford to move away from their workplaces in an industrialized society do so, while the inverse is also true. Now, let us assume that these same neighborhoods have life cycles reliant upon the economic status of a relatively homogenous group as it collectively grows or shrinks. As a group becomes more affluent, certain amenities become available and when a group loses socio-economic status fewer amenities are available. These life cycles are subject to and in some cases are the push and pull factors of urban settlement. Typically, the working classes and minorities inhabit the urban center (Engels 1935).

In an increasingly globalized economy the composition of an urban center is changing. Gone are the days of industrialized workforce cohabitation in "the breeding places of disease, the infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night," as Friedrich Engels once famously penned in his discussion on the shifting housing question (Engels 1935). Now, the revitalization of city centers is more likely a draw toward amenities than it is toward the availability of work. Spatially concentrated changes, like gentrification, rely heavily on economic, social, and population changes. Gentrification is a reflection of the changing economy of an urban center as it alters the demographic of neighborhoods. This move back to the city by the more affluent class is, in places like New York, creating an increased residential polarization of income levels, educational attainment, and ethnicities. The evolution of an urban economy has moved from manufacturing to services, created a redundancy in workforce (as there is now less demand for labor) and thus created a decline in economic viability (Marcuse 1985). The urban center is no longer the seat of manufacturing instead; it is increasingly becoming a commercial playground for services (Marcuse 1985).

The globalization of urban centers has created a business of culture. This business of culture commodifies the urban landscape to reflect a city's global reach by bringing in a myriad of cultural affectations (e.g., cuisine, religious iconography) as niche markets and entertainment centers. These cultural bazaars blend into the landscape without segregation of race (Pérez 2002). The influx of the middle and upper classes toward these amenities has, however, created an environment of residential

segregation by social stratification that forces out the urban poor through economic means or by force.

An economic policy of revitalization becomes a social project of globalized economies. The urban poor must be displaced as they represent obstacles to new development. Gentrification occurs when these lower-class neighborhoods are "reclaimed" by the more affluent classes for access to and the development of amenities not found in the suburbs. Neil Smith likens this reclamation to that of Westward expansion after the Louisiana Purchase (Smith 1996). By considering the urban landscape as a New Frontier, as Smith suggests, reclaiming it from the wilds of its indigenous population—the working class—explains how easily a security apparatus such as the police force can be an instrumental tool in ushering out undesirables. The myth of the Urban Frontier, Smith argues, "rationalizes the violence of gentrification and displacement" in an effort to cleanse the space for economic development (Smith 1996, pg. 22). It is necessary, for reclamation, that the area be scrubbed of any reminder of the working-class citizen as a means by which to take the area back to a *tabula rasa* so that its history can be rewritten by its conquerors.

Reclamation is a fascinating phenomenon in that the poorer classes are simultaneously visible (e.g., eyesores discouraging development, dangerous) and invisible because after a while they have been pushed out to the margins of communities. This commodification is a boon for economic growth and is more often than not supported by local government policies. As the urban landscape evolves into a commodified space of cultural business the visibility of its "indigenous" residents decreases.

II. The Myth of "Other" and Social Cleansing

The violent young man of color is seen as an intruder in middle-upper-class neighborhoods and represents an "otherness" that no longer adheres to the composition of a community. This is a powerfully evocative narrative; it breeds, grows, and festers in the subconscious until any hooded figure at twilight is certainly a threat. It is perpetuated as a perceived threat, in need of surveillance, for no other reason than no longer adhering to the norms of their neighborhoods (Pérez 2002). The myth of "other" (those who differ from the norm in a neighborhood) is a relatively unfounded threat; there is no threat in the transgression of deviating from the community norm. However, this perceived threat opens the door to increased police presence in gentrified neighborhoods. Police forces are ushered in by community activists and watch-dogs protecting their economic interests.

The myth of "other" is perpetuated through the media's coverage of "the crime problem" in gentrifying neighborhoods (Leverentz 2012). It is also perpetuated by business owners and neighborhood imagination. The narrative of transgression synonymous with lower-class citizens, often young men of color, stratifies neighborhoods into factions of those who belong (mid-upper-class citizenry) and those who do not (lower-class) (Fayyad 2017). When the media runs with stories vilifying lower-class communities as crime ridden and dangerous, then the discourse of the conquering pioneer is to civilize the area. The result is local businesses and residents discouraging patronage from and encouraging increased surveillance of those who no longer belong in the community. The fear of crime legitimizes the auspices of policing in neighborhoods (Conquergood 1992).

Is increased surveillance necessary? Does gentrification drive up crime rates in a retaliatory fashion? Drawing on the conclusions of Scott C. McDonald's longitudinal study of fourteen "gentrified" neighborhoods we see that it is a much more complex issue (McDonald 1986). Oftentimes, neighborhoods (previously deteriorated in a spatially concentrated manner) ripe for gentrification are already situated in higher crime areas compared with a city average (Marcuse 1985). McDonald suggests that the "risk oblivious" who move into these high-risk neighborhoods may grow more risk averse as they age and their investments yield matured returns. In McDonald's fourteen-year study from 1970-1984, inconclusive results suggest (rather than prove) crime may be reduced with gentrification, but there is no way to extrapolate whether or not this is a symptom or a cause. Crime rates have not increased in such a way as to merit increased surveillance. It must, therefore, be the myth of the other which draws the police.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's doctrine of "zero-tolerance"—handed down in Police Strategy Number 5—was no more than a social cleansing strategy spearheaded by Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), real estate, and private homeowners' coalitions in protection of shopping and residential districts (Jefferson 2017). Police Strategy Number 5 was intended to restore the city of New York to its "rightful citizens" (Smith 2001). The affluent newcomers had more political influence than their predecessors (McDonald 1986). This influence and articulation of political clout by private actors spurred the New York Police Department to purge the city of

"scum" (as Mayor Giuliani referred to the unlicensed street vendors, prostitutes, drug dealers, and other undesirables in his policy). Police Strategy Number 5 was overwritten by class and race norms that very clearly express rhetoric of affluent privilege complementary to urban regeneration, or rather gentrification.

The prevalence of heightened surveillance can be directly linked to private sector actors who are determined to revitalize the city's real estate and its economic structures that amplify prejudices (Jefferson 2015). The New York Police Department of the 1990s followed the previously initiated Operation Pressure Point (OPP) tactics of 1983 Lower East Side. The OPP was designed to remove drug markets from desirable real estate (thus, not fixing the drug trade problem, simply relocating it). After its implementation, the Lower East Side became a more affluent neighborhood and was viewed as a success by community activists and the New York Police Department (Jefferson 2015). The affluent community had conquered the wilds of the Lower East Side and settled it for their benefit.

The police department in this regard is used as a tool for "improving" the "quality of life." It is crucial to cleansing the urban landscape while businesses and policy-makers try to attract "cultural infrastructure" (Jefferson 2015). By conducting, as was the case with New York, bi-weekly police sweeps predicated on racial profiling, aggressive handling of low-level disorders led to an increase in police brutality. In 1999 the New York City Police Union announced that "zero-tolerance" tactics are the "blueprint for a police state and tyranny" (Jefferson 2015). The tactics encourage race and class profiling even though there had been no evidence of an increase in crime rates. In fact, Neil Smith in 2001 showed that there was a twenty percent decrease in crime rates between 1990 and when the police strategy was implemented in 1994 (Smith 2001, pg. 72). These policies also minimize concerns about evidence, a practice that has become part and parcel of the 42nd Precinct in New York City to this day.

III. In the Cases of New York and San Francisco

The effect of policies like Police Strategy Number 5 have far reaching implications. Shaun King, prominent civil rights activist, has conducted a methodical study of the 42nd Precinct in the Bronx neighborhood of New York City. The 2017 study discusses a rampant abuse of authority by police officers predicated upon arrest quotas and the Stop and Frisk policy (which has now been officially banned) in the gentrified area of the Bronx (King 2017).

King notes that gentrification has created an invisibility of police brutality for the new residents. However, on the fringes of the neighborhood, where privileged classes rarely visit, police officers are free—if not expected—to terrorize the marginalized classes. According to King, "stop and frisk has been banned, but police in the 42nd precinct are actually doing something far worse. They are setting quotas and goals for the number of people each officer must arrest. If you don't meet or exceed the quotas, you feel the wrath of your supervisors" (King 2017, pg. 1). In his research, King found that five million incidents of Stop and Frisk have occurred in New York City since 2002 with ninety percent of those stops resulting in proof of innocence (King 2017, pg. 2).

However, King notes that as detrimental as the Stop and Frisk policy was, the informal policy of arrest quotas to clean up the streets was far worse. In November 2016, the city of New York agreed to pay $75 million in settlements for police corruption cases. In the lawsuit *Stinson v. NYC*, the city admitted to dismissing over 900,000 false arrests and summonses due to a lack of evidence. The arrest quota system is highly contestable and is currently under review by policymakers and the plaintiffs (twelve New York City police officers) note that the system is predisposed to racial profiling and predatory practices toward people of color and those of lower economic status (King 2017, pg. 2). New York City may have been the genesis of "zero-tolerance" policing policies but these policies do not exist in a vacuum.

On March 21, 2014, Alejandro Nieto was murdered by the police in a gentrified neighborhood of San Francisco (Bernal Heights). Nieto was an upstanding citizen of color with a security guard position at a local nightclub, a job that required him to carry a Taser. While Alejandro sat on a park bench having dinner in Bernal Heights Park, someone called 911. A resident of the neighborhood identified Nieto as a suspicious character (Solnit 2016). Four police officers responded to the call and with little provocation (there is argument whether or not Nieto's Taser was particularly menacing or even powered on) two of the officers unloaded more than two gun clips into Nieto. Alejandro Nieto died from the fourteen bullet wounds he sustained. It is also to be noted that police opened fire, unprovoked, in a public park with no regard for potential loss of life from innocent bystanders. The escalation of a non-conflict situation resulted in the death of an innocent citizen.

These examples of violence and corruption do not prove that policies like OPP, Police Strategy No. 5, and Stop and Frisk result in police brutality at the hands of gentrification. However, for the purpose of this research, they do suggest that these policies—based on economic development goals—are a form of social cleansing for economic purposes. That is to say, the need for "zero-tolerance" and reclamation of city streets from the margins of society, are a far more likely causes for increased police surveillance and therefore increasingly violent encounters between the police and the displaced, than actual increases in crime rates.

IV. Conclusion

The class warfare inherent to gentrification remains largely invisible to the affluent classes. Gentrification is class warfare and the police force is its cavalry. It is entirely possible that gentrification has its roots in residential segregation and thereby racial segregation. Here, it appears that police brutality is a feature and necessity of gentrification and serves to socially cleanse areas for neighborhood economic potential. Neighborhoods (developed or developing) and the stratification of economic attainment must be decriminalized in the eyes of the public, thereby stemming the tide of rising police presence in gentrifying areas.

The litmus test of police brutality and gentrification cannot be reduced to such a simple explanation as given herein; however, this argument raises the question of economic development policies that exploit publicly funded security forces and their adherence to the will of the affluent in favor of working-class citizens. If, as posited, the police serve as a social cleansing mechanism then perhaps policies of development must be rendered to their core intention (economic growth) and local governments should regulate housing markets in a more egalitarian fashion.[1]

[1] The development theories of urban centers discussed herein are from the past thirty years. However, these theories are still viable today as the evolution of time has seen the advancement of these ideas. It is intended to build from historical context the notion that this is not a new phenomenon.

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