HYPER-GENTRIFICATION IN THE REVANCHIST CITY*

by Jeremiah Moss

First claimed by the Dutch in the early seventeenth century, before those more uptight English Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, New York City was forged in the Netherlander's twinned ethos of free trade and a permissiveness famously known as "Dutch tolerance," or *gedoogcultuur*, a culture that tolerates the breaking of rules. The city's salesmanship would make it powerful, but its openness to difference, its relative acceptance of rule breakers, would make it exceptional, an anomaly set apart from the rest of Puritan America. In his history *The Island at the Center of the World*, Russell Shorto explains how "the Dutch Republic in the 1600s was the most progressive and culturally diverse society in Europe," providing safe harbor for exiled intellectuals and authors, Jews and other religious groups, oddballs, and peasants; and that progressivism was imported directly to Manhattan. While the Dutch were Calvinists, they were not Puritans, and they turned the town that would become New York into a multicultural, socially flexible zone—not a free-for-all, not a modern liberal utopia, but a different place from the more rigid society created in New England. Through British rule and centuries of near-constant change, that open character endured. Permissiveness is in the city's DNA. So is capitalism and its hunger for real estate. The two have been in tension ever since. But in the twenty-first century, a new breed of capitalism has tipped the scales to win the city, thanks in large part to its most powerful urban weapon: gentrification.

These days, when most people think about gentrification, they're thinking about an outdated concept. While it's arguable that the practice originated when the Dutch colonized Manhattan and displaced the natives, the word was coined by British sociologist Ruth Glass in the early 1960s. "One by one," Glass wrote, "many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle class—upper and lower." The invaders took over modest houses and turned them into "elegant, expensive residences," while refurbishing larger Victorians that had fallen into disrepair. "Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district," said Glass, "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." In this first definition of gentrification we find its basic elements: members of an upper class invade a lower-class neighborhood, purchase and upscale the houses, displace the people, and change the character.

Gentrification is not the simple shifting of one urban population to another. It does not describe, for example, the expansion of Chinese immigrants from Chinatown into Little Italy. One lower-income group cannot gentrify another. Gentrification is about class—and the places where class intersects with race and other factors, like education and sexual orientation—but it is always about an imbalance of power. And in every scenario, the gentrifiers have more power.

Gentrification officially came to New York in the early 1970s. At the time, "Brownstone Fever" was sweeping South Brooklyn. The trend had its own conference, called "Back to the City." Organized by the Brownstone Revival Committee and held at the Waldorf-Astoria, the conference presenters provided techniques for "unslumming" a neighborhood. In media reports, however, gentrification continued to be an offshore peculiarity that first struck London and then spread to cities like Amsterdam and Paris, where architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable

described the upscaling of the slums, including Le Marais, "reclaimed as fashionable historic districts, with that curious side effect, 'gentrification; or the driving out of the poor and working class for an influx of chic residents, restaurants and boutiques."

When the New York Times Magazine published their 1979 story "The New Elite and an Urban Renaissance," they celebrated gentrification's arrival in Manhattan with splashy photographs of boutiques and bistros, tins of pate at Zabar's, and expensive sports cars on (gasp!) the gritty Upper West Side's Columbus Avenue. Who were the new urban settlers enjoying all these luxuries? With an average age of thirty-five and annual incomes over $20,000, "[t]be young gentry," said the Times, had fled the suburbs to "gladly endure the urban indignities their parents ran away from. This new breed of professionals is willing to put up with smaller apartments, dirty streets, and crime in order to live in chic neighborhoods." The only noted downside to this process was that the poor and working class were being pushed out, making the city less colorful for the gentrifiers. "Ironically," said the Times, the ethnic diversity that is drawing the gentry back to the city, the cultural heterogeneity that has always been the source of so much of New York's character and energy, may become lost in a forest of homogenized high-rises and rows of renovated brownstones."

While gentrification was causing a stir in the 1970s, it was nothing compared to what was coming down the pike. The influx of yuppies was still offset by white flight to the suburbs, and they were hardly stampeding to the city as they are today. A quarterly bulletin by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York titled "Are the Gentry Returning?" found little evidence to support the idea that the back-to-the-city movement had begun in earnest. They concluded, "The overall attractiveness of New York City to the 'gentry' . . . did not grow between 1970 and 1980." In fact, the city's share of high-income households, college graduates, and other high-status groups dropped. This vision of gentrification is still the one many of us think about when we think about gentrification—episodic and gradual, organic and minimally harmful, with some positive effects like fresh produce at the corner grocer and safer streets. But this is not the powerful force that's killing cities in the twenty-first century. Gentrification didn't just get bigger. it mutated into something monstrous.

Neil Smith, professor of anthropology and geography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) until his death in 2012, outlined what is probably the most detailed and useful theory of gentrification and its changing shape. His work is essential to understanding how the city-killing process of today is not the gentrification of the past.

Smith called Ruth Glass's first version of gentrification the First Wave, or Sporadic Gentrification. Dating it from the 1950s to the mid 1970s, he referred to this wave as "small-scale" and "quaint," without the backing and support of local government and financial institutions.

In gentrification's Second Wave, from the late 1970s to 1989, the process anchored itself, becoming an essential part of the city government's master plan to take back the city from the poor, the working class, people of color, homosexuals, artists, socialists, and other undesirables. A process that had begun organically, more or less, driven by individuals, was now exploited by City Hall for the benefit of corporations and developers. This momentous shift was largely due to a major political reorientation.

The fiscal crisis of the 1970s brought a new philosophy of governance to the city—the free-market capitalist ideology of neoliberalism, with its focus on privatization, deregulation, fiscal austerity, small government, and the elevation of Wall Street. This neoliberalization of the

city marked a major departure from the progressive, redistributive, New Deal philosophy of old New York. It would change the course of gentrification and eventually lead to Michael Bloomberg's luxury vision in the 2000s—the main focus of this book.

In the late 1970s and '80s, under Mayor Ed Koch, City Hall's goal became to re-create New York, making it friendly to big business, tourists, real estate developers, and upscale professionals. In the process, City Hall turned away from its citizens. CUNY professor and urbanist David Harvey has called this the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism, meaning that the city government changed its main priority from providing services and benefits for its own people to competing with other cities for outside human resources and capital. In the new competitive city, attracting tourists, newcomers, and corporations was (and still is) more important than taking care of New Yorkers.

Gentrification was the big gun in the new competitive city's arsenal. Where early gentrification had been driven by middle-class people looking to move into affordable and diverse areas, now the city brought in big real estate developers and corporations with generous tax abatements and other government subsidies. Public money for the poor was rerouted to the rich. In 1979, the National Association of Black Social Workers vowed to oppose gentrification in cities across the country, along with austerity measures, "since these plans," wrote the Times, "aimed at removing poor blacks from innercity areas." This may have been the first time that gentrification was publicly called a "plan" and its racist, classist aim clearly spelled out. Evictions skyrocketed, along with the numbers of homeless New Yorkers. Visible on the streets, the homeless interfered with property values and the tourist-friendly image City Hall was hawking. So the NYPD pushed them out—and the people pushed back, most explosively in the Tompkins Square Park riots of 1988.

After this contentious Second Wave of gentrification, New York slipped into an economic recession from about 1989 to 1993. Property values and rents fell. Vacancies went up. Real estate investors panicked as journalists wrote of "degentrification." In 1991, the Times announced that gentrification was in retreat and "may be remembered, along with junk bonds, stretch limousines and television evangelism, as just another grand excess of the 1980s." A few years later, the paper declared gentrification dead and buried. But it did not die. It came back bigger, stronger, and meaner than ever.

Smith called the Third Wave of gentrification "Gentrification Generalized," marking its beginning in 1994 with no end date. In this phase, gentrification moved out from the city's center, into parts previously untouched. Generalized gentrification meant "new restaurants and shopping malls in the central city . . . brand-name office towers alongside brand-name museums, tourist destinations of all sorts, cultural complexes—in short, a range of megadevelopments." Gentrification was no longer sporadic or quaint. It was certainly not a natural trend. And its supporters knew it was coming. In 1995, Peter Satins, a senior fellow at the neoliberal think tank Manhattan Institute, told the Times, "Eventually, practically all of Manhattan, south of the northern edge of Central Park, will be gentrified, all the way down to the Battery, and that includes the Lower East Side." He thought it would take until 2025. It happened much faster.

Neil Smith stopped writing about gentrification after 2006. He did not put forth a Fourth Wave to account for the dramatic changes the city endured under Bloomberg. A year before Smith's death in 2012, I wrote to him and asked if he could provide a distillation of his complex theory. In conclusion, he told me:

> The class remake of the city was minor, small scale, and symbolic in the beginning, but today we are seeing a total class retake of the central city. Almost without exception, the new housing, new restaurants, new artistic venues, new entertainment locales—not to mention the new jobs on Wall Street—are all aimed at a social class quite different from those who populated the Lower East Side or the West Side, Harlem, or neighbor-hood Brooklyn in the 1960s. Bloomberg's rezoning of, at latest count, 104 neighborhoods has been the central weapon in this assault.

That *total* class retake of the city might qualify as a Fourth Wave of gentrification, a process that jumped to a new level in the 2000s— under Bloomberg in New York, but also in similarly restructured cities around the globe. Loretta Lees, a professor of urbanism in London, has proposed a fourth wave, describing it as "the consolidation of a powerful national political shift favoring the interests of the wealthiest households, combined with a bold effort to dismantle the last of the social welfare programs associated with the 1960s." Call it Total Oligarchic Gentrification. Call it a Billionaire's Bonanza. I call it hyper-gentrification—because it's fast, frenetic, and aggressive, but also because hyper-gentrification just sounds sexier than "Fourth Wave" or "gentrification generalized."

Hyper-gentrification, as I think of it, encapsulates not only the real estate deals, the movement of money, and the displacement of lower-income people and small, local businesses. It's the whole megillah. It's the return of the white-flight suburbanites' grandchildren and their appetite for a "geography of nowhere," to take a term from social critic James Howard Kunstler, in which monotonous chain stores nullify the streets. It's cupcakes, cronuts, and hundred-dollar doughnuts dipped in 24-karat gold (yes, this exists—in Williamsburg, Brooklyn). It's the ugly extravaganza of what New York, and too many other cities, have become—playgrounds for the ultra nouveau riche, orchestrated by oligarchs in sky-high towers, the streets stripped of character, whitewashed and varnished until they look like Anywhere, USA. It's the displacement of the working class and the poor, people of color, artists and oddballs. And it's the changed psychic climate. A city once famously neurotic is becoming malignantly narcissistic. Hyper-gentrification has a character—and it's a sociopathic one. Intelligent, malevolent, and directed, it is shot up with rage and vengeance. Which brings me to another of Neil Smith's critical points about late-stage gentrification, one that might help explain the psychology of many gentrifiers today.

In 1996, Smith called Giuliani's New York "the revanchist city." *Revanche* is French for revenge. The original revanchists were a group of late-nineteenth-century French bourgeois right-wingers who didn't like the working class, the liberals, or the radical socialists of the Paris Commune who had come to power. So they took revenge on those they believed had stolen France from them. For Smith, the revanchist city in the 1990s expressed "a race/class/gender terror felt by middle and ruling-class whites." The yuppies had come to retake and remake the bad old city in the 1980s, investing in brownstones and condos, developing real estate, taking Wall Street jobs, and moving in their corporations, only to be stranded in a recession with declining property values and a record-high murder rate. So when the economy tanked in 1989, they were furious. They wanted revenge and voted for Giuliani, a Republican with an iron fist, a man who would become known as Mayor Mussolini.

"The rallying cry of the revanchist city," wrote Smith, "might well be: `Who lost the city? And on whom is revenge to be exacted?' The scapegoats in the Giuliani era were people of color,

the poor and working class, immigrants, feminists, homosexuals, socialists, bohemians. These people had made New York the city it became in the twentieth century—open, progressive, diverse, and creative. They had also long been identified as enemies of the more conservative elites.

So what are we really talking about when we talk about gentrification in the twenty-first century? In many ways, the term itself is a diversion. It's the bright green face of Oz that distracts from the man behind the curtain, the invisible hands pulling all the levers. Those hands belong to the globalized world order of the so-called free market, the neoliberal agenda launched in the late 1970s to destroy socioeconomic progressivism, the stuff that made New York so New York. In cities across America and the world, those hands pull the levers on hyper-gentrification. There is nothing natural about it. It is a man-made virus that grows rhizomatically, creeping into every crack and crevice of Manhattan, reaching ever deeper into the outer boroughs, pushing out whatever stands in its way. It can be defeated. But first we must pull back the curtain and see it clearly for what it is: an act of revenge.

By the time Giuliani came along, a battle had been raging between the elites and undesirables for many decades. When I look at revanchism, I see the dark roots of its rage reaching back through the crisis of the 1970s and the race riots of the 1960s, all the way to the ethnic class struggles of the 1920s, and, ultimately, to the anti-immigrant nativism of the 1800s on the Lower East Side. That is where the wild, diverse, progressive New York was conceived—and where the battle for its soul began.

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