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Plutocracy, Gentrification and Racial Violence

By Joseph Natoli
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“You know Southie’s gotten gentrified. I guess you can’t stop progress.”

— Ray Donovan, *Showtime* TV series, 2015

“It was a real wake-up call the other day to realize that evictions and gentrification don’t just mean losing your home but really losing your life as well.”

— KQED News, *San Francisco*, March 31, 2014

— “My God, is no place safe? Bensonhurst, perhaps?”

Brooklynian, March 2013

For consideration: if you are poor in a plutarchy, where wealth has the power, you are in trouble. Let us also say that you are in a country that has not experienced feudalism. No aristocrats, no peasants, no French Revolution, just a colonial real estate and tax revolt “back in the day.” This self-professed classless country picks up on a competitive economic system that is lauded as being self-regulating, elegant in its eventual efficiency and capable of “raising all boats,” economically speaking. What turns out however is that this system plays out like a Monopoly game where Chance and a cold-hearted eating up of your neighbors ensues, a zero-sum game where for you to win, someone has to lose.

Right now in the U.S., we have more than the 1% possessing the power that wealth buys. If you want to understand how gentrification is a byproduct of a Grand Canyon size wealth gap, is indeed the praxis of plutarchy, you need to accept that roughly 20% of the U.S. population now enjoys a surplus capital snowballing on the stock market, business investments and inheritance. The top 20% have an average \$100,000 income; 8% make over a \$150,000 income. With a population of about 2.5 million, Brooklyn, one of the most talked about faces of gentrification in the U.S., has about million people and at least 200,000 with enough funds to turn a former working class/lower middle class borough to a borough with an average monthly rent of \$3,139.

Because a former working class/middle class well-being has slid downward into the anxiety, frustration, insecurity, and discontent that has been the lot of the bottom 20% of the population, neighborhoods have become vulnerable to a gentrifying takeover. Once affordable places are no longer so, landlords work hard to push out longtime renters so flush gentrifiers can step in, and housing offers are made that exceed a wage earner's lifetime savings. The gentrifiers are not villains, nor are the improvements their money and influence effect insignificant. However, if we had maintained a solvent, secure middle class as well as a blue collar working class confident in a work/progress democratic, egalitarian social contract, neighborhoods would be more resistant to gentrification and gentrifiers would not be an invading army but unremarkable within a society in which all were moving "on up."

The sharp divisions of plutocracy has erased a secure middle class and plunged them downward where blue collar workers have no sense of what advance might be. All the tactics of takeover have been accelerated and supersized by a mindboggling wealth gap, one that has left very little ground upon which a middle class can stand.

Here are some facts, now more clearly brought to our attention with Bernie Sanders' run for the presidency. "In the United States, wealth is highly concentrated in a relatively few hands. As of 2010, the top 1% of households (the upper class) owned 35.4% of all privately held wealth, and the next 19% (the managerial, professional, and small business stratum) had 53.5%, which means that just 20% of the people owned a remarkable 89%, leaving only 11% of the wealth for the bottom 80% (wage and salary workers). (William Domhoff, "Wealth, Income and Power"). While productivity has increased by 80 percent since 1979, the income of those who live on wages and not interest and dividends has not risen at all.

Wealth is not innocent of leveraging that wealth to exert power in our democracy in which people, like products and services, can be branded, a clever marketing process of manufacturing ways of seeing and thinking. Of voting. And it is clearly money that fuels that capturing of a democracy voter already led into thinking he or she is impervious to any influence outside his or her own personal choices. Believing that money is spent equally in support of opposing ideologies is like believing that PBS has as much influence on us as FOX, and that the financial clout of vanishing unions equals that of corporations. Why would the pursuit of the maximization of power support a Leftist, or even Liberal politics intent on either displacing that pursuit or regulating it?

The zeitgeist, mass psyche, or what I call the American cultural imaginary has changed from a proud sense of an American working class hero, perhaps rooted in the image of "G.I. Joe," the

soldier made of “galvanized iron” and to whom Eisenhower referred to “as the truly heroic figure of this war.” That image of respect stood behind both private sector and governmental bolstering of a strong middle class, arising out of worker initiative and industry. Mobility from blue collar, working class to middle class was insured by union efforts, overtime pay, job security, pensions, job health benefits, and effective unemployment and workman’s compensation safety nets. And egalitarian spirit stood where now an “I’ve got mine, you get yours” attitude reigns. Real economic and social mobility began to erode in Reagan’s first term. While the middle class descended into the hapless confusion of the present, the blue collar “Everyman” was targeted to become “Joe Sixpack,” a loser, a moocher, a miscreant while those reaping the chance dispersals of a financialized capitalism become heroic icons celebrated for their fame and fortune. Simply put, wage earners never making enough to buy that home in the suburbs but remaining in the neighborhood became the bad guys and the entrepreneurial wealthy became the good guys. The middle class was destined to exist as middle class only in their own minds.

A zeitgeist of gentrifying wealth fueled by a desire to privatize the public space to fulfill personal design arrangements now pushes both working class and middle class to the curb. Neighborhoods are now customized to meet the requirements of high end shopping and costly leisure activities. Americans have gone from imaginatively identifying with Chaplin’s tramp persona, the beleaguered poor man who not only endures but also wins our hearts and our admiration, to becoming admiring “followers” of those Chaplin parodied as “Moneybags.” Donald Trump is no more than a “Moneybags” whose absurdity we are no longer able to parody Chaplin-style. We went from laughing at the arrogance and pretensions of the wealthy to idolizing them, from promoting a social and economic advance from underclass to working class to middle class to the rigid class boundaries of Europe before the French Revolution.

We now have a Winner discourse, practices that degrade the working class and heel to the wealthy, and institutions that enforce this new regime. For the wealthy to have everything the way they want they need to dismantle entrenched neighborhood arrangements that fall below their own lifestyle standards, which amount to no more than consumption and leisure regardless of how much one is devoted to yoga, veganism and meditation. Gentrification is thus class warfare waged with both political sides pulling in the same direction. Both Liberals and Neoliberals are either openly applauding or giving a rapacious capitalism’s “creative destruction” the benefit of the doubt. This is done in the same fashion that the charter school invasion of public schools as a campaign of profit making somehow seems to be a creative process. What is staring us in the face, however, in regard to gentrification is that it is an assault on and invasion of the “Losers” by the “Winners.” This has feudal and not democratic egalitarian dimensions.

The resistance point that has now hit the headlines has emerged from the racist treatment of blacks escalating to police violence. Many Brooklyn neighborhoods, and I use my own home borough Brooklyn as an example, are traditionally black neighborhoods, though some like Red Hook and Williamsburg are no longer. Neighborhoods surrounding Bedford-Stuyvesant remain majority African American such as Brownsville, Canarsie, East Flatbush, Crown Heights, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, East New York, Coney Island and Fort Greene. The most offensive neighborhoods in terms of a gentrified perception are the ghettoized neighborhoods, the sanctuary neighborhoods of those who have not found their way into the mainstream, either

economically or culturally, of American life. Top of the list are African-Americans, the heirs of American black slavery.

Gentrification in “Southie” Boston has gone on at great speed but the Irish and not African-Americans are the ones being displaced. The Latino population in The Mission district of San Francisco has been steadily evicted but clashes with the police do not take hold as do clashes with African-Americans elsewhere. In these places and elsewhere across the U.S. a struggling blue collar and lower middle class that has been scheduled for extinction since outsourcing and robotics, since the collapse of manufacturing and sustaining salaries are now being uprooted from their neighborhoods. Only the explosive, deeply troubling issue of racism has brought attention to an incursion that we are otherwise wired to call “progress.”

The congenital memory of black African slavery haunts the American mass psyche in incomparable ways. It draws the headlines. A gentrifying force initiated by a plutarchic wealth gap ignites an always latent American racism and the point of explosion is police enforcement. The poor have proven to be easy to ignore or degrade but when the poor are also black, racism, the haunting nightmare of the American mass psyche, comes into play.

The answer to the question as to why this new Millennial American society which has declared itself “post-racial” now brings us each day a new report of police clash’s with blacks has all to do with a black presence in those neighborhoods scheduled for gentrification. Police uphold the laws but they also uphold the values of a culture that demonizes the “Moochers” and the “Losers.” The poor are not others who “but for the grace of God” would be us, but rather they are those who, in the words of the Big Lebowski “have failed to succeed,” are too lazy to get a job and too canny at working a welfare system (almost non-existent in the U.S.) to their advantage to “start a business” or buy stocks.

The advance of gentrification has run into the perennial racist issue in the U.S. but neither Liberals nor Neoliberals find it useful to make the connection. Poor whites could be easily displaced without arousing too much attention. But violence to blacks is a hot point; to repeat, it goes deep into the American mass psyche. The young Millennials think of themselves neither as homophobic nor racist. These are “back in the day,” analog hang-ups that their own attachment to online life shows no interest. And yet, the topic has legs, almost as newsworthy as Donald Trump. Blacks have gotten caught being poor in the neighborhoods that the gentrifiers want. Law enforcement is now in a place where the gentrifying invasion must be carried out. If you are poor in a neighborhood that the wealthy want, your days are numbered. If you are black and poor and in those neighborhoods, police brutality precedes racism charges made against the police, a praetorian guard protecting a resident order established by and for the “Winners.”

Police chiefs, mayors, and governors will take all manner of anti-racism measures, face all manner of abuse, or make all manner of defense. The focus, in other words, will be on the site of clash and the actors involved but this is like condemning the knight in a game of chess for eliminating the pawn, or, you can take a wider view and scrutinize the game strategy of your opponent.

When the game being played is a zero sum game, a “scrunch or be scrunched” doctrine, and the results represent progress, the march of gentrification cannot be questioned because doing so would question the underlying premises of capitalist competitiveness. Only a socialist preference for mutual aid would launch such a critique, one neither Liberals nor Neoliberals will make. Capitalism is a forbidden “C” word in the American mass psyche, like Cancer and Class. It is a word even Bernie Sanders on the campaign trail refrains from using. But to amend the victimizing, exploiting and dehumanizing of the poor — the designated Losers and Moochers — the wealth gap that the Monopoly game of capitalism will inevitably produce, and has produced, must be addressed head on.

A serious blow is struck against structural racism when the wealth status of African-Americans, who remain a preponderant presence among the poor, gives them resistance power. This amounts to what leverage a secure prosperity provides, and beyond that, as much ownership of law enforcement, the justice system, and as much lobbying power and media power as the gentrifiers now possess. Neither brutality nor invasion occurs easily when one is so fortified.