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Is Gentrification a Human-Rights Violation?

By Saki Knafo

A Brooklyn-based group is arguing that the displacement of longtime residents meets a definition conceived by the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II.



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No one will be surprised to learn that the campaign to build a national movement against gentrification is being waged out of an office in Brooklyn, New York.

For years, the borough's name has been virtually synonymous with gentrification, and on no street in Brooklyn are its effects more evident than on Atlantic Avenue, where, earlier this summer, a local bodega protesting its impending departure in the face of a rent hike, put up sarcastic window signs advertising [“Bushwick baked vegan cat food”](#) and [“artisanal roach bombs.”](#)

Just down the block from that bodega are the headquarters of Right to the City, a national alliance of community-based organizations that since 2007 has made it its mission to fight “gentrification and the displacement of low-income people of color.” For too long, organizers with the alliance say, people who otherwise profess concern for the poor have tended to view

gentrification as a mere annoyance, as though its harmful effects extended no further than the hassles of putting up with pretentious baristas and overpriced lattes. Changing this perception is the first order of business for Right to the City: Gentrification, as these organizers see it, is a human-rights violation.

Gentrification, human rights—these are broad terms for complicated ideas. To understand how these activists could claim that the manifestation of the former is a violation of the latter, it's helpful to consider the history of both. The modern concept of human rights [took shape in the years immediately after World War II](#), when world leaders came together to devise a doctrine that would serve as a legal and intellectual buttress against another Holocaust. In 1948, at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The document [identifies](#) several universal rights, including education, healthcare, and freedom from torture. Nowhere, though, does it say anything about gentrification.

Nor could it have. That term didn't come into use until nearly two decades later, when Ruth Glass, a British sociologist, coined it to describe the growing phenomenon of young bohemians moving into a section of London that had fallen into neglect and disrepair. At the time, there was a theory that gentrification was a natural process that inevitably played out when artists and other adventurous types struck out for the urban frontier. Later in the decade, that perception changed, and this boundary-pushing came to be viewed as the result of some larger forces. As Neil Smith, the late influential geographer, put it in *Gentrification of the City*, a 1986 collection of essays, "It is apparent that where urban pioneers venture, the banks, real-estate companies, the state, or other collective economic actors have generally gone before."

Smith's work is an important touchstone for the members of Right to the City, who view gentrification as the result of a "systemic" effort to drive up profit margins for real-estate developers. Through rezonings, tax abatements for developers, and the privatization of public spaces, local governments and federal agencies often work to change low-income neighborhoods at the encouragement of developers, they argue.

It is the resulting displacement of people who can't afford increased rents that, in the eyes of these activists, amounts to a human-rights violation. (Homeowners, at least economically, stand to gain from the changes, since their property values often rise as a result.) Drawing on *Le droit à la ville*, a 1968 work by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre whose title translates to "The Right to the City," the organization argues that all people, including the disenfranchised, have the right to remain in their apartments and homes and shape the political and cultural landscapes of their communities. The UN Declaration of Human Rights already [asserts](#) that everyone has the right to be protected against "interference with his... home." Lenina Nadal, the communications director for Right to the City, says the group hopes to build on this idea. "It is an ideal time to expand the idea that inhabitants not only have a right to their home, a decent, sustainable home," she said, "but also to the community they created in their city."

At first, the alliance consisted mostly of community groups from Brooklyn and other obvious magnets for wealthy young professionals, such as the Bay Area and Los Angeles. But in the past few years, it has garnered interest from places like Lexington, Kentucky, and Springfield, Massachusetts—the sorts of smaller cities where people have traditionally gone to escape the

economic pressures of the Bostons and New Yorks. Right to the City promotes the idea that gentrification isn't something limited to big cities on the coasts.

The organization is up against the fact that there isn't even a consensus that gentrification is bad in the first place, much less bad enough to be classified as a human-rights violation. What some see as gentrification, others see as revitalization. Real-estate development, after all, often brings jobs, resources, and infrastructure improvements to neighborhoods that were previously starved of them, potentially benefiting low-income residents. In [*Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Toward Racial Equality*](#), the sociologist Patrick Sharkey studied black neighborhoods that grew whiter between 1970 and 1990. "There is strong evidence that when neighborhood disadvantage declines, the economic fortunes of black youth improve," he wrote, "and improve rather substantially."

But what happens to those people who can't afford to stay in these "revitalized" neighborhoods? Thomas Angotti, a professor of urban affairs and planning at Hunter College, [told the website *Curbed*](#) that there's a refusal in public-policy circles to "incorporate displacement into the analysis of the discussion." Right to the City wants to rectify this. A [report](#) by Causa Justa, a San Francisco-based community group and a member of the alliance, found that the separation of low-income families from their communities can result in higher transportation costs, the loss of jobs and income, and, for children, a decline in school performance—in other words, a compounding of the problems that cause people to live in poor neighborhoods in the first place.

Right to the City is organizing a series of "renters' assemblies" in cities around the country, with the ultimate hope of building support for policies that protect low-income renters, particularly renters of color, from getting priced out of their communities. It is one way that the organization is trying to influence the national discourse about gentrification, much like the Occupy movement did for income inequality and #blacklivesmatter did for race and policing.

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