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the City

Anglo-American Perspectives

Andrew D. Glassberg

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Anglo-American Perspectives

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## The Politics of Middle-Class Return to the City

### Anglo-American Perspectives

In American political euphemism, the phrase "inner city" has for some time served as a surrogate for all sorts of social deprivation. Broken homes, substandard housing, high crime rates, increasing rates of abandonment, all fall within the image this phrase conjures up. British usage, in recent years, has been moving toward many similar connotations. Standard "concentric ring" theories of urban growth postulate an ever-outward migration of those with economic choices.

But despite such common interpretations, some types of central city residence has always retained an aura of high social standing. "Park Avenue" in New York and "Park Lane" in London have meanings beyond the specific thoroughfares involved. In recent years, these classic high-status neighborhoods have been added to by the growth of "gentrification," the process of the return to central city renovated neighborhoods by middle-class (and especially upper-middle-class) professionals.

With the development of gentrification have come divergent social science analyses. From some perspectives, any "back to the city" movement is welcome because of the infusion of economic resources into depleted city treasuries,<sup>1</sup> to others, gentrification produces an unwelcome displacement of previous neighborhood residents,<sup>2</sup> who are likely to be poor and constrained in their choice of alternative housing.

In this paper, I shall be suggesting that the phenomenon of middle-class return needs to be understood in the context of the larger political and economic systems in which this movement takes place. I shall be using both British and American evidence to argue that although some of the same economic forces lie behind this movement in both societies, variations in political structures have produced variations in response to the gentrification trends which have developed.

To begin with the similarities, the economic bases of both Britain and the United States, and especially both countries' large metropolitan centers, have been changing. Both societies are moving away from employment predominantly based in manufacturing and toward tertiary service sectors. While this change has been going on for a long time, and need not necessarily result in middle-class return to the city, it is a necessary precondition for such a development. It is not accidental that the highest rates of gentrification are found in precisely those urban neighborhoods which, although working-class in their recent history, are in close proximity to burgeoning centers of office development.<sup>3</sup>

The most visible signs of middle-class return can be found in London, in Britain, and in Washington, in the United States. As the commercial function of the City of London expands, and as the non-governmental, but politically-interested group association headquarters continue to centralize in Washington, their personnel are prime candidates for the gentrification movement. While cities with weaker commercial cores may experience some middle-class return, we should not anticipate finding it with anything like the vigor it displays when the central-office function is expanding.

In addition to central office growth in some major metropolitan centers, both societies are undergoing changes in their demographic composition which promote middle-class return.<sup>4</sup> Both societies have post-World War II bulges in their birth rates, and in both societies this leads to high rates of new family formation as this earlier generation matures. High rates of family formation ensure continuing pressure on the housing market, at a time when new suburban housing construction is unlikely to be able to fully keep pace.

Historically high rates of inflation, and their concomitant impact on interest costs, make the carrying charges for mortgages on new construction out of the reach of individuals who might have been able to afford new suburban housing in recent decades.<sup>5</sup> New environmental restrictions in the United States has had an impact on the availability of sites of suburban construction in many ways similar to the longer-term impact of Green Belt legislation in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

Both Britain and the United States, in common with all other Western industrial nations, have faced steep increases in energy costs, and these have begun to affect population distributions as well. While an energy-sufficient country like Britain ought not face as severe a set of future changes as the United States, it begins with a much higher energy-cost base. Energy costs, particularly as translated into home heating and commuting costs, increase the attractiveness of central residential locations.

Perhaps more difficult to document than any of the common characteristics listed above, both Britain and the United States have experienced a growth in the proportion of the population likely to be attracted to a gentrification movement for "cultural" and not just "economic" reasons. Although the concentration of such individuals in certain metropolitan areas is, in some sense, a function of the concentration of central-office commercial functions discussed above, it also has an independent base of its own. Both societies have invested substantial resources in expansion of educational facilities in recent decades, particularly in higher education. One of the classic arguments for large central cities is that they provide locales for "culture." With both societies experiencing increasing proportions of their populations with formal exposure to their "high cultures," we should not be surprised to find increasing demand for access to it.<sup>7</sup> One consequence of this demand is, of course, demand for housing which makes the high culture physically accessible. None of this is to argue that high rates of education are incompatible with suburbanization; the data, of course, clearly show the opposite. Rather, it is to suggest that one precondition for "gentrification" movements is a critical mass of individuals with desires for the type of lifestyle central cities can afford to those with at least moderate levels of affluence. Increasing rates of university education in Britain and the U.S. increase the likelihood that this "critical mass" will be reached for any particular metropolitan area or, indeed, for any particular neighborhood.

Finally, both the U.S. and Britain have recently experienced substantial population decline in their older central cities. In England, this decline was in part due to conscious social choices; the building of "overspill estates" in suburban areas, the development of "New Towns," and the use of financial incentives to move manufacturing and commercial facilities to regions seen as depressed. No such explicit set of policies can be found in the U.S., but can readily be argued that a set of national decisions was nonetheless taken which had the effect of encouraging central city population decline.<sup>8</sup>

With population decline comes less pressure on the housing stock of central cities. While we are more accustomed to seeing the obviously negative consequence of this in vacant houses and abandoned buildings, it also has the consequence of making property more readily available for conversion to "gentrified" use. (As shall be seen below, the availability of vacant housing has been particularly important in some types of American gentrification.)

The substantial drop in central-city populations, particularly in many of the inner neighborhoods which have become prime foci for gentrification, has other consequences as well. Such neighborhoods have had largely working-class populations in their pre-gentrification period. Although, as I shall argue later, diversity of population is one of the ostensible attractions of "revival" neighborhoods, it is clear that "too large" a poor and/or working-class population discourages many potential middle-class returnees. While housing abandonment does not make for an attractive neighborhood physical appearance, neither would densely populated "slum

neighborhoods, from the prospective of prospective gentrifiers. Thus, central city population decline makes gentrification possible in two ways. First, higher vacancy rates and/or abandoned buildings reduce property costs for those interested in "rehabilitating" old buildings. (This rehabilitation can be performed by the returnees themselves, in some circumstances, but is more likely to be undertaken by local real estate developers, both in the U.K. and the U.S.)<sup>9</sup> Second, population decline in a formerly densely settled neighborhood means that the first wave of returnees form a significant percentage of neighborhood population from the very outset. Had densities remained what they once were, then many potential returnees might have been discouraged from the attempt at the outset.

The social and economic circumstances described above, I have argued, are common to both American and British neighborhoods which have experienced middle-class return. Differences in the urban political structures of the two societies, I now wish to argue, has produced considerable variation in the response to gentrification.

American and British urban areas differ considerably in the nature of their financial base. While British local government is severely restricted in the raising of local revenue, being permitted only the use of property taxes, it has access to substantially more central government subsidies than is available in the United States.<sup>10</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, what is crucial about the distinction in urban public finance is not simply the relative extent of national funding of urban expenditure, but the relative certainty of receiving funding in the future. In Britain, the Rate Support Grant is a routinized feature of national political life, in the United States the continuance of a variety of federal urban aid schemes always seems politically problematic.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence of this distinction, I suggest, American urban governments are more sensitive than those in Britain to changes in their local tax base. As a consequence, American cities are more likely to encourage middle-class return, perceiving it as a step toward less strain in municipal budgeting. While such sentiments are not necessarily absent in Britain, the nature of central government transfer payments mutes the issue in comparison with the U.S. Anglo-American distinctions on this point are reinforced by the somewhat broader range of taxes available to most American cities. Return of the middle class looks fiscally attractive in the U.S. not only for its potential impact on property values, and therefore, over time, on property taxes, but also because of its quicker impact on sales (and sometimes income) taxes. Such additional fiscal considerations are absent in Britain.

But purely budgetary considerations are not the only difference in American and British responses to middle-class return. The structure of local government, the structure of the party system, and the range of local public services also have impact. Particularly in London, the nature of borough government produces a response to gentrification different from that seen in the U.S.

The nature of London Boroughs, comprising as they do relatively small parts of the entire metropolitan area, means that they are often class-homogeneous. Ward-based, partisan systems of election to borough councils provides an avenue to formal political power for individuals and organizations which in American cities might only be unofficial protest movements. Thus, an American city can take a decision to emphasize programs attractive to middle-class returnees and seek to encourage their arrival, and poor neighborhoods which might be subject to displacement are without

formal power to resist. Citywide majorities would have to be mobilized to defeat such a program. A structure of borough government, particularly if it has significant housing powers (as do London Boroughs), makes resistance possible even where broader governmental forces might wish to encourage middle-class return.

This potential for resistance, however, would not be activated except in the presence of political organizations with community power and with a perspective which regarded middle-class entry in strongly negative terms. Such a stance is taken by some, but by no means all, local Labour Party organizations in London. Thus, the legal structure of local government and the nature of the party system mean that some London Boroughs are likely to be resisters of gentrification.<sup>12</sup>

One major vehicle for such resistance is provided by the locally-controlled housing program. Not all types of housing are suitable for gentrification, the housing needs to be of a type that would be attractive to and open to middle-class returnees. Despite the different image of council housing in the U.K. as compared with public housing in the U.S., estates of council housing do not provide a fruitful environment for gentrification in London. At the extreme, a local council might be successful in converting so large a fraction of the local housing stock to council housing (either by clearance and rebuilding or by rehabilitation of existing structures) that gentrification would have a very limited scope indeed.<sup>13</sup> Such has been the situation in some parts of London.

But the existence of "neighborhood" governmental structures in London (through the institution of the London Boroughs) does not guarantee that there will be resistance to gentrification. Indeed, the very existence of such local structures has the potential for reinforcing gentrification trends, once they are able to get underway in the first instance. Just as access to the institutions of formal government authority make it possible for English "resisters" to be better mobilized than American protest groups, so it is also true that newly-arrived middle-class residents of English gentrification neighborhoods have access to formal power not so easily obtained in the United States. Examination of London Boroughs of this type shows that such individuals are able to move into positions of power at the Borough level; they do not need either the political power or the motivation to control the London government as a whole.

An examination of the literature suggests that the most controversial aspect of gentrification, at least in the United States, centers around the question of whether middle-class return leads to significant displacement of previous poor and working-class residents.<sup>14</sup> Although conclusions differ, the dominant theme seems to be that the volume of gentrification is not yet sufficient to have caused widespread displacement,<sup>15</sup> although there are a few specific neighborhoods which can be identified around the U.S. where displacement has taken place.<sup>16</sup>

But there is another consequence of this new social process which is not much discussed. This is the question of the impact of middle-class return on urban political systems. I am arguing that this impact is not dependent on gentrification becoming a numerically predominant factor in urban demographics. Rather,

gentrification can have impact in two other ways. The entry of a small number of gentrifiers can change neighborhood political processes; where new arrivals have the will to enter local affairs they have advantages which suggest that they will be influential in ways disproportional to their numbers in the community.<sup>17</sup>

The second major impact of gentrification which is not entirely dependent on its numerical extent is the impact gentrification has on "urban image." I suggested at the outset of this paper that the phrase "inner city" had become a euphemism for deprivation in both the United States and Great Britain. One consequence of gentrification is its potential for changing this perception. Changes in this perception can have substantial impact on future development in urban areas, and are particularly important to the economic interests of the central business districts of large cities. We can anticipate that those with economic stakes in this area will provide strong support for the further development of gentrification, and will seek to publicize its existence when and where it occurs. To the extent that such interests are historically better connected to American urban governments than to English ones, we can anticipate that gentrification (perhaps not called by this name), will become a regular part of "civic boosterism" campaigns in American cities, while its role in the U.K. will be more problematic.<sup>18</sup>

The impact of gentrification on cities can, therefore, be seen as multifaceted. First is the direct impact, the effect of a change in the population composition, and related changes in tax base and service demands. Secondly, gentrification has the potential for changing the leadership composition of a community even where there is not a change in numerical domination. This effect is less direct since it is contingent on the formal political structures of the community, and dependent on the interest the new arrivals have in engaging in political activity.

A third, and even less direct impact, is the effect of gentrification on patterns of urban investment. Even if its participants are few in number, a city with a reputation for "revitalization" may find its downtown business core more attractive to private investors. The extent to which such a development takes place is dependent both on the economic circumstances of the entire society, and on the relationships between the city's business community and its political leadership.

A fourth, and quite different type of impact, comes in the effect of gentrification on prior residents. As I indicated earlier, this issue, under the name of "displacement," has proven to be the most controversial aspect of gentrification to date. Some communities emphasize that middle-class return does not produce displacement, since "revitalization" is concentrated in areas of heavy housing abandonment. Critics of this view both disagree with the contention, and question whether city policy encourages departure by poor residents.

Aside from displacement, some debate takes place over the consequences of middle-class arrival in a previously poor neighborhood on its remaining poor residents. Traditions of a more self-contained working-class culture in England than is true in the United States have led to more concern with this question in Britain. Critics of gentrification suggest that working-class residents are "entitled" to all working-class neighborhoods, free from middle-class intrusion. Such reaction is less visible in the United States, at least up to now.<sup>19</sup>

But any thoroughgoing assessment of gentrification ultimately confronts the question of how extensive the movement is likely to be. As I indicated at the outset, most observers now agree that there are few cities where in-migration of new middle-class residents exceeds their continuing outflow. Is the interest in gentrification itself just a "trendy" intellectual phenomenon of the "man bites dog" variety, interesting primarily because it takes place at all? Or are the developments to date just the precursors of a social trend which will rival mass suburbanization in its impact on urban society?

Up to now, participants in this movement have come from such a narrow spectrum of society that it is impossible to imagine substantial numerical growth. Only a limited fraction of any society will ever be made up of "young professionals."<sup>20</sup> Predictions of numerical growth, therefore, depend on the predictions one wishes to make about the likely appeal of return to the city for groups which have not yet participated.

Suburbanization itself provides a model for such a process. Once the preserve of the wealthy, the ideal of the "suburban home" came to permeate the national culture, particularly in the United States, but in England as well. Changing technology, of which mass automobile ownership was a prime prerequisite, and national government policy, made possible the extension of the "suburban dream" to significant masses of middle-class citizens.

Whether the type of "elite gentrification" observed to date is an early stage of a similar process is, of course, beyond conclusive demonstration. We do not yet see the "dream of the town house" dominating American culture. Longer and more positive traditions of urban living persist in Europe, and may make such a development more likely in England than in the U.S. But fashion is subject to change, and popular magazines already feature articles about central city lifestyles. But just as changing technology was fundamentally important to mass suburbanization, so would it be for mass return to the city.

The catalyst for such a development, if it is to take place, would, by present understandings, have to be a sustained energy shortage. Higher prices per se are unlikely to be "sufficient" to stimulate such a trend, since there is so much scope for conservation within the suburban lifestyle. If energy availability becomes sufficiently scarce to interfere with suburban mobility, then we should expect to see a broadening of the gentrification trend. The relative energy supplies of the U.S. and the U.K. make such a development more likely in America, or at least make it more likely at an earlier time. Predictions about future energy

supplies are beyond the scope of this paper, but one consequence of gentrification which we can already observe is that it provides an arena for contending economic and political forces to stake out claims for turf which will become increasingly desirable and valuable if the "energy crisis" turns out to be a crisis of scarcity and not just of price. The politics of middle-class return to the city could then become the central theme of urban political life.

Notes

1. J. Thomas Black, "Private-Market Housing Renovation in Central Cities," Urban Land vol. 34, no. 10 (Nov. 75) p. 9  
Statement of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in Neighborhood Diversity, Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate, July 7, 8, 1977, pp. 75-76  
M. Leanne Lachman and A. Downs, "The Role of Neighborhoods in the Mature Metropolis," in Charles Leven (ed.) Mature Metropolis (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1978) p. 215
2. Conrad Weiler, NAN Handbook on Reinvestment Displacement (Washington: National Association of Neighborhoods, 1978) Ch. 2  
Carol Richards and Jonathan Rowe, "Restoring a City: Who Pays the Price?" Working Papers, Vol. IV, no. 4 (Winter, 1977) p. 55  
Statement of Franklin James, Urban Institute, in Neighborhood Diversity, p. 134
3. Andrew Glassberg, Representation and Urban Community: Borough Councils in London, Yale University Ph.D. dissertation, 1977
4. Black, op. cit.  
George Sternlieb and Kristina Ford, Some Aspects of the Return to the Central City (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research 1978)
5. New York Times, June 28, 1976, "Inner City Housing in Demand as Suburban Prices Soar," pp. 1,16
6. Maurice Ash, "Green Belt or the Green City," Town and Country Planning, Vol. 42, no. 1 (January, 1974)
7. One aspect of the "high culture" is the restoration of historically important architecture. It is not surprising to find housing of this type particularly attractive to returnees.  
See, Timothy Conley, Lafayette Square: An Urban Renaissance (St. Louis: Lafayette Square Press, 1974) p. 99  
Statement of Robert Schur, Neighborhood Housing Developers, Inc. in Neighborhood Diversity, p. 49  
London Borough of Islington, Official Guide (2nd edition) (Cheltenham: E.J. Burrow and Co., n.d.) p. 25

8. These would include mortgage subsidies, income tax advantages for home ownership, and federal subsidization of commuter highway construction.
9. One important type of rehabilitation is the "homesteading" program, in which a city seizes vacant property for tax delinquency and then sells the houses to prospective renovators at a nominal price. This type of renovation often involves substantial "sweat equity" on the part of the new owner. See, Home Ownership Development Program, City of Baltimore, Homesteading in Baltimore (n.d.)  
HUD, Office of Policy Development and Research, Evaluation of the Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program: First Annual Report (Washington: G.P.O., Mar. 1978)  
James Hughes and Kenneth Bleakly, Urban Homesteading (New Brunswick: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1975)  
  
Private market rehabilitation, especially in neighborhoods which have already begun to experience substantial renovation, is likely to be performed by private developers. See Glassberg, Representation and Urban Community, op. cit.  
Jeff Bartley, The Political Consequences of Gentrification in Islington (unpublished essay, Urban and Regional Studies Unit, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1978)  
Nathaniel Rogg, "Urban Housing Rehabilitation in the U.S.," Urban Land (Jan. 1978) pp. 10-18  
Washington Post, Dec. 11, 1978, p. A1, reports that private speculators involved in renovation of Washington, D.C. neighborhoods had moved into redevelopment in Baltimore.
10. Douglas Ashford, "Territorial Politics and Resource Allocation," European Studies Newsletter, Vol. 8, no. 2 (Nov. 1978) p. 2
11. Andrew Glassberg, "Urban Management Under Fiscal Stringency: United States and Britain," paper presented to Council for European Studies Conference of Europeanists, March, 1979
12. Glassberg, Representation and Urban Community, op. cit.
13. It is, of course, theoretically possible to convert public housing to private luxury use. This has been discussed in both the U.S. and the U.K., but does not yet seem like a significant possibility on any substantial scale. See Conrad Weiler statement in, Neighborhood Diversity, pp.208-9  
Granada Television, City at Risk: Housing Trap (Manchester: Granada Television, Feb. 24, 1979) p. 6 of transcript.

14. Karen Kollias, "Neighborhood Revitalization: An Overview," HUD Challenge, Vol. IX, no. 3 (March, 1978) p. 2
15. Sternlieb and Ford, op. cit. p. 39  
Donna Shalala, City at Risk: Lesson from America (Manchester: Granada Television, Feb. 23, 1979) p. 23 of transcript.
16. Washington Post, Feb. 24, 1979 report of study conducted by Sonia Sands, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota
17. Glassberg, Representation and Urban Community, op. cit.  
See also Peter Willmott and Michael Young, Family and Class in a London Suburb (London: New English Library, 1967) p. 114, for an argument that working-class self-confidence is higher in homogeneously working-class neighborhoods.
18. Thus, the City of Baltimore reprints and distributes magazine articles describing the process in Baltimore as part of its Baltimore 1990 kit, which is primarily about downtown commercial redevelopment.  
See, U.S. News and World Report, Dec. 25, 1978, "Where Things are Going Right in America," p. 75  
Newsweek, Jan. 15, 1979, "Baltimore's Comeback," pp. 34-35
19. We can anticipate, however, that if gentrification grew to sufficient numerical strength to challenge existing political power arrangements, this point could become much sharper in the United States. Racial politics are an obvious focus around which this could occur. Washington, D.C. may be the first large U.S. city to experience such a development, as gentrification comes to challenge black numerical dominance, but even here this remains in the hypothetical future.
20. The median income of one group of New York suburban commuters studied who indicated interest in return to living in the central city was \$48,000. Such figures do not suggest mass movements. Sternlieb and Ford, op. cit. p. 40