

Book Review: Gentrifier by John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill

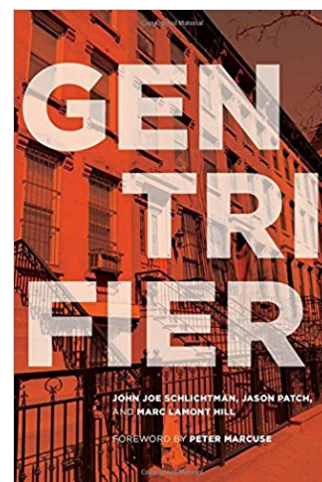
In Gentrifier, John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill offer a riposte to the widespread use of the term 'gentrification' in recent years, drawing on their own personal experiences as self-identified 'gentrifiers' to suggest a different understanding of urban change. While recognising that the book's approach may prove controversial, Peter Matthews recommends this accessible read as a welcome corrective to media and popular narratives of gentrification processes.

Gentrifier. John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill. University of Toronto Press. 2017.

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The term 'gentrification' has become something of a buzzword in recent years. Endless newspaper articles report changes to neighbourhoods across the globe. Developments like the Cereal Killer cereal café, located in the gentrified Shoreditch area of London, have become a focus for debate and even [attacked by protesters](#). As an adjective, 'gentrified' has detached from its roots in urban studies to describe clothing choices, [food](#) and [art](#). The figure of the 'hipster' has become a target of pillory for their seemingly unthinking contradictory consumer behaviour that ultimately destroys what they claim to love.

These 'pop' narratives of gentrification are useful in raising awareness of issues of neighbourhood and urban change as well as its costs and consequences for the most marginal groups in our cities. However, they often lack detailed and nuanced understanding of how urban change has happened. 'Gentrification' becomes an amorphous blob, charging through our cities, wrecking our neighbourhoods. This very accessible book, *Gentrifier*, provides a welcome corrective to this.



The book begins by setting out how gentrification, as a term, has become extremely popular and used both widely and indiscriminately. Immediately, in presenting their 'multi-tool' to unpack gentrification narratives, authors John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch and Marc Lamont Hill provoke insight by focusing on structure, agency and the self. The title of the book – *Gentrifier* – instantly provokes the question that makes this book so interesting: [who, me?](#) (Particularly pertinent as the author of this review is writing in their flat in a converted warehouse in an up-and-coming area of a city).

All the authors of *Gentrifier* self-identify as gentrifiers from their experiences of living in various cities in the USA. While understanding the urban processes they have lived in from analytical and critical perspectives, they also present the acute moral ambiguities they faced in making the same choices as many prospective residents of a neighbourhood. It is this interlacing of personal stories with critical commentary on gentrification scholarship that makes the book so readable.



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The stories of the authors are predominantly outlined in the second chapter – ‘Dispatches’ – where the neighbourhoods listed are a roll call of gentrification stories in New York – Fort Greene, Park Slope, Harlem – as well as places like inner-city San Diego; and more unexpected ones, such as Providence, Rhode Island, where one of the authors bought a nineteenth-century house in an up-and-coming area, and amusingly recounts the story of a tour bus going past while the book was being written to show quite how gentrified the neighbourhood had become.

In focusing on their own experiences, the authors highlight the rationale behind decisions many urban scholars will have made settling into a new city and link these to the life course: for example, moving to a neighbourhood that would become gentrified as a ‘first-wave’ gentrifier when you are a student looking for somewhere affordable to stay; or seeking to move to a vibrant, ethnically and socially diverse neighbourhood when forming your first household for all the interest it will bring to your life. For the authors, this residential mobility is both a fact of their own lives and also recognised as ‘affecting the fabric of urban life around the world’ (86).

In Chapter Three, ‘Invasions’, the authors focus on this fabric of urban life, taking on the key critical issue for gentrification: displacement. Here, they place the micro-level decisions of the gentrifier into the meso- and macro-levels of the economy and policy impacting on neighbourhoods. In particular, they highlight that, for gentrification to occur, a neighbourhood must have ‘de’-somethinged to ‘re’-something. That is, they explain how planning policies (suburbanisation), economic changes (the location of industry) and social practices (racial redlining) have produced neighbourhoods that then have a rent-gap that could be exploited. This is a useful corrective to popular narratives that often assume that neighbourhoods that are gentrifying were always the way they were prior to gentrification. This ignores the waxing and waning of neighbourhood fortunes over time.

The criticism the chapter builds to is that in the popular gentrification literature and some scholarship, gentrification has become *the* causal factor in displacement. Subsequently:

gentrification-related displacement has become a cat-and-mouse empirical game where people are forever being displaced and gentrification comes to explain all movement (120).

The authors do not underplay the damage displacement does – particularly the way less socio-economically advantaged residents are removed from neighbourhoods – but they do add breadth to help the reader understand the myriad processes that lead to this occurring.

By setting out this macro- and meso-level of analysis, the authors imbue gentrifiers with agency: they are not (all) inherently evil people out to displace everyone in a neighbourhood, but people making positive choices in a constrained context. This analysis is then extended in Chapter Four with a Bourdieusian typology of gentrifiers. This chapter is ironically entitled ‘Columbus’, and aims to move us away from the notion that all people moving into a gentrifying neighbourhood are invaders. The types of gentrifiers identified are: conqueror; colonizer/connector; consumer; competitor; capitalist; and curator. The names of the types summarise them well, but by bringing in their own personal experiences and how they identify with these categories, the authors highlight how they all have some positive and negative characteristics. The classic one – and one this reviewer identifies as – is the ‘curator’ who feels ‘that it is [...] the gentrifier’s responsibility [...] to keep the sociocultural fabric of the neighbourhood as it was when the gentrifier entered’. Yet, as the authors outline, who is to say what ‘authentic’ character is when neighbourhoods change extensively over time? There are no absolutes.

A more obvious negative type of gentrifier would be the capitalist – this might conjure images of global property developers seeking to wipe out neighbourhoods to produce a return to profit. Again, by focusing the analysis on ‘who, me?’, the authors bring nuance to this account. They tell the story of how one of them became a property owner with sitting tenants, and thus became this capitalist – they had to pay the rent. The owners renovated the property and the tenants eventually left after the rent was increased. This might seem a classic case of economic displacement, and the authors are guilty-as-charged. Actually, what they recount is a story of tenants-from-hell who were creating problems. This changes what could be interpreted as simple economic behaviour into a more complex ethical conundrum.

I came to this book with a background in urban planning and urban policy. I have engaged with gentrification literature from this perspective and am often left with the question: so what? In the final chapter – ‘Collisions’ – the authors tackle this issue, describing urban studies conferences where you can get one room listening to narratives of gentrification, displacement and symbolic violence, and down the corridor another room having an entirely parallel debate on regeneration and neighbourhood upgrading.

As a scholar who is committed to delivering good quality neighbourhoods for all people (something I do in my voluntary work alongside my academic job), I struggle with some criticism from gentrification scholarship and how it is assumed all neighbourhood improvements are gentrification. Poor quality neighbourhoods are often very bad places for people to live: housing can be barely habitable; levels of crime can be high; communal areas can be poorly maintained. We know from the extensive research in public health that these qualities increase stress levels, increase levels of depression and mean that [people die younger because of where they live](#). Yet policy interventions that seek to improve neighbourhood conditions are ceaselessly subject to criticism. This is not to say much of this is unwarranted – the reductions in the supply of affordable housing to rent in London’s regeneration schemes are state-led displacement. But demolition of high-rise flats riddled with damp to be replaced by new homes for affordable rent and new, higher quality neighbourhood environments should not be stopped for fear of gentrification. This should be welcomed as needed investment.

This book will provoke outrage among many gentrification scholars. But it provides a welcome corrective to the slap-dash way ‘gentrification’ is used as an explanatory force in popular narratives and some scholarship. The £20 cover price puts it just within reach of the interested general reader, who I would encourage to read it. It would also be a valuable addition to reading lists on urban studies, urban geography and urban planning.

This review originally appeared at the [LSE Review of Books](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the reviewer

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Dr Peter Matthews is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling. In his research he is interested in the causes and manifestations of urban inequalities in all their forms, and policy responses to these. His current research is focused on the housing experiences of people who identify as LGBT+.