



How to kill a city, by Peter Moskowitz

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BOOK REVIEW

How to kill a city, by Peter Moskowitz, New York, Nation Books, 2017

As the title indicates, this is not a nuanced publication. Journalist Moskowitz pens a provocative book arguing that gentrification—in virtually all of its dimensions—destroys cities. An impassioned writer, he centers his critique on case studies of four U.S. cities: New Orleans, Detroit, San Francisco, and New York. Through a series of interviews, direct observations of local conditions, and citations of various published sources, he argues that the benefits of gentrification are outweighed by the social costs imposed on poor and working-class people.

Of course, skewering gentrification is hardly a groundbreaking enterprise, given the many scholarly studies to that effect appearing since the late 1970s. But Moskowitz goes to considerable lengths to delaminate gentrification's complicated strata, offering insights, for example, on local housing costs, eviction patterns, and affordable housing construction. In addition, he adroitly captures some of the personal burdens imposed on gentrification's putative sufferers in their own words. To Moskowitz's credit, he is quick to acknowledge that he is both a victim of New York's gentrification and one who is complicit in its perpetuation. He confesses to patronizing some of the very upscale bars, coffee houses, night clubs, and other businesses that contribute to reshaping life in changing neighborhoods. And yet, he bemoans the loss of neighborhood character (as well as neighborhood characters) and escalating housing costs resulting from reinvestment.

Initially, I questioned Moskowitz's decision to include case studies of Detroit and New Orleans. Detroit has suffered catastrophic population losses and crushing disinvestment while New Orleans underwent devastation due to a natural disaster of nearly unprecedented proportions. However, Moskowitz employs the term *gentrification* liberally to include nearly any form of investment in cities or suburbs primarily benefiting middle- and upper-class people over those of lesser means. Therefore, like others before him, Moskowitz tilts his lance at numerous windmills, finding fault with market capitalism, governments at all levels, and corporate hegemony, among other alleged iniquities. He makes a good case that New Orleans and Detroit, despite their deep and abiding social and economic travails, are experiencing reinvestment and redevelopment, albeit not as extensively as New York and San Francisco. Thus, the latter two cities represent rampant and widespread gentrification in two global cities, whereas New Orleans and Detroit illustrate its more tentative and spatially delimited dimensions in cities under deep economic distress with large low-income and minority populations.

As the author notes, gentrification theory tends to divide along the production vs. consumption axis. (Lees, Slater, & Wylie, 2008). Productionists emphasize the primacy of collaboration between governments and capital for orchestrating the spread of gentrification. Consumptionists, on the other hand, view the phenomenon as driven largely by the momentum of uncountable individual consumer choices in market economies. Though neither side claims mutual exclusivity, they differ in the extent to which they believe that public-sector actors and institutions in particular can be held accountable for gentrification's negative impacts. Moskowitz unequivocally establishes himself as a productionist, believing that gentrification is usually initiated through "a combination of federal, local, and state policies that favor the creation of wealth over the creation of community" (p. 23). Potential readers for whom this viewpoint is too shortsighted may still find *How to Kill* worthwhile, considering the interviews and observations the author marshals to bolster his conclusions.

In New Orleans and Detroit, Moskowitz observes, public policies and private actions seek to attract more middle- and upper-income Whites and limit the return of poor and working-class Blacks. Enhancing neighborhoods and the downtowns to attract the affluent as residents and tourists has become an explicit economic development strategy in each city. Although he is aware of the

economic and population declines that these two cities have suffered, Moskowitz doesn't seem to fully grasp the severity of their nearly intractable quandaries. In both, large land areas have lost population and are uninhabitable—due mainly to flooding threats or to abandonment by outmigrating families and businesses. Local governments suffer from vastly inferior fiscal resources; eroding public services such as sewer, water, street lighting, education, and police; and undercutting social welfare safety nets. And in an era of generally stringent federal subsidies, only by attracting private capital can either city hope to forge a path to economic stability and growth. For Detroit, New Orleans, and several other U.S. cities, gentrification is one avenue—perhaps the only—for doing so. Alas, these realities receive short shrift in Moskowitz's assessments.

As for the comparatively wealthy cities of San Francisco and New York, the book takes them to task for doing too little for minority and low-income residents. San Francisco is found wanting for attracting large numbers of college-educated people, especially tech workers. However, considering the city's bountiful cultural life, progressive political traditions, and appealing climate, should we be surprised that hordes of newcomers—especially young hipsters and LGBTQ folks—want to live there? As Moskowitz points out, though, the newcomers are crowding out thousands of minorities and low- and moderate-income people, many of whom are long-term city denizens. And San Francisco is faulted for favoring growth over human welfare.

Overlooked here is an accounting of San Francisco's policies that help to offset the impacts of gentrification. For example, with approximately 7,500 homeless residents, San Francisco currently funds shelter services at \$305 million annually. Doubtless, this is a level exceeded by few, if any, other local governments nationally. And inclusionary zoning policies covering new office and multifamily housing construction produce several hundred units of ancillary affordable housing each year. Developers proposing a new project in the city are pressed by city hall for quid pro quos serving the needs of San Francisco's poor and minority residents. Meanwhile, San Francisco leaders compete with the siren calls of Silicon Valley suburbs seeking to entice city businesses to relocate. Among the emoluments offered are lower taxes, fewer regulations, and more generous land supplies and prices. Thus, San Francisco struggles to balance desired social welfare outcomes with the tolerance threshold of footloose capitalists whose jobs and revenues help finance the city. Though the book's account of San Francisco is poignant, it is also somewhat selective.

Moskowitz is clearly in his element discussing his hometown, New York. He leads readers on a walking tour across Lower Manhattan, over the East River, and ending at Brooklyn's Williamsburg. A nostalgic meditation on the city of his youth, his account finds little to celebrate today. Newcomers are faulted for lacking the neighborhood memories and sensitivities of long-term New Yorkers. Public officials are excoriated for favoring policies supportive of upper-middle- and upper-class values. And developers are castigated for promoting rampant consumerism and capitalism at the expense of organic urban spaces once idealized by Jane Jacobs in Greenwich Village. But righteous indignation, no matter how sincere, loses momentum when endlessly repeated. So generously expressed are Moskowitz's displeasures that they resemble an incantation, all but anesthetizing the reader's mind. For him, change and memory are perpetually at odds.

Often, the Achilles heel of such critiques is that in their doctrinaire rigidity they oversimplify, becoming hopelessly myopic. Frequently missing is any discussion of an alternative and more humane mechanism for stimulating inclusive urban revitalization. But Moskowitz gamely tackles this issue in his New York case study, predictably proposing higher taxes and wages, greater public expenditures on the poor, reinvigorating the nation's public housing program, and imposing rent control as a national policy. Furthermore, he recommends land banking of surplus property for community spaces and affordable housing, as well as expanding participatory democracy over development activities.

Doubtless, the author is aware of the compelling irony of such proposals in the current national political and economic climate. With a billionaire president in the White House, a Republican-controlled congress, and an increasingly conservative Supreme Court, Keynesian policies have all of the appeal of a steak at a vegetarian's convention. More to the point, however, is the age-old problem

of negative externalities. Neoliberal governments tread softly on private-sector actors because increased taxes, higher minimum wage laws, more burdensome regulations, and more expensive land and rental costs fuel capital flight, driving households and businesses away from cities. Merely lambasting governments oversimplifies the complicated calculus of individual human decisions when people and firms are free to migrate. Memories of the city's 1970s bankruptcy and spiraling decline persist among New Yorkers. Few want to repeat that lesson.

Readers preferring an arm's-length analysis of gentrification may be disappointed by the author's highly personalized perspective. Conversely, those already predisposed to his premises and conclusions will likely relish the equivalent of ideological comfort food. The lack of any photographs is a surprising omission in light of the feelings that Moskowitz displays for gentrification's victims and their communities. And random statistics cited in the text, lacking context, would have benefited from the inclusion of tables and graphs.

Despite my concerns, I suspect that some faculty members will find the book to be useful in courses on housing, urban planning, public policy and administration, inequality, and related topics in the social sciences. Instructors hoping to provoke student discourse might pair *How to Kill* with other readings more thoroughly grounded in careful empirical research methodologies. A student team might be assigned to each volume to critique its findings, methods, and conclusions in class.

In summary, this is a sincere, albeit at times sentimentalized, perspective on an inarguably critical subject regarding the future of American cities. Whether readers agree or disagree with its pronouncements, they will find plenty of grist for the mill to pique curiosity and stimulate discussion.

Reference

Lees, L., Slater, T., & Wylie, E. (2008). *Gentrification*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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