The Politics of Preservation: Openness to Inclusion Across Associational Frames

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Abstract:

Do attitudes of openness and inclusion translate across different political contexts? This article explores that question by examining several locations where the infusion of new bodies threatens the stability of existing social orders. At the broadest level: national immigration policy, where racialized nativist approaches compete with attitudes of openness and inclusion. Then, in a more constrained context, I assess urban environments, where debates over new arrivals often play out as critiques of ‘gentrification.’ In both cases, rhetoric of invasion is used to characterize the danger of free movement. Is this simply a coincidence of arguments, or a demonstration of deeper convergences that blur ideological categories? My goal in asking this question is not merely to assess how populations comprehend the value of openness in different contexts, but also to explore the normative implications of this effect, and to develop an argument about how openness manifests across the whole scope of political experience. Posing these questions offers the chance to reflect on the process of community formation, solidification, and renegotiation.

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“Gentrification is a form of immigration, though almost nobody calls it that.” [[1]](#footnote-1) So writes Annalee Newitz in a recent essay, which argues for attending to the convergences between these two forms of migration. In particular, she notes strong similarities in the reactions of existing residents. In both cases, one finds fear of cultural and social change, distrust of the intruders, a feeling that a place once marked as ‘home’ is no longer their own.

This article treats the analogy between these two forms of migration as a starting point for assessing differential treatments of cultural identity within changing communities across associational frames. The point is not to assert a perfect correspondence. National immigrants differ from gentrifiers in many important respects—with distinctions in race, class, and cultural capital all playing an important role. Nevertheless, both drive political responses grounded in expectations of authenticity, ownership, and community. And by evaluating both the similarities and differences between these two forms, we may explore the valences of social change, and in the process gain a richer understanding of how disruption is understood and what sorts of responses it triggers. How is change interpreted, where is responsibility assigned, how is blame apportioned? And perhaps most importantly, if context shapes the ways in which people respond to the infiltration of new bodies into a given space, is this effect irresistible, or can principles overcome natural inclinations in some cases?

To this point, Newitz concludes her essay with an appeal to treat the connections as an opportunity to reflect anew on the hidden value of urban migration: “Instead of seeing immigrants as aliens, we should welcome their fresh perspectives, their wealth of new cultural traditions — and yes, their cash infusions.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Is this case persuasive? Could those who reflexively distrust gentrification be persuaded to take a more positive perspective if it were framed as an extension of the politics of cultural openness that they practice on questions of national immigration?

To address these questions, I begin with psychological responses to difference—the extent to which an attitude of openness correlates with a feeling of comfort about the permeability of communal identity boundaries. Here I build off the work of scholars that have explored the role of deep personality traits in shaping attitudes toward immigration, who have found that ‘openness to experience’ is a particularly strong indicator of attitudes on a number of important political issues, particularly immigration.[[3]](#footnote-3) Such work has been a welcome addition to a field that traditionally has seen immigration attitudes as primarily driven by larger social processes (economic patterns, racial attitudes, etc.). Exploring the role of psychology adds an important layer to these assessments, allowing a more fine-grained assessment of motivation and effect.

I treat that research as an invitation to more deeply interrogate the idea of ‘openness,’ and its effect in shaping or reflecting broader theoretical practices. The goal is not merely to describe an existing effect, but rather to explore the normative implications of this effect, and to develop an argument about how openness manifests across the whole scope of political experience. How does openness affect other locations where communities form, and are then subjected to cross-border movement? Specifically, what may be learned by tracing reactions to national immigration and internal migration?

Considering these questions will allow for the construction of normative arguments informed by the role that community plays in guiding theoretical practices, even across significantly different contexts. While important structural differences do exist between the politics of immigration and gentrification, reflecting on the embedded similarities may still provide helpful perspective on how to best frame those differences.

Engaging this topic offers the chance to reflect on the process of community formation, solidification, and renegotiation. The comparison also allows new perspective on two broader theoretical questions in politics.

First, how should cases where individuals find themselves on opposite sides of a principle be best understood? Is this philosophical dissonance, ‘transconsistency,’[[4]](#footnote-4) or the normal sort of attitudinal hypocrisy that drives so many political behaviors?[[5]](#footnote-5) Further, if they came to regard this as a contradiction, would they then act to resolve the tension? If so, in what direction? Or would they simply acknowledge that the principle itself was less dispositive, and acknowledge other factors (ascriptive, material, etc.) as more significant? Such questions are particularly compelling in the case of inclusion and openness, where principle is often cited as significant but is clearly not the only relevant factor guiding decisions.

Second, does every act of exclusionary identification necessarily evoke a certain degree of historical violence, or is it possible to reject the act of forced assimilation without thereby seeking to reify the practices of exclusion involved in the construction of that community? In the case of immigration, this question has been well-studied, framed in the context of nationality and civic membership. But how do these topics apply when placed in more fluid urban environments, where preservationist ideologies often struggle *against* the weight of capital—both social and literal—rather than working in concert with those forces?

This article takes these questions as objects of inquiry, puzzles to be developed, rather than as matters in need of definitive resolution. The goal is to describe a convergence, and to explore what may be learned from it. To the extent that this concludes with a normative argument, it is simply that we must be careful about the ways in which place and identity are wielded. Who is included, and who is excluded, are decisions of existential importance, but all too often are taken with little understanding of their consequence. If comparing these two modes of communal formation enriches the understanding of either, it is a journey worth taking.

I. Psychological traits and political opinion

A wide range of studies in recent years have shown that the so-called ‘Big Five’ personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability) provide significant explanatory power when considering attitudes toward political questions.[[6]](#footnote-6) Other researchers have suggested that the HEXACO model of personality structure provides significant clues about socio-political attitudes.[[7]](#footnote-7) At the broadest level, these studies find that personality traits are reliable indicators of conservative and liberal political values.[[8]](#footnote-8) More specifically, studies have consistently shown that “Openness to Experience is inversely associated with conservative vote choice.”[[9]](#footnote-9) That is: those who are generally open to new experiences are less likely to express conservative political opinions across a wide range of topics. This trait works in the opposite direction as well, with higher openness to experience corresponding with more liberal political beliefs.[[10]](#footnote-10) And this is not a small effect. As one study found, “the size of the effects of these traits rivals those of canonical predictors of political behavior that have been the subject of countless studies—such as education and income.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Moreover, the research on personality traits also finds a significant relationship between openness to experience and tolerance for national immigration. Those more open and responsive to new experiences will respond more favorably to flexibility in national residency.[[12]](#footnote-12) This effect is particularly pronounced when it comes to inter-ethnic immigration, where “openness positively moderates the association between interethnic encounters and immigration attitudes.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The effects of openness on positive immigration sentiment also appear to track across different cultures and nationalities in the West, having been identified in the United Kingdom,[[14]](#footnote-14) Canada and Denmark,[[15]](#footnote-15) Switzerland,[[16]](#footnote-16) South Korea,[[17]](#footnote-17) and the Netherlands,[[18]](#footnote-18) among others.

Within this effect, researchers have also identified specific features that predict attitudes. Negative feelings about immigration are determined largely by the way immigrants are perceived as a threat to the existing social order. The nature of this threat, however, varies across different immigrant categories and may therefore depend on framing.[[19]](#footnote-19) For example, an individual who fears cultural dislocation may support restrictive immigration policies toward those perceived as non-white and non-English speaking, while supporting immigration for whiter, English-speaking immigrants. One might summarize it thus: “Those who are similar are welcomed; those who are deemed other are excluded and often blamed for their own exclusion.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

In broad terms, then, anti-immigration sentiment is drive more by concern about the disruption of the existing social and cultural order than about any material effect. While individuals may cite crime, security, or economic worries, these tend to be overwhelmed by deeper worries about the loss of an affective community.[[21]](#footnote-21) Summarizing the research on this question, McLaren and Johnson argue that “exclusionary reactions to immigrant minorities...have been shown to be far more strongly related to the more symbolic concern about cultural threat and maintenance of cultural unity and distinctiveness than to individual or collective economic threat.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Importantly, such anti-immigrant sentiments are not *merely* practices of exclusion and rejection. That effect is merely part of a broader process of community formation: “the ways in which we make categories for ourselves and others, and through which the group to which we belong is shown to have its own distinct, positive elements.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Openness to experience, in this context, suggests greater tolerance for permeability of such community lines, while those who tend toward anti-immigration sentiments are more concerned with preserving the scope of a constrained body politic. This is by no means the *only* thing happening, and such categorization takes a myriad of different forms in different cases. Nevertheless, this does represent *a* continuity, and a potentially revelatory one.

II. Comparing attitudes toward openness: urban migration and immigration

Does this connection between openness and liberal attitudes toward community formation hold across issues? Under a naïve reading, it should not matter whether the community at stake is national, or more narrowly defined. Those comfortable with permeable communal boundaries should be equally willing to accept new arrivals. As Vincent Woo argues, embracing national immigration while rejecting internal migration “is an ethically incoherent position. If we…so strongly believe that national immigration is a human right, then it seems strange to block migration into our own neighborhoods.”[[24]](#footnote-24) In this context, the desire for local residents to preserve their long-standing way of life might be seen as little more than an effort to preserve a cultural bulwark against the arrival of new, divergent identities.

Certainly, the logics of resistance to immigration and gentrification are quite similar in some cases. For many residents of urban communities, gentrifiers are seen as cultural blights, unthinking trespassers violating a sacrosanct space in order to serve their own selfish interest, “similar to nineteenth-century pioneers on the plains, who had little regard for those there before them.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Longtime residents resent “the superimposition of an alien culture-with different consumption patterns and an accelerated pace of change-on their community.”[[26]](#footnote-26) For some the issue must be put in stark terms of displacement: “This is what they want: to live in our neighborhoods, in our homes.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Compare these statements to the way nationalist communities respond to widespread immigration, where “manipulation of elements of sense of community provide opportunities for active devaluation and exclusion of newcomers in order to promote the standing, privilege and status of, or at least parts of, the receiving community.”[[28]](#footnote-28) In both cases, existing communities characterize newcomers as intruders in order to enhance the standing of those who currently reside in the neighborhood.

However, the naïve view that treats anti-immigration and anti-gentrification sentiments as equivalent does not necessarily track well in real life. While openness to experience seems to drive both liberal political attitudes and pro-immigration attitudes, the same convergence does not apply to the same extent in the urban context. Here, gentrification is a bogeyman for many liberals, who regard it as an intrusion of alienated capital into an authentic neighborhood environment.[[29]](#footnote-29) As Woo argues, in liberal bulwarks like the Bay Area, the tension between these positions is stark: “Conservatives see national immigration as a privilege to carefully dole out. Liberals see immigration as a human right that needs to be protected. San Francisco progressives view living in certain neighborhoods as a privilege to be earned, and see nothing wrong with preventing certain groups of people from moving in, a traditionally conservative view.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

What accounts for this difference? Again, the naïve reading might suggest it is pure hypocrisy. But digging into the differences between immigration and gentrification reveals three important distinctions, each of which could conceivably justify divergent responses.

First, the class dynamic is often different. In both cases, there is fear that new arrivals will change the character of the place, but the direction of that change may be opposite. Whereas immigrants in a national context are generally poorer than the country to which they are emigrating, legacy residents of a gentrifying neighborhood “are likely to have consumption patterns of a lower social class, constitute a different ethnic and racial community, and an older age group”[[31]](#footnote-31) Second, urban neighborhoods are small enough that migration can produce significant economic change in a relatively short period of time. The space of a single generation is enough time for property values to skyrocket, driving out long-time residents who can no longer afford to live there. This sort of direct and immediate change is less apparent or nonexistent in the context of national immigration, except in the rare cases of true waves of arrivals. Third, at the extreme level, gentrification entails the erasure of a specific, historically grounded communal life so that it may be replaced by a generic cosmopolitan urban experience. Often, “a fairly homogeneous group of in-movers reduces residential density and replaces...a relatively heterogeneous” out-moving population.[[32]](#footnote-32) As such, gentrification might be understood by some as the erasure of difference, rather than its arrival.

Beyond these three issues, proximity also plays a potentially significant role in shaping values. Immigration is a national question. While some locations, generally near the border, do experience its effects at significantly higher rates, for most inhabitants of a country the effects of immigration are diffuse enough to produce relatively small changes in material conditions. By contrast, inhabits of a gentrifying neighborhood are likely to experience this change in a far more personal and specific way—through rising rents, increased cost of living, enhanced police presence, and so forth.

*Strengths and weaknesses of the gentrification-immigration analogy*

Given these important distinctions, it is no surprise that some respond differently to urban migration than to national immigration. And yet, important similarities do persist across these examples. In both cases, an abstract principle of openness to new identities urges tolerance for difference, and welcomes new arrivals into a rich mosaic. This contrasts with the practices of authenticity and preservation, which seek to maintain dominant cultural patterns within a space and are deeply skeptical of those who might disrupt a community’s ‘real’ character. Even the most pointed critique of gentrification—that it replaces vibrant, diverse communities with generic white-collar, racial and economic homogeneity—could be conceptually applied to the immigration case. Widespread immigration, after all, certainly shifts the character of the national community, bringing significant changes to social and political practices, which often drives a more cosmopolitan national culture.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Moreover, just as many immigrants travel to a new country in order to embrace its specific character—to assimilate into rather than to challenge the social order—many urban migrationists regard the existing character of their new home as a selling point. They are, in Japonica Brown-Saracino’s characterization, “social preservationists,” who want to join the existing community, not change it.[[34]](#footnote-34) Upon arrival, they seek to embrace “a set of political, symbolic, and private practices to maintain the authenticity of their place of residence, primarily by working to prevent old-timers' displacement.”[[35]](#footnote-35) While this often bears a patina of paternalism or even colonialism (a subject expanded on in Section III), it is nevertheless distinct from the outright destruction envisioned by many gentrification critics.

Furthermore, the case for gentrification’s concrete material effect is actually weaker than it might seem. Researchers have sought to find a direct causal relationship between the arrival of wealthier ‘gentrifiers’ and the displacement of long-time residents, often with little luck. While a neighborhood’s wealth certainly affects its residential composition, it is not clear that gentrification plays a significant role in this effect. Rather, the arrow often points in the other direction, with increased standard of living changing the composition of new arrivals, not the other way around. Furthermore, studies which have sought to find evidence that gentrification drives residents *out* of communities have had great difficulty establishing clear causal links.[[36]](#footnote-36) In some cases, gentrification has improved the experience of living in a neighborhood, inspiring long-time residents to stay, thus reducing residential turnover.[[37]](#footnote-37)

And, while gentrification certainly affects the demography of a particular neighborhood, it also has broader, often positive, implications for the urban economy writ large. Overall, increasing wealth in an urban area improves the standard of living for everyone. Greater wealth expands the tax base, creates more opportunities, more jobs, and more investment.[[38]](#footnote-38) These benefits create expanded opportunities and resources for everyone, not just for the new arrivals. This is quite similar to the immigration context, where studies repeatedly show that immigrants add significantly to the national economy.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Of course, just as with immigration, the benefits of migration are often not shared evenly, inviting serious questions about distribution and access. In both cases, therefore, public policy may be called on to redress the negative effects while enabling the benefits. As Byrne notes, the primary negative effect associated with urban migration—loss of affordable housing—has little to do with gentrification per se, and instead “results primarily...from the persistent failure of government to produce or secure affordable housing more generally.”[[40]](#footnote-40) These effects may not be independent—the unwillingness to enact policies that would limit the negative effects of gentrification appears to be part of a larger hypocrisy embedded in NIMBYist politics—but they are still worth disentangling conceptually, if only to expose the ways that theory and practice come into conflict through engagement with concrete political decisions.

For example, the simple fact that gentrification critics remain unpersuaded by the policy arguments for ‘urban renewal’ is an important feature of the larger political debate on this subject. To them, the risk of displacement stands in for broader concerns about devaluation of their communities. As Alice Rivlin notes, “the debate is dominated by the perceptions of those who fear they are about to be harmed, invaded, or displaced” and “well reasoned, solidly researched academic papers...are not likely to convince poor residents of gentrifying neighborhoods...that all is for the best.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The language here is significant. As in the case of immigration, the rhetoric of invasion and displacement is powerful, far more powerful than a dry assessment of material effects might suggest.

One conclusion to draw from the investigation of gentrification and immigration might therefore be that individuals do not possess comprehensive ideological positions on inclusive membership. Rather, they “position themselves, ideologically and behaviorally, in relation to a political, economic, and cultural process in which they are engaged.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Openness is significant, perhaps, but it only goes so far. The question, then, is what sorts of distinction are sufficient to change perceptions of an issue. In this way, both immigration and gentrification serving as useful signifiers of larger social constructions.

This framing invites a deeper look at the way identity is built and policed in these contexts. That will be the subject of the following section, which explores community construction in the context of power relationships, and seeks to add texture to the process through which identity is subjectivated and regulated.

III. Recharacterizing gentrification: colonization and counter-hegemony

When considering urban and international migration, it is important to attend to the distinct ways the practices are policed. In the case of immigration, boundaries are often heavily regulated, with extensive legal structures designed to capture and process those who cross these boundaries. In many cases—particularly the southern US border—the policing is explicitly militarized. By contrast, movement into and throughout urban environments is regulated far less extensively. While some mechanisms do exist to enforce uniformity within neighborhoods—zoning restrictions, community housing associations, etc.—these are relatively weak compared to the security state which operates at many national borders. Even among the most radical anti-gentrification voices in the political world, no one proposes building fences, establishing checkpoints, or implementing aggressive deportation policies for those found to have moved without authorization.

Therefore, the nearest analogy might be the sort of urban policing designed to enforce residential segregation during the ‘great migration’ of African-American families out of the American South.[[43]](#footnote-43) In these cases, white communities regarded the arrival of black families as an existential threat—as intruders who might wreck the existing social world. Every tool in the box was unleashed to protect that order, with both legal and extra-legal mechanisms used to sharply restrict the capacity for black families to enter segregated white communities. And when infiltration did occur, this generally provoked full-scale white flight. Virtually overnight, neighborhoods were evacuated, property values plummeted, and the community’s composition fundamentally altered. White families then fled to suburbs, where they were free to erect a whole new set of barriers to racial integration.[[44]](#footnote-44) In this context, gentrification sometimes functions as a kind of perverse rewinding of that initial white flight, with the neighborhoods which had been abandoned now increasingly repopulated by upper middle-class whites.

For all these reasons, gentrification is arguably much closer to colonization than to immigration. Its practitioners operate as the tamers of a “new urban frontier” represented by an “evocative combination of economic, geographical and historical advances” attached to a matrix of “social individualism.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Indeed, filmmaker Spike Lee, in an appearance for Black History Month, described gentrification as “Christopher Columbus Syndrome,”[[46]](#footnote-46) in which new arrivals effectively wipe out the culture of the neighborhood, in the same way that Columbus’s arrival signified the coming extermination of indigenous peoples.

Compare the identity structures of gentrified communities with those of immigrant nations, which impose significant barriers to integration, from learning the language to developing social and economic ties to gaining fluency with the cultural doxa.[[47]](#footnote-47) Even if their presence filters into popular culture in important ways—bringing new restaurants, musical styles, slang, and so forth—this sort of ‘melting pot’ effect is limited. National culture shifts slowly, and retains quite a bit of momentum even when hit by tidal waves of immigration. Gentrifiers, by contrast, rarely face any of these burdens. They are already members of an upper-class, with existing social networks that exceed the neighborhood into which they have moved. Indeed, over relatively short periods of time, such movement can generate an entire new, stratified social overlay whereby gentrified social networks exist *above* but rarely interact *with* the longstanding communal web which once defined the area. They may choose to integrate, or not, but they are rarely subject to the kind of power dynamics that shape the cultural experience of national immigrants. As such, gentrification may be less about assimilation *into* and more about replacement *of* an existing community.

Furthermore, the colonialist framework for thinking about gentrification also invites scrutiny into the underlying power structures of movement. While economic migration across national boundaries is often driven by the need for labor to meet the demands of global capital, gentrifiers are more often the *wielders* ofcapital than its targets. For these reasons, one might argue that gentrification is a process of geographic invasion not by persons but by capital itself—faceless, nameless, without identity or spirit.

This perspective provides a mechanism for recharacterizing the differential treatment of immigration and gentrification as a sort of counter-hegemonic resistance. To operationalize anti-immigrant sentiment, “different strategies are put in place to protect the power and privilege of the receiving communities.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Perhaps anti-gentrification arguments seek to do precisely the same, but in service of marginal communities, wielding their limited social capital in an effort to hold back the tide of capital’s free movement. In the same way that native citizens often see “the power and privilege to determine belonging” as a principle motivator of anti-immigrant sentiment, the less-fortunate residents of a neighborhood may seek to activate their own version of that effect.

If hegemony is the process of making subordination seem natural and unquestionable, then counter-hegemony is a practice of resistance that builds *out* from this constrained worldview, seeking for cracks and fissures from which these values may be reformulated.[[49]](#footnote-49) Lacking the power to forbid literal or even cultural presence within the broader national community, they may at least exercise a constrained form of exclusion, by denying legitimate status within the social frame of the neighborhood.

Further, those in larger society might also seek to align with this sort of cultural exclusion, even if they themselves are not members of the particular community. To stand against gentrification is a form of performative alignment with the gatekeepers of urban life, and a rejection of the insistence that wealth is sufficient to purchase entry into the closed circle.

IV. The wages of destruction: openness and acknowledgement of past violence

The previous section advanced an argument for treating the analogous aspects of immigration and gentrification debates as an opportunity to develop their important *divergences*, so as to legitimate the case for differential treatment. But while these distinctions are notable, and well-deserving of consideration, this does not entirely settle the case. If gentrification is truly closer to colonization than immigration, one would expect ‘gentrified’ communities to be destructive of the neighborhood cultures into which they move, replacing the old neighborhood identity rather than infusing it with new meaning. But this is rarely what happens. Instead, gentrifying communities often maintain elements of their past life, existing side-by-side with new cosmopolitan structures. The resulting mélange is a peculiar blend of old and new, rich and poor, historically-specific and atemporal.

Here one must reconsider the ‘social preservationist’ strain of gentrification, whereby relatively-elite members of society move into poorer neighborhoods in part *because* of their imagined authenticity. Such movement clearly cannot be disentangled from the power relationships that infuse it, nor should such efforts at preservation be taken uncritically. The power to ‘preserve’ an imagined ideal of authenticity is generally held exclusively by those with the freedom to pick and choose their cultural associations. And the sort of culture they desire to preserve is often highly inflected by their own biases and expectations.

The point is not to praise such actors, nor to absolve them of blame, but only to show that the politics of inclusion and exclusion are far more fraught than they might immediately seem. In some cases, the line between colonization and collaboration is clear. But for many, such distinctions become difficult to sustain when placed into the hurly burly of real life.

At what stage does it become appropriate to describe new arrivals as *replacing* an existing community, rather than simply supplementing it? Does the arrival of younger, whiter, richer people into an urban environment fundamentally change its character? Where in the process does this take place? And how is this different from the slow churn of demography, whereby a national culture also shifts and flows over generations? Have not immigrants *fundamentally* changed the character of the United States? Of France or Germany? Of Sweden? What should we make of the British Isles, which have been populated by waves of conquerors over the centuries, all of whom overwrote much existing culture, but which also eventually blended into a new, hybridized culture? The traces of continuity are impossible to miss, even in the midst of a brutal assault on the preexisting cultural patterns, ways of life, and identities.

Indeed, this is precisely the point of contact where the analogy is most appropriate. Immigration and internal migration are different in many respects, but they are both pieces of a larger phenomenon of displacement and destruction, which is rarely as simple or morally determinate as any of its practitioners believe.

As Newitz notes, the mythology of continuity is ahistorical at virtually every level of politics. Our cities, as much as our nations, are “are made up of wave upon wave of such morally gray displacements, some violently coercive, and others eerily quiet.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Whether local or national, migration is the fact of life, with bodies moving across boundaries, occupying new spaces, and building new identities. This is a fact of life, as ever-present as it is destructive. Consider Emmanuel Levinas’s deep anxiety over the realization that “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my home – have these not also been the usurpation of places which belong to the others already oppressed or starved by me, expelled by me into a third world: a repelling, an exclusion, an exile, a spoliation, a killing.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

For Levinas, this sense of guilt for the displacement of the other evokes a feeling of infinite responsibility. But others have suggested that the unbearable weight of such responsibility pushes in the opposite direction: toward evasion and disassociation.[[52]](#footnote-52) Often this takes on a distinctly conservative character, with the present occupiers of a space struggling against the natural tendency toward change, that tendency which created the status quo ante from which they marshal such claims. Rather than facing the impossible task of rendering justice to those who have been set aside, one instead searches for new forms of violence against which the present order may be positioned. By fixating on the threat to *present* life, those who have benefited from the absence of others transform those acts of exclusion into mere history. Whatever erasures were committed to secure the resulting social order fade away as the violence intrinsic to this process is muted and whitewashed until eventually it can be characterized as ‘history’ and then taken for granted. As Newitz argues, “It's easier to blame the aliens for what's happened to your city rather than face up to the complicated reality of urban life.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

To the extent that anti-gentrification arguments stem from this foundation, they track quite closely with nativist sentiments. Both valorize the ideal of a coherent and durable communal order, seeking to lock an imagined cultural unity into amber. Just as anti-immigrationists insist on inhabiting a cultural world of imagined national stasis, so do neighborhood preservationists hesitate to acknowledge the reality that “dynamic succession has been the rule in all our urban history.”[[54]](#footnote-54) In either case, those who presently occupy a space may only claim authentic ownership to the extent that they whitewash the reality of churn, movement, and persistent displacement.

Applying this logic to the capital-driven critique of gentrification, one may also see a clear connection to the immigration case. Gentrification is loved by urban planners, mayor’s offices, and city councils who see a larger tax base, wealthier constituents, and a bolstered urban economy. The cost of gentrification, where it exists, is generally born by the relatively-poor who are displaced or priced out of their communities. In the same way, immigration is generally most popular in the wealth elite classes, who regard it as a source of workers. Immigrants provide heavy manual from manual labor in factories and fields, domestic service at home, and high-skilled work in the tech sector. Indeed, in this regard immigration and gentrification are mutually supportive, with international movement providing “the service workers for the new economy: in New York, greengrocers are now mainly Korean; the plumbers fitting gentrified buildings are often Italian, the carpenters Polish; the domestic workers and nannies looking after the houses and children of gentrifiers come from El Salvador, Barbados or elsewhere in the Caribbean.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

As such, anti-immigration politics are by no means exclusively the purview of the right. For many on the left, immigration represents a capitalist shell game, orchestrated by transnational managers who regard borders as anachronistic limitations on the free movement of labor. To the extent that anti-gentrification sentiments are driven by fear that movement across borders will serve only the whims of capital, and thereby erase the specificity of a given community, the same is often said of immigration. Movement across national borders, after all, rises and falls upon the same tides of capitalist need that drives internal migration. While expressing sympathy for those caught up in these currents, the anti-immigration left nevertheless insists on treating borders as important protectors of hard-won labor gains.[[56]](#footnote-56) And do not many anti-immigration voices speak to the coalition of cosmopolitan capital, which regards borders as anachronistic limitations on the free movement of labor, and migrants who merely operate as the pawns of those capital forces? In both instances, the free-floating subjectivity of capital is viewed as uniquely threatening, insofar as it possesses the capacity to quickly overwrite longstanding norms and habits.

Such considerations neither start nor end the conversation about migration. As I have consistently argued, describing an analogy between national and urban migration is not meant to imply perfect correlation. These practices activate different values, incite different problems, and possess different potential advantages. The goal of establishing a connection is to see how these values intersect and relate to one another. What claims are implied, what counterclaims are provoked? The ultimate object is to improve considerations of both subjects, to enable that core principles are given full weight, and assessed with the appropriate degree of nuance and care.

**V. Conclusions**

Migration is a broad concept, encompassing forced and voluntary movement, across great and small distances, and enframed by a complicated mesh of social, political, and cultural factors. The comparison between national and urban migration should not therefore be taken to imply an essential baseline continuity, nor should it be expected that treatments of the two issues depend exclusively on the element of openness. One might, for example, quite reasonably support a relatively open immigration policy while resisting the intrusion of capital into a specific urban neighborhood.

Nevertheless, comparing the motivations and concerns that influence attitudes toward these two distinct-but-connected forms of integration can improve consideration of the meta-issues involved in *both* practices. While clearly distinct, the overlapping features invite deeper thought into how underlying political attitudes shape responses to particular phenomena. If one regards immigration as good but gentrification as bad, is that distinction drawn primarily from comprehensive principles, from self-interest, from individual characteristics?

In a particular case, does an individual favorability toward openness incite positive attitudes toward gentrification, which are then overwhelmed by other factors? If presented with arguments that emphasize this aspect of openness, does an individual’s treatment of the question change? If so, does this matter? If not, why not?

This topic provides a useful point of entry for a broader conversation about how people respond to the reality that politics and culture is founded on a constant churn of displacement and dislocation. How do they come to accept that reality? How do they justify drawing the line in one place and not another? Precisely because immigration and gentrification are similar but distinct, they provide a helpful location for assessing these effects. Exploring responses to them is an invitation to think seriously about the *ways* in which movement and migration implicate the experience of difference.

Section IV argued that backlash against immigration and gentrification shares a certain pattern of attempted guilt-abatement through temporal dislocation. Fixation on the present threat to community cohesion functions to establish a firewall between *present* displacement and past exclusion that made the status quo conditions possible. In this way, accusations of external invasion provide a critical means for transforming past violence into present authenticity.

To develop this point, Smith discusses the valorization of difference embodied in the urban migration of capital: “The pursuit of difference, diversity and distinction forms the basis of the new urban ideology but it is not without contradiction. It embodies a search for diversity as long as it is highly ordered, and a glorification of the past as long as it is safely brought into the present.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Could the same be said about national immigration, particularly in countries like the United States which simultaneously pride themselves on their history as a ‘nation of immigrants’ while also featuring strong anti-immigrant politics in the present tense? Does this comparison obligate any particular response?

Answers will vary. But the very existence of such questions should serve as an injunction for those inclined toward openness to think seriously about whether anti-gentrification sentiments are driven primarily by genuine concern for class hierarchies and concrete material harm to existing communities, or whether they stem primarily from exclusionary impulses that might be incompatible with core principles.

For those interested in a politics of justice, discovering how people understand their relationship to space and community is essential to developing successful techniques for supporting those in need. In the two cases I have addressed here, the experience of space and time are essential to one’s assessment of relative value. Ultimately, even if the differences between these two modes of migration ultimately overwhelm the similarities, there is much to learn from drawing the comparison.

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29. This point is, at present, merely anecdotal. Despite the prevalence of anti-gentrification sentiment in popular debates, there is surprisingly little research on public attitudes toward it. Further research will be conducted to determine whether left-leaning anti-gentrification sentiment is indeed the norm or merely a vocal minority. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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49. Rupert, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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