

Chapter 5

Land and Gentrification

The Umoja Village Shantytown received its share of press, mostly focused on the embarrassment it caused to Miami-Dade County and the City of Miami. Attention was also appropriately lavished on the nexus between gentrification, the housing crisis, the role of the government in manufacturing that crisis and the number of people homeless- both street and under housed- in South Florida.

While all of that is well and good, such coverage expended a disproportionate amount of attention on the tip of the iceberg visible above the water, and not nearly enough attention on the humongous glacier lurking below the surface. The tendency is understandable, as the current events type of news generally covers what is happening, leaving the more significant questions, such as "why is this happening" to other genres, such as history and academia. I will refrain from calculating the impact of conflicts of interest on the corporate media.

News coverage of the 'what' is sufficient for most, but anyone studying, much less engaged in, liberation struggles must search deeper and come to understand the 'why.' Only by struggling with the 'why' can we understand the significance and context of the 'what,' and determine appropriate responses or courses of action.

Surface vs. Root Issues

In order to properly analyze any social dilemma or contradiction, it is critical to distinguish between the surface issues at play and the root issues at stake.

Surface issues are those which directly and tangibly confront the society and its members, those issues on the surface, to the forefront and in our face. Surface issues often grab attention, mobilize people and reveal the existence and importance of a deeper problem.

The surface issue, however compelling, is only the manifestation or symptom of the deeper, more significant problem, the fundamental or root issue. Conversely, the root issue is the cause of the surface issue.

This distinction is important to make, because no matter how vigorously one attacks a symptom, the only way to solve a problem is by resolving its cause, not its symptom. This is not to say that surface issues, or symptoms, should be ignored, but that we understand that addressing the symptom is no substitute for addressing the root cause.

For example, a dinner party patron who develops a runny nose would do well to acquire napkins and wipe as often as necessary. At the same time, it must be understood that while the runny nose is problematic, it is not the actual problem, but rather the untimely symptom of a deeper problem and sickness. While our patron cannot be expected to enjoy the soiree by ignoring the constant nasal drip, it must be clear that the napkin is not curing the sickness, it is merely masking its symptoms from the other dinner guests.

If the root cause of the problem is never addressed, one could, conceivably, spend their entire life wiping, dabbing, blowing and otherwise deal with a symptom, a symptom which would disappear on its own if only the underlying sickness, the root issue, were addressed.

The perils of failing to distinguish between a symptom and the problem which causes the symptom- the surface issue vs. the root issue- is not limited to those with active social calendars: it continues to confuse and confound liberation and social justice movements. The failure to understand the difference between surface and root issues will convince us we are making progress when we are making none; that we are moving forward when we are running around in circles; and that we have solved a problem, when, in fact, we are only altering the manifestation of that problem.

Consequently, the crisis of gentrification and low-income housing mandates a thorough examination and analysis of the surface and root issues at stake.

As bad as it is, this crisis, at least as it relates to the black community, is a surface issue, a mere symptom of a deeper problem. The crisis touches our lives as we see and feel the impact of law, government expenditures and the mobilization of private capital. Gentrification forces us out of our communities and the lack of low-income housing offers us few options. And yet, gentrification is clearly a surface, not root, issue.

This is no attempt to minimize the importance of gentrification as an economic phenomenon and social issue. Quite to the contrary, gentrification, and our response to it, will likely emerge as a defining issue of this generation. Gentrification destroys homes, separates families and guts historically black communities to make room for whites looking for shorter commutes to work and the arts.

In many ways, gentrification in the 2000s is the functional equivalent of segregation in the 1950s and 60s. Social movements were built around fighting segregation, as students and other sectors of society risked life

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Because the surface issue of segregation was elevated, in the minds of many, to the status of root issue, it was presumed that the end of segregation, as a set of laws, would end the problem of inequality, codified by those laws.

More than 50 years after the legal walls of segregation began to crumble, the races in the US are still largely separated, if not outright segregated. Most blacks live in overwhelmingly black communities and most whites live in overwhelmingly white communities. Thanks to the defeat of legal segregation- a noble cause which was right to fight- blacks can now sit next to whites in restaurants, on the bus and even in the stall of the public bathroom, before each returns to their respective racially separate neighborhoods and houses of worship. Poverty and unemployment in the black community remains disproportionate to that suffered by whites and discrimination remains rampant, even if, technically, illegal.

Of course, the powers-that-be, particularly through the use of the media, cultural outlets and the educational system, had an interest in advancing the notion that a root issue had been resolved, and, therefore, the society was just, and the need for struggle ended.

As a result, many in the social justice movement were thoroughly confused and confounded by how segregation was defeated, but racism and inequality persisted. If segregation were in fact a root issue, or a cause, then the elimination of the Jim Crow laws would end the problems of racism and inequality.

Racism and inequality did not end with the fall of Jim Crow because segregation was not the cause of racism and inequality, it was the symptom. Jim Crow laws were the manifestation of the hate whites bore against blacks and the specific rules of White Supremacy and privilege. But the root issue never was eating in a specific restaurant or drinking water from a particular fountain.

The root issue was not segregation, it was White Supremacy and power. Consequently, 50 years after the fall of legal segregation, widespread de-facto segregation persists, the black community faces many of the same challenges it did then, and whites continue to derive privilege from their whiteness.

Just as the best way to stop a runny nose is not to wipe, but to cure the sickness which causes it, the best way to stop segregation is not to end the

gentrification. The root issue is *land*.

Not just land in the physical sense of the word, although that is included, but land in the political sense of the word, meaning power and control over land. Land is an essential element of liberation, an absolute prerequisite. The lack of power and control over land condemns the majority of African (black) people in America to an endless cycle of moving from one undesirable lot to the next, at the behest and for the benefit of the rich.

This reality demonstrates how differentiating between surface and root issues brings clarity to our analysis and enables us to gauge progress, or the lack thereof.

Those who believe that segregation itself was root or fundamental, argue forcefully that the struggle is, for all intents and purposes, over. However, those who understand land as root and segregation as symptomatic, recognize just how little progress has been made. The same segments of society which confined us to one geographical area then are able to, with relative ease, force us off of those same geographical areas 50 years later. They are able to do so precisely because, in relation to control over land, the black community has no more power today than we had prior to the civil rights movement.

It is easy to see that while much movement has occurred, little tangible progress has been made in dealing with the root issue of power and control over land.

To be thorough and fair, it is often argued that there are really two root causes at stake here, both land and racism or White Supremacy, and that ending the root issue of White Supremacy would have also ended segregation. While that might be true, the reality is that ending White Supremacy and hate in someone else is neither easy nor a substitute for building power for one's self. As such, even if we were willing and able to devote our entire existence and resources towards the task of teaching whites to hate us less, after the successful completion of the mission, we would still have before us the task of building power and control over land. Therefore, the issue of land, more specifically, power and collective control over land, is root and primary.

Those who benefit from our misery, of course, would rather that we only address the surface issues and then give up the struggle after making progress on that front. Our mission and objectives must be more substantial, however. Sickness cannot be cured by wiping a runny nose

and liberation cannot be achieved by setting our sites on superficial changes which do not address the root causes of exploitation and oppression.

For these reasons and others, it is clear that in order to address the crisis of gentrification and low-income housing in a real way, our responses must be rooted in land-based solutions.

The work of Take Back the Land is not fundamentally about the homeless, or even gentrification: it is fundamentally about the collective control over land.

Chapter 6 October 23, 2006

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