

Spike Lee, gentrification and the crisis of affordable housing

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Spike Lee, the film director and producer well known for *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992) and many other movies, attracted much media attention recently with one of his typical outbursts, this time on the gentrification of a number of historically African-American neighborhoods in New York City.

“I grew up here in New York. It’s changed,” Lee said at a lecture for Black History Month at Pratt Institute, an architecture, art and design school near Brooklyn’s Fort Greene area.

“And why does it take an influx of white New Yorkers in the South Bronx, in Harlem, in Bed-Stuy, in Crown Heights for the facilities to get better?” Lee went on. “The garbage wasn’t picked up every mother***** day when I was living [in Fort Greene].... The police weren’t around. When you see white mothers pushing their babies in strollers, three o’clock in the morning on 125th Street [in Harlem] that must tell you something.”

Lee’s demagogic comments, citing real social problems in order to ascribe them to race rather than poverty and the fundamental class divisions in society, are what one has come to expect from this well-heeled, reactionary celebrity. He is a prominent representative of a small social layer that has profited while the working class has suffered from the attacks on jobs and living standards over the past 40 years.

The issue is not race, but social inequality and its impact on housing. In a city that is home to the greatest number of the world’s millionaires and billionaires, the crisis of affordable housing is a fact of life for vast numbers of workers and young people as well as sections of the relatively better-off middle class. Lee seeks to encourage resentment based on race and pit older residents of neighborhoods against newer ones. This is designed to hide the real issue—the need for

affordable housing for all, which cannot be met by the capitalist system and the rule of the super-rich.

Everything is relative in the process of gentrification, which is driven by the colossal wealth at the disposal of the rich. Competition and scarcity dictate the living conditions of the majority.

Today’s “gentrifiers” moving into a cheaper, working class or formerly industrial area like the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights or Harlem in search of affordable housing—millions of New Yorkers pay at least half of their monthly income on housing—find themselves on the other side of the process a few years later, as a wealthier layer displaces them and they are forced to move once again.

New York City is not only the most populous of US cities, with more than 8 million people living in five boroughs, it is also the most densely populated, with 26,403 people per square mile, which is about 10,000 more than the next-densest large American city, San Francisco. In Manhattan, the city’s most expensive borough, there are 66,940 people per square mile.

Home ownership is far lower in New York, with only 3 out of 10 units owner-occupied, compared to 2 out of 3 for the rest of the US. A large majority of the city’s inhabitants are renters. With only a third of rental units falling under rent control or stabilization laws that limit annual rent increases, and with wages for the working class, including white collar, technical and professional workers, having stagnated or fallen over the past three decades, many of the city’s residents are forced to move frequently as their apartments become unaffordable.

The city also attracts a record number of newcomers each year. According to Census Bureau population estimates, “New York City’s population increased by 161,564 residents, or about 2.0 percent, from 2010 to

2012. The largest percentage change in the city's population occurred in Brooklyn, growing by 2.4 percent, or 60,900 persons, followed by Manhattan (2.1 percent, or 33,200 persons)."

Many of the new residents in the Brooklyn neighborhoods Lee singles out are immigrants, including from Africa and the Caribbean. But a significant number of them are native-born and often college-educated young people from across the US. Only a small number come to work in high-paying jobs in the finance sector. Many look for work in the arts and culture, and most of those who find jobs—not including those who find work as unpaid interns—wind up in the service and retail sector, which has been the main source of job growth in recent years. In New York, these mainly low-wage jobs remain plentiful, for the time being, compared to many other smaller cities and towns across the US.

Many of the young people, some of whom are given the "hipster" label, join in the search for scarce housing. They frequently share one-to-a-room apartments, in the style of the single room occupancy (SRO) housing of old, in apartments that are beyond the budget of a working class family. In addition, the prohibitive cost of housing has helped drive up the city's homeless population to an all-time high of over 50,000.

The process of gentrification on which Lee seizes in his demagogic way is inevitable as long as housing remains a market commodity rather than a social right. His exclusive focus on the changing racial complexion of neighborhoods willfully obscures the real cause of gentrification and the common housing problems of all working people.

Behind gentrification is the vast transfer of wealth to the top 1 percent, and, even more significantly, to the top one-hundredth of 1 percent of the population, which has been under way since the 1980s but has only intensified in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008.

New York is the most unequal city in the US. In 2012, the *New York Times* reported, "Median income for the lowest fifth [in New York City as a whole] was \$8,844, down \$463 from 2010. For the highest, it was \$223,285, up \$1,919.

"In Manhattan, the disparity was even starker. The lowest fifth made \$9,681, while the highest took home

\$391,022. The wealthiest fifth of Manhattanites made more than 40 times what the lowest fifth reported, a widening gap (it was 38 times, the year before) surpassed by only a few developing countries, including Namibia and Sierra Leone."

All of these trends have been aggravated by the vast sums of money that have been pumped into the financial markets by the Federal Reserve each month as part of its "quantitative easing." This has made cheap money available for speculation in real estate.

All-cash deals for \$1 million or more for brownstones in the neighborhoods in Brooklyn that Lee describes are increasingly common. Many of these are bought by investors and developers who then "flip" them, often within a matter of months. And for those who were lucky enough to buy a home prior to the latest run-up in the real estate market, the pressure to sell is high. Even if they choose not to realize a profit that might enable them to afford tuition for their kids' schooling or their own retirement, the re-assessed taxes may make it prohibitive to keep their new "luxury" homes.

Lee is utterly indifferent to these problems facing working class families, whatever their color or ethnicity. He has just put his own 9,000-square-foot mansion on the Upper East Side in Manhattan on the market for \$32 million, double what he paid in 2009 due to the inflation in real estate values.

The crisis of capitalism is sharpening the class divisions of society. White, black, Latino and immigrant working people face a struggle for housing, education and all other aspects of urban life. This raises the crucial need for a socialist program to secure these needs as social rights, and the repudiation of racial politics and all other attempts to divide the working class.



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