Class Divide: A close-up look at gentrification, inequality in New York City

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Class Divide is indeed appropriately named. This documentary film by Marc Levin provides a concrete examination, largely through the eyes of the young generation, of life in one of the most unequal cities in the world.

This is the third in a series of films made by Levin on significant social issues. Earlier ones examined the disappearance of New York City's garment industry, and the lives of families in the city's suburbs who lost good jobs in the wake of the 2008 financial crash.

In *Class Divide* the setting is the West Chelsea neighborhood in the lower midtown area of Manhattan. The neighborhood had already seen an influx of the upper middle class over the past quarter-century. Since 2009, however, with the opening in successive stages of the High Line, the aerial greenway and park built on old New York Central railroad tracks, hyper-gentrification has arrived.

One luxury high-rise apartment building after another has been or is being built along the High Line, which has become one of New York's top ten tourist attractions. The new residents, paying millions of dollars for an apartment, are taking advantage of the views and the prestige of the address, as well as the proximity to the trendy art gallery scene west of Tenth Avenue and the new Whitney Museum and night life only a few blocks south. For some of the new owners, the apartments are merely an investment, and little time is spent living there.

Catering in large part to the wealthy newcomers, Avenues, a private for-profit school from kindergarten to the 12th grade, opened its doors several years ago. Tuition is currently more than $45,000 annually. All of the students, even in the lower grades, study either Mandarin Chinese or Spanish. Avenues enrolls more than 1,200 students, a relative handful of whom (45 students) receive full scholarships. Most of the students at Avenues come not merely from upper middle-class families, but from the top one-tenth or even one-hundredth of one percent on the income scale.

Directly across from Avenues, on the east side of Tenth Avenue, lies the Chelsea-Elliot Houses, a public housing project that is home to 2,500 people. Half of the development dates from 1947 and the other half from 1964. A typical example of New York's public housing, Chelsea-Elliot is plagued by poor maintenance, a backlog of basic repairs and occasional loss of heat or hot water. Most of its households have annual incomes that are far less than the tuition demanded across the street.

The film holds our attention and works as a documentary largely because the bare statistics are translated into the experiences and the honest and unfiltered views of young people on both sides of the class divide. Interviews with youth from Chelsea-Elliot are interspersed with ones from students at Avenues, and we also hear from adults connected to the school, the High Line, the neighborhood, and the real estate boom that is remaking the area.

Joel, a 7-year-old from the projects, speaks about his hopes for the future, and his fears as well. His mother, Candida, comes from the Dominican Republic. His father, Fernando, is an undocumented immigrant from Ecuador who leaves for work every day at 5 am. The family worries that he could be deported. Seven people live in two small rooms.

Juwan, Hyisheen and Brandon are teenagers. Juwan's mother died when he was eight. Brandon works as a doorman while making plans for the future. Hyisheen does well in school and studies social work in college.

Rosa De Santiago is perhaps the liveliest presence in the film. About 9 years old, she declares that she admires Beyoncé, and has decided, after wondering, "how did pieces of rock get on the Earth?" that she wants to become a professor of geology when she grows up. "I hate money," Rosa passionately declares. "People fight over money. My mom pawned her jewelry to pay the rent."

On the other side of the street we meet Yasemin, a high school student at Avenues who lives on the Upper West Side and who worries about inequality. Nick, whose father is a currency trader, hopes to become an architect and looks forward to building for the rich. Luc lives in a building with a "poor door," with the lower half providing apartments,

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with a separate entrance, for low-income families.

Also interviewed are Ricardo Scofidio, the lead architect of the hugely successful High Line; Chris Whittle, the "educational entrepreneur" who is one of the founders of Avenues and has been a prime mover in the attacks on public education through charter and private schools over the past two decades; Ken Jockers, from the Hudson Guild social services center in the Chelsea Houses; and Joe Restuccia, a local advocate of affordable housing, who tells us that 40 percent of the city's low-income housing has disappeared in the last decade.

A real estate broker brags about the huge sums apartments are going for in the West Chelsea area. Showing apartments to prospective buyers, she mentions that the asking price for a penthouse is about $15 million. One buyer is shown a four-bedroom apartment for $10.35 million. When she asks the agent whether the playground outside is "safe," the reply is, "I can't guarantee safety."

An 11-year-old from the projects tells the camera, "They use all our parks, but they don't even like us." Only late in the film do students from both sides of the street get the opportunity to meet one another. A group from the projects is taken on a tour of Avenues. We are informed that a single scholarship student from the Chelsea-Elliot Houses has been admitted to Avenues.

One of the most important and valuable insights from the film, in the words of the young people themselves, is that the dividing line between the overwhelmingly white student body at Avenues and the equally overwhelmingly African-American and Hispanic population across the street is one of class, not race. As Hyisheen explains, "it's not racism, it's classism." An adult comments, "It's America, that's the way it is…not race, but wealth."

Filmmaker Levin has accurately described a state of anxiety among the young people, on both sides of Tenth Avenue. They are concerned about the class gulf that they navigate every day, and wonder about the future. In the case of one of the Avenues students, as the film recounts, this has tragic consequences.

At the end of the movie we are given an update on the current plans of some of those who have been interviewed. Rosa tried to get admitted to Avenues but did not succeed. Juwan is pursuing his hope of a career in stand-up comedy, and Hyisheen has graduated from college.

Class Divide is clearly a cry of liberal concern. According to the *Huffington Post*, "Levin did not want to make a political film but rather to put light on 'how these forces impact real people and how that is sometimes missed.'"

The film succeeds in showing this impact and has many worthwhile and revealing moments, but it also reflects a definite political outlook, one that remains very much within the framework of the social and political status quo.

The term "classism" used by Hyisheen is significant. It is a word that only came into more common usage in recent decades, in line with identity politics. It signifies—analogously to racism as well as to such terms as "ageism"—discrimination against the poor. It strongly implies that nothing can be done about poverty, that it is just another "identity," along with race, age and gender. Those who object to "classism" usually mean that the poor should be treated with fairness, not that poverty can or should be eliminated. As we hear on several occasions in the film: "This is America," a phrase that says nothing will ever change.

In another revealing moment, Rosa's older brother Danny declares himself a conservative, an entrepreneur and a Republican, because the Republicans stand for "free enterprise" while the Democrats "are for the lazy, poor people."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Of course the poor are not lazy, nor do the Democrats stand for the poor. The Democrats, while always a big-business party, have become in recent decades even more trusted representatives of the financial aristocracy. Danny is merely repeating phrases that come from the Republican right wing but that also reflect the increasingly threadbare claims by Democratic politicians to defend the "less fortunate."

It is perhaps significant that the film includes this snippet, suggesting that young workers see their salvation in right-wing demagogy. Danny's comments leave the impression that the choice (in 2016 and beyond) is between the two parties of the ruling class. We never hear from the workers and youth in the Chelsea-Elliot Houses who have no use for either of their parties of the corporate and financial establishment. Their bitter hatred of the system would have introduced a dissonant note in relation to the movie's overall theme. Although we don't hear from them in *Class Divide*, they will be heard soon enough.

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