Human Rights Violations in New York City and the Urgency to Alleviate Suffering

written by Robert E. Thibault | March 17, 2020

On January 31, 2019 Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson and New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio conducted a rushed press conference where they signed an agreement between Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) that would have a federal monitor oversee all repairs of New York City's public housing. Instead of details, both Carson and DeBlasio gave out generalizations and vague statements. Ben Carson states:

"One of the best options, which is extremely pleasant, is when you have people who are willing to put the people first and the needs of the people first," said Carson at the press conference. "We're going to have to get to the **root causes** of these things and fix them, because having a safe and nurturing environment is key to human development."[1]

These root causes that Carson is searching for are white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism and inequality, all being brought to a boil in a neoliberal stew. One of the results of this deadly combination is ethnic cleansing through gentrification and life-threatening disinvestment of public housing. The term ethnic cleansing became popularized during 1992 to describe the purposeful policy of the Bosnian Serb Army, supported by local political leaders and Serbia's secret police, in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Croatia to remove certain ethnic and religious groups, particularly Muslims, from strategic areas by force, coercion and violence. According to Vladimir Srebov, a former Serbian Democratic Party leader, the Army's doctrine, The RAM Plan, laid out in stark terms that "The Muslims were to be subjected to a final solution: more than 50 percent of them were to be killed, a smaller part was to be converted to Orthodoxy, while an even smaller…part-people with money-were to be allowed to buy their lives and leave, probably, through Serbia, for Turkey. The aim was to cleanse Bosnia-Herzegovina completely of the Muslim nation."[2]

The United Nations determined that "ethnic cleansing means rendering an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area" and "carried out by means of murder, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape and sexual assaults, confinement of civilian population in ghetto areas, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, deliberate military attacks or threats of attacks on civilians and civilian areas, and wanton destruction of property."[3] The results (rendering an area ethnically homogenous) are very similar when a rezoning has been implemented in New York City. For example, between 2000 to 2013 "the white population **increased by 455 percent** while the

black population declined by 5 percent and the Latino population declined by 13 percent" as a result of a 2003 and 2009 rezoning in Harlem.[4]

As a white privileged male who has been honored to be a part of Black and Brown low-income communities through the arts since I was a teenager, I have seen the rampant disinvestment in public housing. Public housing in downtown Syracuse was known as Brick City and was where I saw the anger and violence disinvestment creates. And just as important was the uncomfortableness I felt as being the only white person in a community center on a rainy Friday night. The center was packed wall-to-wall and was hot as an oven as my very nervous hand touched the vinyl record while every eye looked at me with suspicion. Then when I began to cut back and forth and people began to dance I felt more calm. However, when everyone heard the sound of a gun going off, the entire room ducked. I was pushed down by the other djs I had come to spin with. A kid had shot off a clip toward the ceiling but was immediately reprimanded by two powerful Black women who escorted him out. The party resumed as if nothing happened. A common occurance I was told, in the neighborhood.

The uncomfortableness, the violence and the community is something that every white person in America needs to continually experience to not only understand the results of the historically racist system that defines America, but to know the importance of on-the-ground solidarity. To know the racist and classist system that defines the very city agencies that are supposed to work for the people and how their policies have shaped the landscape of public housing and neighborhoods in general is to know segregation, disinvestment, redlining, gentrification and police brutality. Particularly, Brooklyn community organization, Mi Casa No Es Su Casa rightly says of the Department of City Planning's policy in New York City, "DCP is responsible for racist rezonings all over the city."[5]

In the case of public housing in New York City, it was through isolation, "confinement of civilian population in ghetto areas," under the guise of rezonings which resulted in the construction of luxury buildings sprinkled with a few "affordable" units, the raising of rent for longtime small businesses and residents resulting in displacement and then replacement with chain stores, high-end boutique businesses catering to new gentrifying residents and those who can afford to rent an apartment starting at $2,000 a month. Public housing residents became surrounded by a white privileged fantasy world while inhumane living conditions in NYCHA have continued to be ignored decade after decade. This was no mistake. Gentrification and displacement are a continuation of urban renewal policies and infrastructure projects (like the highways of Robert Moses) that destroyed and displaced entire neighborhoods resulting in rendering an area ethnically homogenous – ethnic cleansing.

Structural Violence Through Dissemination of Information

Structural violence can be seen as subtle processes enacted through technocratic systems and institutional procedures to monitor and control poor people. This is the "landscape of despair": symbolic and physical spaces where structural violence takes place and where more than likely, the poor are portrayed as undeserving, unproductive and welfare-dependant.[6] The residents are all too aware of this. One resident messaged me on March 21, 2019 via Twitter and had this to say:

"What upsets me is the fact that all of these individuals are making a big to-do about a situation that they don't have to deal with it because they don't live in NYCHA however me and other residents we live in NYCHA so it's really frustrating to see all these cameras surrounding us; only come to the conclusion that at the end of the day our help is temporary and we are being made a mockery around someone's dinner table."[7]

In fact a recent article in FAIR found that "more often than not, news reports portray residents as

passive victims, who lack the agency to change their own lives" and that media coverage marginalized tenants' opinions and in many cases did not even include the perspective of the tenants.[8] This confirms what the tenants already know. From an online correspondence with a resident on March 21, 2019: "I've noticed that a lot of the media has turned the living conditions of me and my fellow residents into a sideshow."[9]

The recent agreement between HUD and NYCHA has this structural violence built in, through the use of covert power: "the power to shape desire, such that one cannot help but internalize dominant values and beliefs, and support institutional procedures that favor the dominant."[10]

For example the HUD-NYCHA Agreement states within 5 years "NYCHA shall abate all lead-based paint at the Harlem River Houses and the Williamsburg Houses."[11] There is no negotiation of the terms of this agreement with residents who live in these developments. If the situation is dire, why 5 years? And then 50% of lead abatement in all NYCHA apartments in 10 years, 75% in 15 years, and 100% in 20 years. Surely the $30 million a week that HUD gives NYCHA.[12] could be used to hire more people to speed up this process significantly. That timeline is unacceptable and it continues a policy of structural violence against poor people and communities of color.

The agreement also states that within 5 days, "NYCHA shall remove mold that is visible from within the unit. In the alternative, NYCHA may comply with this standard by remediating the mold and its underlying root cause (i) within 7 days." The agreement's definition of mold is "limited to mold that has grown enough to be visible to the unaided eye."[13] Mold spores grow behind walls and cabinets that cannot be seen. And using the words "may comply" indicates they are under no obligation to do mold remediation. This is a way for NYCHA to not do true mold remediation. It doesn't exist if NYCHA can't see it, it seems.

Centering the Voices of NYCHA

There is no immediate relief for residents who have been waiting years for NYCHA to make living conditions humane. Since NYCHA has been continually complicit in human rights violations, Twitter is being used increasingly as a vehicle to get the agency to take action and voice opposition to the HUD/NYCHA agreement. On February 1, 2019 a resident, wishing to remain anonymous, tweeted "As a resident I feel betrayed, this is a back door agreement in which we have no say." On January 9, a resident, wishing to remain anonymous, tweeted with pictures "The leak, everything started at the kitchen and now has passed through my bedroom, where I'm having the flood now, the dirty water stinks has damaged my cabinets, tiles. I can no longer store my food in the cabinets!! Please I'm begging for HELP!!!" As of January 17, NYCHA fixed the leak but as of February 6, have not fixed the mold damaged cabinets in this apartment at Jefferson Houses. And there are constant outages of heat and hot water.[14]

And what do residents think of New York City mayor Bill DeBlasio's public/private scheme to have 1/3 of public housing managed by private developers? On Twitter on January 22, 2019, one resident wrote "The mayor has made it very clear he is NOT going to do anything but throw every development into RAD so his investors can manage, while the city sits back and makes money off the land!!" Another tweet on February 11, 2019 from another resident: "So, if private developers take over NYCHA buildings … where are the people to go who will be evicted when rents are raised? SHAME ON DEBLASIO!" And another on January 23, 2019: "Yes… Deblasio only cares about his money… HES NOT FOR THE PEOPLE. HES FOR HIS BANK ACCOUNT. SHIT, LOOK AT THE UNDISCLOSED AMAZON DEAL WITH Cuomo too. Two selfish bastards."[15]

Deal with The Devil: City Government and Private Developers

The programs handing over management to private developers known as PACT (Permanent Affordability Commitment Together) and RAD (Rental Assistance Demonstration) are continuing the violence and failure of market solutions to public housing such as the HOPE IV program, conceived in 1992, which demolished or sold close to 250,000 public housing units resulting in private management, displacement and a dramatic loss of housing. The program did not require the private developers to replace housing at a 1:1 ratio and had a mandate of replacing public housing with mixed-income housing which assured that not every resident would return.[16]

And PACT and RAD will continue this trend, replacing communities of color with the rich and the white unless public housing remains public and is funded publicly. Furthermore, there is no guidance from HUD on how private developers should manage their housing after a RAD conversion, there is very little oversight from HUD on ensuring residents do move back after a RAD conversion, and HUD has been notoriously slow to respond to complaints. Even the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated in 2018 that HUD had an inability to track people in a RAD conversion which would put the "long-term affordability of renovated homes at risk."[17]

The first conversion under RAD was conducted on NYCHA development Ocean Bay Houses in Far Rockaway. Although $83 million came from the conversion to section 8, a large portion of the money to renovate, $231 million, came from FEMA because Ocean Bay was affected by Superstorm Sandy.[18] The new landlord, RDC Development (a joint venture between MDG Design + Construction and Wavecrest Management) has evicted 80 households since January 2017 from Ocean Bay, the most out of all NYCHA evictions during this period. RDC also brought more than 300 cases in housing court against tenants there since late 2016.[19] As long as there is a motive to profit, the free market will never be able to deliver basic needs like housing.

If housing is truly a human right it should be taken out of the marketplace immediately and the project of U.S. imperialism on its' own citizens should be acknowledged. When New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio wants to sell air rights, build private mixed-income developments on public housing land and turn one third of public housing into "quasi-private Section 8 housing", public housing will no longer be public; public land will no longer be public.

Using vague feel-good language without disclosing the details of the agreement is disingenuous. To not acknowledge the fact that this country is founded on stolen land, white supremacy, murder of indigenous people and economic elite domination obscures the truth. And to not engage the 400,000+ residents of NYCHA before even signing the agreement is paternalistic and is the type of covert power used to dominate the narrative through institutional procedures laid out as structural violence that favor a neoliberal viewpoint and control the decision-making process. This is not democracy. And it is certainly not freedom.

If the privatization of public housing is to be stopped, resistance must come from the public housing residents leading, along with a coalition of the multitude of grassroots housing and racial justice movements rising up in New York City. There are many truly grassroots groups fighting this privatization plan across the five boroughs that are working directly with NYCHA residents or led by NYCHA residents: Occupy NYCHA, Fight for NYCHA, Justice for All Coalition, Not One More Block and others. Once these groups and others begin to show up for one another's actions, the power base will begin to form. From there this frontline can connect to other frontline movements in areas such as climate change, education, police violence, decarceration and gentrification, simply by showing up and creating deep relationships. When this happens, the force will be enough to change our current political course toward building public housing for all. Rise up New York City! Another city is possible!

1 For the entire press conference, see PIX 11, "NYCHA to get federal monitor, Ben Carson, Mayor de

Blasio announce", Jan. 31, 2019.

2 Mark Danner, "America and the Bosnia Genocide", The New York Review of Books, Dec. 4, 1997.

3 United Nations. Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780, *Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 to Investigate Violations of International Humanitarian Law in the Former Yugoslavia,* May 27, 1994.

4 Tom Angotti and Sylvia Morse, *Zoned Out! Race, Displacement, and City Planning in New York City* (Terreform, 2017)

5 Shelby Quinn, "Locals and Activists Continue Resistance to Bushwick Rezoning", *Bushwick Daily*, December 2, 2019.

6 Darrin Hodgetts, Kerry Chamberlain, Shiloh Groot and Yardena Tankel, Urban Poverty, Structural Violence and Welfare Provision for 100 Families in Auckland, *Urban Studies*(Vol 51, Issue 10, August 2014).

7 Online correspondence on March 21, 2019 via Twitter

8 Teddy Ostrow, "Residents an Afterthought in Public Housing Privatization Coverage", March 27, 2019

9 Online correspondence on March 21, 2019 via Twitter

10 Cyndi Suarez, *The Power Manual* (New Society Publishers 2018)

11 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD NYCHA Agreement 01-13-19, Jan. 2019

12 Lisa Evers, "NYCHA residents lament apartment conditions", FOX 5 NY, Feb. 18 2019.

13 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019

14 Residents wished to remain anonymous for various reasons including retaliation from NYCHA, via author. Tweets documented via author.

15 Residents wished to remain anonymous for various reasons including retaliation from NYCHA, via author. Tweets documented via author.

16 Rebecca Burns, "HUD's privatization scheme may herald end of public housing", November 13, 2014.

17 Danielle McLean, "Trump's HUD wants to expand flawed program that is 'privatizing public housing'", Think Progress, Feb 27, 2019.

18 New York State Homes and Community Renewal, "HCR, HUD, NYCHA, RDC Development, and Partners Celebrate the Completion of Ocean Bay Apartments in Far Rockaway, Queens", June 10, 2019.

19 Harry DiPrinzio, "Hundreds of NYCHA Evictions Raise Questions About Process", City Limits, August 14, 2019.