

Michigan Specter

For a life worth living

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How the Media Legitimizes Gentrification

By Noah Streng

If you've ever seen an episode of HGTV's *Good Bones* or any other "house-flipping" show, you'll know that like all reality TV shows they depict dramatized situations as a way of increasing the stakes and encouraging viewers to keep watching. However, when watching these types of shows, it is important to recognize what narratives they are promoting. Whose voices and stories do they center? What underlying assumptions are left unchallenged?

In the strange world of reality TV, there's an entire genre dedicated to "home improvement" where wealthy individuals will buy homes in "rundown neighborhoods" and "make them beautiful again" (all while making a significant profit for themselves, of course). These shows like to promote the idea that the house-flippers are courageous underdogs venturing into an uncharted and dangerous land to save target homes from the scary, filthy people who live in them. Euphemisms like "up and coming" and "transitional" are often used to describe low-income, minority neighborhoods starved for investment.

In a dramatic scene from an episode of HGTV's *Good Bones*, the gentrifiers are seen "scouting" a house that they bought and breaking through a window because the doors of the house are locked — a sign that people have been staying there. The scene depicts the gentrifiers as being frightened by the possibility of encountering a squatter and being disgusted by the house's "filth." However, what's never asked or included in these shows is questioning why the person living in that house needed to squat in the first place. Did the state fail to provide them affordable housing? Are they suffering from a mental health issue and lack insurance? Did they get evicted from their former home? Instead of analyzing the root causes of this person's housing insecurity and seeking to address it, the squatter is demonized as singularly responsible for their failures. Not only that, but the con-

tent of these characterizations is highly racialized, contributing to the white supremacist and colonial themes of the show.

These shows almost never consider the perspective of the tenants evicted by gentrifiers who rip their apartments out from under them. In some cases, there will be depictions of scary, drugged-up squatters who are illegally occupying the gentrifiers' new passion project. In an article titled 'We Bought a Crack House,' house-flippers Catherine Jheon and Julian Humphreys detail their "brave" story of buying a house for \$560,000 and encountering the tenants — whose home had just been sold by their landlord without consent — still living in the house when they arrive. Some of the home's residents are experiencing problems with drug addiction, and are even caught by the gentrifiers using crack in an upstairs room.

What's not mentioned here is how poverty, and these people's recent condemnation to homelessness by their landlord, may have influenced their decision to use drugs to cope with the immense hardships they face. When Jheon and Humphreys ask the former tenants to leave the home so that they can start renovating, the tenants refuse, citing that they have nowhere else to go and that this is their rightful home. Jheon writes about her frustration with this, as every day she can't renovate the home is money lost. In the end, she and Humphreys bribe one of the tenants to leave the house and call the police to forcibly remove the rest of them. This is a classic example of how law and the media intersect to legitimize the violence of colonization and gentrification which continues in our cities today. The poor are demonized and gentrifiers are portrayed as innocent white saviors who are just trying to make a living — but they are doing so by displacing poor, housing-insecure black and brown people. The police advance these projects of colonization by using their monopoly on vio-

lence to aid gentrifiers in their mission of displacing community residents so that their house can be fixed up and eventually sold to a rich white family.

While seeming innocent on their face, these shows can have devastating effects on the lives of the millions of people in the United States who experience housing insecurity. Not only do these television networks make money off of stories of the tragic displacement of poor people, but they frame these stories in a way that valorizes gentrifiers and legitimizes a landlord's right to hoard property and force destitute people into homelessness. Oftentimes, the excuse that gentrifiers will use when evicting tenants is "it's our house now." However, this statement is highly ideological and reinforces the social dynamic between property owners and the property-less in our capitalist society.

Who controls housing is not something that is natural or written in the stars. It is a power arrangement forged by the deliberate decisions of actors within an economic system that prioritizes profit over human life. House-flipping shows are just one part of the larger media trend of legitimizing societal oppression. TV companies make political decisions when they choose to only highlight the voices of landlords, realtors, and house-flippers over tenants and the housing insecure. The depiction of low-income, predominately black people as filthy, dangerous, and lazy — rather than victims of a violent, exploitative, and racist economic system — feeds into the narrative that gentrification is good for society at large. How the media depicts people's interactions with the law and frames which laws are just has real consequences. When the media chooses to center the story of the colonizer over the colonized, it legitimizes the displacement, land theft, and systemic impoverishment that millions of people face every day. 🌱

Forcing the Vote on Medicare for All: A Proven and Imperative Strategy

By Karthik Pasupula

14.6 million. That's the lower estimate of the number of Americans who have lost their health insurance during this pandemic. Want to guess the number of people in the same situation in other developed countries? Zero if you live in Canada, the UK, Germany, France, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Denmark, Finland, Norway, etc. You've probably seen the polls. More than 70% of Americans believe that the government should be responsible for insuring all Americans, with around 88% of Democrats supporting a single-payer system. Support for government healthcare has risen across the board, presumably because pandemic-induced mass unemployment has exposed the folly of employer-based insurance.

Yet, the fight for Medicare for All isn't happening in the halls of Congress right now. And that is a huge mistake. National media is dominated by coverage of an inept administration whose will to govern has been broken by the (un)dynamic duo of Senators Manchin and Sinema. The constant ceding of ground must end. It's time to #ForceTheVote in order to put public pressure on establish-

ment politicians and get them on the record.

Ever since the emergence of "The Squad" in 2018, interest in Medicare for All (M4A) has soared. This is especially relevant to Michigan voters, since 16% of residents live in poverty, including one in four children and 17% of senior citizens. These problems are especially bad in Detroit where around 30.6% of people live below the poverty level — the highest among big cities. The insane grip that corporate health insurance companies have on America harms more than just America's very poorest. One in five voters struggle to pay their medical bills and one in three fear that they won't be able to pay for healthcare. In order to pay those bills, they have to resort to extraordinary measures: dipping into savings, borrowing money, selling jewelry, crowdsourcing, etc. This would not exist under a single-payer system.

A single-payer healthcare system would also set prices for each service. This solves one of the biggest problems of our healthcare system, which is the variety in rates for different services. An appendectomy, for example, can cost

anywhere from \$1,529 to \$186,955. Under single-payer, that rate would be much lower and consistent across hospitals. Administrative costs for doctors and hospitals would also go way down due to the reduction of negotiation costs. As of 2017, administrative spending made up 34.2% of total health expenditures in the United States. That is more than twice what Canada spends.

But how do we win a cheaper and more efficient healthcare system? The strategic and principled move is to demand a floor vote from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. This would prompt an "on-the-record" vote on M4A from all representatives. Right now, there are 221 Democrats in the House and 211 Republicans (and three vacancies). There are more than enough progressives to threaten the stoppage of any legislation Democrats propose. And they could use that leverage to demand a vote on M4A. But one of the main arguments against a floor vote for M4A is that it would just be an immediate flop.

So? When M4A polls so well, why should we be worried about if it flops or not? The viability of a piece of legislation is in the hands of the people,

and the people have spoken: they support M4A. Putting elected representatives on the spot and showing how they're actively voting against their constituents is absolutely crucial. If the bill fails, then it immediately lets progressives know which representatives they need to primary.

Opponents of this strategy have said that we can just look at the cosponsor list to ascertain who supports M4A. Senators Cory Booker and Kamala Harris have both cosponsored an M4A bill. But, when pressed on the issue during the Democratic presidential primary, they immediately backed down. It would be reasonable to assume many other cosponsors would do the same if forced to vote.

Moreover, a message that certain representatives argued against healthcare coverage for Americans during a pandemic would help progressives in future elections. With our healthcare system absolutely failing during this crisis, American citizens will be more open than ever to healthcare reform. With media coverage of liberal representatives voting to deny them coverage, voters will be reminded of the necessity to elect more progressives to Congress.

Historically, the president's party tends to lose seats during midterms. Obama lost 63 House seats in 2010, the largest loss since FDR, after his Wall Street bailout. Forcing a vote on M4A would make it much easier to capitalize on dissatisfaction with the president's party during the midterm elections. 2022 would be the perfect time to campaign against incumbent Democrats, as history shows they are weaker during midterms. Not only that, but forcing a vote on M4A would use the exact same tactics the Tea Party used to ultimately excise former House Speaker John Boehner. The Tea Party tried to repeal Obamacare numerous times, to no avail, but they rode the enthusiasm from those failed attempts to enormous wins and quickly became a force to be reckoned with in Congress. By blocking nearly every piece of legislation, and thereby tying Boehner's hands behind his back, the Tea Party effectively forced him to resign. In short, Boehner stepped down because the Tea Party used the leverage they had. Progressive Democrats should use similar leverage to

bring Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi to their knees.

If you disagree with forcing the vote, then what is your plan to bring M4A into effect? What do you think we need to do before getting a vote on M4A? How do we do this, and what is the timeline? These questions are not being answered by sitting politicians. All we have are ideologies; not action on those ideologies. Denying this strategy means denying that the Tea Party was successful in being a commanding presence, and that is verifiably false. The incremental approach that doesn't utilize the bully pulpit is failing. Everything that Biden "compromised" with progressives on during the campaign trail is falling dead in its tracks: \$15 minimum wage (God save the Parliamentarian), ICE detention facilities, \$2,000 checks, foreign policy, etc. Playing nice with the establishment does not work and that has been proven time and time again.

Democrats in Congress argued that we needed to impeach Donald Trump to hold him accountable for inciting the Capitol riots. Even though they didn't have the votes to convict, I agreed with the motivations behind impeachment because it's a moral imperative to get every single representative and senator on the record to keep them and Trump accountable. The same reasoning applies to forcing a vote on M4A.

Even recently, vote-forcing strategies have been successful at putting pressure on establishment politicians. Senator Bernie Sanders recently forced a vote and got eight senators, all of whom caucus with the Democrats, on the record as opposing a \$15 minimum wage.

At this stage, opponents of this strategy complain that there is not enough thought given to step two. However, there's a clear plan. We get politicians on record, and then exert political pressure on a popular issue. In this way, even if the bill fails, the issue only gets heightened. Just one piece of evidence is the huge outcry and shaming of Senator Sinema for her thumbs-down vote.

And what comes after this, you ask? The ammunition to primary these corrupt individuals is readily provided on an issue that the vast majority of Americans have a solid stance on. Denying a living wage is

one thing, but denying healthcare during a pandemic will carry even graver consequences for Democrats who take that stance.

Something I'm completely against is calling opponents of this strategy corrupt. AOC and other members of "The Squad" have said that they are against forcing a vote on M4A because of aforementioned counterarguments, but they aren't corrupt like the majority of DC. Progressives do NOT take money from super PACs, and that's the main separator. We won't always agree on everything, but we will agree on basic, reasonable political positions.

The foundations of #ForceTheVote are both principled and strategic. It's principled because we're fighting for something at a time when people need it most. Even if it's "doomed to fail," fighting for something that you believe is right is simply the morally principled action. And it's strategic because, even if the vote fails, it gets representatives on the record as denying basic improvements in quality of life. That sets us up well to pressure incumbents and mount serious primary challenges against them.

The 2020 election showed that anti-Trump rhetoric by itself does not work. Democrats lost seats in the House and Biden won by smaller margins in swing states than Trump did in 2016. Sticking with their tradition of strategic cluelessness, the DNC recently announced that their primary focus will be on QAnon next election cycle.

Enough of this culture war bullshit, it's time to fight for real policy. We need to have substantive arguments and a floor vote provides us with the ammunition, especially if it fails. The failure will not fall on progressives, it will fall on Democrats who voted no and they will be punished for it through democracy. There is nothing to lose from this strategy.

Keep in mind the 14.6 million people who have lost health insurance. Keep in mind the huge number of people who were already uninsured or underinsured. Keep these things in mind while consistently calling out politicians, so we can keep them accountable when the opportunity arises. 🌟

A Blueprint for Defunding the Police

By Cal Abbo and Elias Khoury

Following the tragic murder of George Floyd, socialists the world over have rallied around the cause of defunding the police — and with great success. Under pressure from their more progressive residents, big cities from San Francisco to Baltimore raced to approve substantial cuts to their bloated police budgets. These wins ought to be celebrated. Activists, protesters, and left-wing politicians alike should take a moment to pat themselves on the back.

But spending cuts alone only go so far. The ultimate goal of the movement to defund police should be to reimagine public safety altogether. And the question socialists in particular must reckon with is: What would sharply diminishing the role of police in society look like?

At present, cops are called upon to deal with a staggeringly wide variety of tasks. Barry Friedman, faculty director of The Policing Project at NYU, breaks these down into five categories. One of which is the self-explanatory "traffic cop."

But there is no reason why police must be the ones to handle traffic-related incidents. In England, traffic functions have been assigned to unarmed civil servants employed by a state-owned company. By all accounts, these workers do a successful job of tending to everything from road debris to major collisions. If this model were replicated here in the United States, that alone would eliminate nearly two-thirds of all police contact with civilians.

Another role Friedman identifies is the "mediator cop," wherein officers try to resolve more mundane con-

flicts like neighbors complaining about a loud party down the street. The "first responder cop" and "social worker cop" cover similar terrain. These two roles see officers handling everything from public intoxication to lost items.

Police are unnecessary in those areas too. Just look at Eugene, Oregon's CAHOOTS program. CAHOOTS responds to noncriminal 911 calls by sending an unarmed, two-person dispatch of a medic and crisis worker trained in mental health response (which is critical since potentially more than half of all those killed by law enforcement have some form of mental illness). This approach has proven to be more cost-effective and compassionate than the traditional approach of sending armed police officers. It is therefore no surprise that CAHOOTS has begun expanding to a number of major cities including Indianapolis, Denver, and even New York.

At this point, only one role remains: "the law enforcement, crime-fighting cop." There is a legitimate case to be made for trained individuals intervening to stop serious criminality. But keep in mind that this makes up quite a small portion of what police do. Indeed, only 1% of police service calls are for violent crimes. And even then, cops typically show up after the crime is over, and not while it is being committed. So, in that sense, defunding to this extent stops just short of outright abolition.

Reasonable people can disagree over whether the police should hold on to this crime-fighting role. For the sake of argument, let us just assume that they

should. That would still save a ton of money which could then be invested in alternative institutions that actually address the criminogenic features of society.

In December, The Activist published an interview with Kwynn Riley of the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100). While discussing BYP100's involvement in the Movement For Black Lives, Riley indicated her support for the BREATHE Act (championed by DSA member and endorsee U.S. Representative Rashida Tlaib of Michigan), which calls for federal divestment from policing. And she further explained that these funds should be reallocated toward public services like education, counseling, and mental healthcare.

Miss Riley has exactly the right idea. These are the sorts of investments that, time and time again, have been proven to reduce crime. Later in the interview, Riley proposed using the money saved by cutting police budgets to subsidize housing. Again, she hits the nail on the head. There is plenty of evidence that sheltering the homeless reduces crime substantially.

Now that we know what will exist in their place, why exactly do we demand that the police be defunded?

A problem of hierarchy

Politics on a macro level describes how governments function, make decisions, and delegate power. But this conception of politics is born out of the

republican nation-state and thus only applies to high-level decisions. In reality, as individuals, we exist in political situations and make political decisions every minute. Our daily social reality and interactions decide how our institutions function, who makes decisions on our behalf, and how power is shared.

From the beginning, socialists have hailed democracy as a guiding macro principle. Put simply, democracy means people with a stake in any consequential decision should be involved in making it. CEOs and profit-motivated financiers cut jobs, wages, breaks, and generally make decisions opposed to the interests of the working class. This is why socialists believe that workers, rather than an oligarchic class of rich citizens, should control the means of production. Through a critique of production, we arrive at many micro-level political situations that need to be resolved. For example: A specific worker wakes up with a high fever and symptoms similar to that of COVID-19. Her boss demands she comes in even when she is sick, otherwise he will fire her.

This example represents a micro-political situation in which the boss, with little-to-no stake in the outcome, holds inordinate power over our meager and underprivileged worker, whose entire livelihood will collapse, perhaps being rendered homeless, if she does not return to work when she is sick. The demands

of the boss are therefore excessive, ill-informed, and directly opposed to the general interests of the workers — of course, they don't want to get sick, especially in a pandemic — as well as the specific interests of our poor, ailing worker who will have her livelihood stolen from her if she does not oblige the demands of the boss. Importantly, this specific type of social relation, in which the boss holds power over her, exists because of institutionalized norms and state-backed property laws that define capitalist production.

Similarly asymmetric social relations exist in policing. Our society justifies a boss's control over a worker with appeals to property rights, scarcity, and overall economic benefit. In the same way, our society justifies a standing police army with a monopoly on violence by appealing to public safety, protection from crime, and the good faith of individual officers.

In reality, police officers seldom operate in the name of public safety, protection, and good faith. Police officers are people, just like our CEO, with interests, biases, passions, and vices. And they typically use their power to pursue an idea of the public good that prioritizes the rigid enforcement of institutional norms over the well-being of individuals and communities.

In a modern police state like the US, a single officer has both the practical power and the legal justification to drive

out thousands of homeless people from a public park. For the officer, his stake in the decision is minimal. Perhaps he has to witness homelessness in its glaring reality, which makes him uncomfortable. Or maybe his ego will take a hit if he allows such immense power to go to waste. On the other hand, thousands of homeless civilians will have their residences destroyed and won't have a place to sleep. In this specific social relation, like the CEO, police hold inordinate power. Of course, this is disastrous for homeless people. But socialists also hold that this social distortion holds dire consequences for the police officer. Namely, he reifies his near-unlimited social powers into his identity and sees citizens as objects to be policed. Officers lose a piece of their humanity when they fail to consider the effects that their unilateral decisions have on others, and thereby undermine the collaboration that democracy emphasizes.

What it means to be “policed” remains up to the officer — not the general public or working class — whether it's issuing traffic tickets with excessive fines, prosecuting minorities for smoking marijuana, or committing murder by kneeling on someone's neck for more than eight minutes. 🚔



Credit: Daniel Arauz via Flickr

What is Ultraleftism

By Lex Von Klark

Republished from The Activist.

In June of 1970, as the radical energy of the '60s began to dissipate but before the looming darkness of neoliberal backlash had properly coalesced, a socialist activist named Peter Camejo gave a speech to a small Trotskyist youth group in New York City. Later titled “Liberalism, Ultraleftism, or Mass Action,” Camejo's speech outlined what he saw as the three possible “orientations” of the contemporary Left and made an impassioned case for the power of mass action over the passivity of liberalism or the pessimism of ultraleftism.

In the decades since its original publication, Camejo's speech has grown in both relevance and popularity, continually drawing in new generations of radicals eager to learn the best way to transform their ideals into reality. Indeed, for all the countless attempts to diagnose the problems that ail the contemporary leftist movement — constantly blaming our weakness on immaterial cultural signifiers like “identity politics,” “white chauvinism,” etc. — none has had the incisiveness or staying power of Camejo's tripartite analysis. For all its seemingly timeless wisdom, however, “Liberalism, Ultraleftism, or Mass Action” is definitely a product of its time, filled with references to the specific protests and political disagreements of the early '70s. To those unfamiliar with such history, Camejo's constant references can weigh down and obfuscate his important points, making his speech inaccessible to those who need it most, such as young socialists and new organizers. In an endeavor to open up Camejo's critically important analysis to an even broader audience of socialists, this essay will rearticulate Camejo's core ideas using 21st-century examples.

At the core of Camejo's speech is his theory of the three possible “orientations” of the modern Left: liberalism, ultraleftism, and mass action. These orientations are not ideologies, with specific goals, demands, and political beliefs; rather, they are logics of how power operates in society, of how change occurs.

Liberalism

For liberals, power is vested entirely in the elites, and making change is simply a matter of putting the right people into the elite class. Liberals believe that the “system,” whether that's capitalism, the US government, etc., fundamentally works to the advantage of everyone, and any issues such as poverty, repression, etc. are simply mistakes to be corrected with the proper policy. The liberal elite theory of change is not limited to just government: in the private sphere, many liberals champion initiatives pushing to diversify corporate boards of directors, believing that if just the right identity was in power that exploitation would cease. Liberalism currently dominates most of the American political landscape: regardless of ideology, American politicians' only goal is to get certain elites elected and to enact certain policies.

Some liberals have grown disillusioned, however, as the years have dragged on and the promised top-down progress has never arrived. They called their representative, marched in the Women's March, and may have even worn their “I Voted” sticker longer than a day — and still, nothing really changed. The elites weren't listening. This is where the second orientation, ultraleftism, originates: “a liberal that has gone through an evolution.”

Ultraleftism

Like the liberal, the ultraleftist believes that the elite have all the power, but instead of them usually using it for good purposes and sometimes making mistakes, they believe the elites are maniacally evil and constantly plotting to create the worst possible outcome. Where the liberal sees opportunities to make change by putting new people into power, the ultraleftist sees everything as hopelessly rigged and stacked against them.

Since they believe that the evil ruling class has all the power and that the masses have none, the ultraleftist is driven to theories of change that center around small minorities of radicals taking drastic action to force the elite's hand. Riots, armed revolution, and autonomous zones at the edge of civilization are some of the core ultraleftist tactics, as they turn away from the masses and focus on either destroying the elites or retreating from society entirely. “The actions they propose are not aimed at the American people,” Camejo argues, “they're aimed at those who have already radicalized. They know beforehand that masses of people won't respond to the tactics they propose.”

This disbelief in the power of the masses also leads them to denounce many mass-strategies as “insufficiently radical,” claiming that they have been co-opted and are actually tools of the elites. As Camejo says, ultraleftists represent a small portion of the broader left, but make up a significant proportion of those who consider themselves radicals or socialists. They are extremely common on the Internet, as thousands of newly disillusioned liberals have taken up radical aesthetics over the past few years and joined communities of like-minded

ultraleftists who encourage each other's increasing immersion in the subculture — thus increasing their distance from the real state of society outside their bubble.

A Logic, Not an Ideology

Not all ultraleftists share the same aesthetic or ideology, however. As emphasized earlier, Camejo's orientations are logics, not ideologies themselves, allowing for ultraleftists to carry the banner of anarchism, Maoism, Trotskyism, or whatever other dead tendency they have revived to try and “play revolution, because they have no hope.” Ultraleftists can even appear to be remarkably liberal: take for example the case of the Movement for A People's Party, or any of the great number of attempts at a progressive third party in recent years. While seemingly liberal in their goals (elect a new set of politicians who will be properly “progressive”), the actual tactics and theory of change behind such parties are distinctly

ultraleftist: they ignore the masses and preemptively create a minority party of radicals who can instigate performative disturbances in order to force the elites to change (e.g. “Forcing the Vote” on a bill that has no chance of passing). This points to a fundamental truth about ultraleftism that none admit: for all their loud denouncements of “liberals” and “liberalism,” the ultraleftist and liberal logics are ultimately mirror images of each other, differentiated only by whether they believe the ruling class to be kind or cruel, whether the system is efficient or oppressive. It is no wonder that when you cut through all the rhetoric and get down to their actual “organizing,” liberals and ultraleftists both prioritize the same ineffective strategies of endless protests, obscure reading groups, and intra-left conflict.

Mass Action

Camejo's third orientation, mass action, rejects the fundamentals of both the liberal and ultraleftist logic, asserting

that power does not lay entirely in the hands of the elites, but rather is a constant struggle between the ruling class and the masses. This is a dialectical, class-struggle-centered analysis that understands change as the product of conflict instead of just the decision-making of elites.

Where liberalism and ultraleftism have minority theories of change, either focused on putting in new elites or leading a small super-radical sect, mass action focuses entirely on the working class. Liberals/ultraleftists orient themselves entirely around the capitalist class; mass action organizers orient themselves only toward the working class. Mass action is not somehow “in between” liberalism and ultraleftism, but is actually completely separate from them in how it analyzes power in society.

A liberal calls their congressman; an ultraleftist tweets about a #GeneralStrike; a mass-action oriented socialist is meeting workers where they are and mobilizing them in struggle. As Camejo says, “This is the way to not only play, but make, a revolution.” 🌟



Credit: The Matt Gonzalez Reader