Resourceful Researchers: Tackling the Elusive Problem of Displacement By Going Further Upstream[1]

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Abstract– Gentrification is the structural displacement over time of lower-income residents out of a neighbourhood for more affluent people. Marcuse (1985:205) defines such displacement as housing-related, involuntary residential dislocation. Simply put, people are forced to leave their houses. Despite its invasive character, displacement has been understudied for most of the last fifteen years (Wacquant 2008). Reasons for this include a traditional focus within the literature on gentrifiers, the methodological difficulties of tracking displacees, and the inherent interest of the state – increasingly a propagator of gentrification – to not catalogue the negative effects of gentrification. This leads to Van Criekingen calling the quantification of displacement 'a lasting empirical challenge for gentrification researchers' (2008:200).

In this paper I argue that, while the methodological problems of studying displacement are real, there is no inherent reason why these cannot be overcome. After all, numerous researchers have succeeded in documenting other elusive groups such as drug users or illegal immigrants. Indeed, perhaps one of the largest obstacles to researching displacement is the self-reinforcing character of the assumption that it is difficult. Lack of data perpetuates the idea that it is hard to find, and (more perniciously) that displacement itself is a marginal phenomenon.

Yet, paradoxically, the reality is that, now more than ever, displacement is visible and widespread. Gentrification has become a global phenomenon and the growing role of the state in actively pursuing it means that displacement has gained an institutionalised, policy-embedded character. Consequently displacement reaches into European welfare states where – due to the comparatively advanced levels of renters' rights in these countries – it leaves a more visible legal, policy and procedural trail. This opens up useful avenues for research, because it allows us to tackle the problem further upstream: to investigate the process by which a tenant becomes a displacee, rather than searching for the already displaced.

I describe multiple techniques for researching the process of displacement upstream. Broadly speaking there are four categories. Firstly, scrutinizing (local) housing policy documents will point us to the scale and location of targeted state-led gentrification. Secondly, we can identify signs of upcoming gentrification through actions of property owners. These include not only classical symptoms (e.g. dilapidation next to upgrading) but also more subtle indicators such as changes in the land registry, tell-tale requests for building permits, and objects of desire on real-estate investment websites. Thirdly, we can study the formalized trajectories that often must be followed when tenants are displaced. These vary from purely legalistic (recourse to the courts) to more sophisticated governmental citizen participation programmes. Fourthly and finally, through accessing support networks such as advice and advocacy agencies we can locate residents threatened with displacement. This allows us to interview such tenants themselves, a seemingly obvious step that is perplexingly underutilized in gentrification studies.

I demonstrate these principles using examples from my own research in the Netherlands although I argue that they are applicable more broadly, in many cases even extending to Anglo-Saxon countries where perceptions of displacement are more complex.

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"Measuring how gentrification affects low-income residents is methodologically challenging and estimating the scope and scale of displacement and exploring what happens to people who are displaced have proved somewhat elusive. *In short, it is difficult to find people who have been displaced*, particularly if those people are poor. (Newman & Wyly 2006:27, emphasis added)".

Introduction: Researching gentrification and displacement downstream

Originally gentrification, the structural displacement of lower-income residents out of a neighbourhood by new people with a higher income, was seen as an independently occurring, small-scale, though theoretically important phenomenon (Lees *et al.* 2008). By the beginning of the 21st century, both the scale as well as the role of the state in gentrification had changed to such an extent that the renowned gentrification researcher Neil Smith (2002) called it a 'global urban strategy'. Gentrification now takes place all around the world, and is actively pursued by many cities as a policy, often named 'urban renewal' or 'urban renaissance'. With the changed role of the state and the increasing importance of the urban level, cities often have the idea that gentrification is the only solution for social and economic problems (Bridge *et al.* 2012). Indeed, as Smith observed, urban renewal by state-led gentrification seems to be currently the common goal of most European cities. Due to the increase of the phenomenon, its impact of displacing and marginalizing lower-class people will be larger than before. But exactly this important element of gentrification; displacement, housing-related involuntary residential dislocation (Marcuse 1985:205) has been understudied (Slater 2006, Wacquant 2008, Lees *et al.* 2008). As I will argue in more detail below, this significant gap in our understanding is due to intertwining theoretical, methodological and political reasons. For that analysis it is necessary to first make explicit what is meant by gentrification and displacement.

Above, I defined gentrification as 'the structural displacement of lower-income residents out of a neighbourhood by new people with a higher income'. This differs from other definitions such as Hackworth's; 'the production of space for progressively more affluent users' (2002:815) in that it purposely puts displacement back centre stage.[2] This displacement is *structural* because it concerns an aggregate process at the level of the neighbourhood affecting multiple households, leading to a change in the composition of the population. But by structural I also mean that poorer households who are not directly displaced, will be affected by this process of neighbourhood change through displacement pressure and exclusionary displacement.

The last two terms stem from Peter Marcuse's well-known account of the complex process of displacement. He starts with the definition by Grier & Grier (1978, as quoted in Marcuse 1985:205):

> "Displacement occurs when any household is forced to move from its residence by conditions that affect the dwelling or its immediate surroundings, and that:
> 1) are beyond the household's reasonable ability to control or prevent; 2) occur despite the household having met all previously imposed conditions of occupancy; and 3) make continued occupancy by that household impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable."

The core of displacement is thus: the move is involuntary and related to the house (-owner),

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2   One of the advantages of Hackworth's broad definition is that it also allows for gentrification of the countryside (i.e. Stockdale 2010) or the level of whole cities (i.e. Hedin *et al.* 2012). However, for the purpose of this paper, and given the ever-increasing importance of the urban, a narrower definition that focuses on neighbourhoods is most useful.

not to the actions of the inhabitants. This distinguishes it from other circumstances forcing people to move, such as for instance not being able to pay the rent anymore because of job loss.[3] While adopting Grier and Grier's definition, Marcuse also argued that for a comprehensive understanding of displacement, more indirect forms needed to be considered as well. This is because forced moves are not single, stand-alone events happening to individual households, but processes taking place in the context of whole neighbourhoods changing over time. This insight lead Marcuse to distinguish between *direct* and *chain displacement, exclusionary displacement* and *pressure displacement.*

  Direct displacement refers to the individual processes that forces people to move from their houses through physical or economical actions. *Direct physical displacement* occurs when a landlord by physical means forces the occupants to leave. Marcuse (1985:205) gives the example of a landlord cutting off the heat in winter; in my own research tenants for instance left after the recurring flooding of their house due to their landlord refusing to repair holes in the roof. The most straightforward form of *direct economical displacement* is when a landlord terminates the renting contract and evicts the tenant. When a landlord raises the rent to a level the current occupants cannot reasonably be expected to be able to pay, forcing them to move, economical displacement is taking place as well.

  Often only synchronic attention is paid to displacement, looking at the last resident that leaves the house before demolition or conversion. However, frequently *chain displacement* occurs, when buildings degrade over a period of time before they become gentrified. During this process, each degrading step of under-maintenance is accompanied by an ever more desperate inhabitant following the previous one. Another form of chain displacement occurs when one household after the other is economically displaced through cumulative rent increases. Marcuse furthermore points to the fact that displacement has effects beyond the household directly affected. When a house in a neighbourhood is gentrified, one house less for people with a lower income will be available there, causing *exclusionary displacement.* Finally, the last form of displacement happens through the *pressure* put upon households through the displacement of other families in their neighbourhood and the resulting changed character of the neighbourhood, causing them to leave.

I have dwelled quite long on Marcuse's oft-repeated account of the different forms of displacement, because of its clear focus on process. There is an element of time in each form, and the forms are interrelated. This is most easy to observe in chain displacement, which consists of a string of households who one after the other are being directly displaced. That direct displacement is also often a process, not an event, is less widely recognized. It is, for instance, usually the physical degradation of a building due to lack of maintenance over time that in the end causes direct physical displacement, not just one (non-)action of the landlord.

  This insight is important because ongoing debates about whether gentrification causes displacement often fail to grasp the processural character of direct displacement. While most scholars agree that gentrification by definition causes displacement pressure and exclusionary displacement, some scholars have argued that in many cases gentrification is caused by incoming higher class residents, rather than the forced out-migration of lower-class people (Hamnett 2003, Freeman 2005, McKinnish *et al.* 2010,). They propose that changes in the composition of the population of a gentrifying area are driven by poorer households leaving of their own volition (such as household formation or break up), or alternatively are due to involuntary but not gentrification-related reasons (i.e. job loss). Significantly, the quantitative

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3 Note also that the form of tenure is not relevant: according to this definition, displacement can also happen to owner-occupiers (e.g. expropriation or raising of local tax due to gentrification beyond a level that poor home-owners can afford).

studies used to back up these claims, have relied on already existing statistical data sets in order to infer whether people in gentrifying neighbourhoods have been displaced. Because appropriate data is seldom available, indirect indicators have to be used as proxies for displacement. While data on demographic characteristics such as age, education and income level, ethnicity and household composition is often present, as well as data on for instance form of tenure and length of residence, data on specific reasons for moving house is seldom included.[4] Furthermore, such statistical analyses ignore the processural character of displacement, showing us only a 'before' and 'after' picture, but not offering us any insight in what happened in-between. But unless residents were followed over time, and unless they were asked directly whether they were forced to leave or not, and whether this forced moving was housing-related or due to other factors, we cannot conclude that displacement occurred, nor can we conclude that displacement did not happen. While we might be able to conclude whether gentrification is occurring, i.e. whether more affluent people are moving in and less affluent moving out, it is simply not possible to infer from such incomplete data whether people were directly displaced (cf. Atkinson 2002).

As Wacquant (2008) and Slater (2006) argue, the lack of suitable data is undoubtedly related to the central role of the state in most gentrification processes. This relation is somewhat provocatively explained by García-Herrera *et al.* (2007: 280):

> 'Insofar as the state at various scales adopts gentrification as a housing policy, in whole or in part, it has little self-interest in collecting the kind of data that documents the level of displacement and the fate of displacees, data that would be tantamount to exposing the failure of these policies.'

But it also seems that researchers have become so accustomed to using secondary data, that they ignore the possibility of creating data themselves. However, through large repeated surveys (a sample of) inhabitants of gentrifying neighbourhoods could be questioned several times about their experiences directly. Although in the face of universities and funding agencies following increasingly neoliberal agendas finding money as well as time (that other hard-to-secure academic resource) for such an endeavour might be hard, that does not imply it should not even be attempted!

Most qualitative research has focused either on gentrifiers or on long-term residents that manage to stay in their neighbourhood rather than on displacees (but see Porter 2009). The pre-occupation with gentrifiers comes partly because of the debate of the late 1980s and 1990s, about whether gentrification was caused by the changed consumer preferences of the new middle class or the needs and cycles of capital (Hamnett 1991, Smith 1996). In trying to explain gentrification researchers looked at gentrifiers, not displacees. In addition, Slater *et al.* (2004) have hinted at the natural affinity that middle-class academics might feel for gentrifiers. The focus on stayers can be partly attributed to the (proclaimed) inherent difficulty of tracking displacees[5], by means of a second-best option. Stayers then function as a proxy, through which experiences and the fates of displacees are construed (Davidson & Lees 2010).[6] Work that looks at residents publicly resisting their displacement (Newman & Wyly

4   Even Freeman's (2005) quite elaborate attempt has to rely on a proxy item for displacement, including all residents "who give as their reason for moving in the previous year that they wanted to consume less space, wanted to pay less rent, or moved in response to outside events including being evicted, health reasons, divorce, joining the armed services, or other involuntary reasons." (Freeman 2005:469)

5   However, as Wacquant (2008) has so poignantly pointed out, earlier generations of researchers proved more resourceful in overcoming these difficulties.

6   Another recent strand of literature goes even further downstream by examining how displacees evaluate their new housing situation after they were forced to move (e.g. Kleinhans & Kearns 2013 and the other articles in that special issue). While this constitutes a valuable contribution to the literature, I propose that

2006, Watt 2013) are laudable attempts to make a start on closing this void in the literature. However, what is urgently needed is research into the large majority of people dealing with displacement that do *not* succeed in successfully organising themselves and drawing public attention to their plight. For this reason, I suggest going upstream.

Moving upstream: four techniques for tracing the process of displacement

In the following section I first expand on the conceptual and practical aspects of my proposal to upstream research of displacement. I will use the case of Amsterdam in the Netherlands to motivate these ideas. I then explain how these ideas can potentially be developed into broadly applicable generic framework for locating and tracking displacement.

The core conceptual component of upstreaming is the argument that displacement is fundamentally a process. With the exception of extreme cases tenants do not become displaced overnight. Indeed, as we shall see, it is not uncommon for the displacement process to unfold gradually over a period of months, or years. To fully understand the phenomenon of displacement it is critical that researchers follow this process from its very beginning. By doing this we gain valuable new insights that existing *a posteriori* research techniques struggle to yield. In particular, we gain insight into the often subtle accumulation of pressures, stretched over time, that culminate in displacement. Closely intertwined with this is the manner in which tenants psychologically prepare themselves to the growing reality of displacement. Some tenants will resist, some will respond passively, some will respond pragmatically, but these responses do not occur in a vacuum: they are reflexive responses to the reality of forced, involuntary moving. *A posteriori* analysis can at best paint a flat picture of abstract neighbourhood change, but it cannot explain how or why.

If we accept that it is desirable to track this process from its beginning, how then do we practically go about this? I propose four main techniques, but before I do that, and at the risk of stating the obvious: once potential displacees have been located, it is essential to engage with them. On a quantitative level this engagement can consist, for example, of surveys conducted over time. Qualitatively tenants can be interviewed and, where possible, followed through the process via participation observation.

The first technique is *policy research*. Given the growing scale of state-led and state-supported gentrification, it is politically necessary for (local) governments to back-up their actions with policy documents, and the latter are usually publicly available. These policy documents lay the political foundation upon which the economic and legal reality of state-led gentrification is built. Often they will not go into micro-level detail about which house will be evicted, and when. But they do yield a great deal of indirect information that can be used to infer likely displacement hotspots. For example, for many years the local government of Amsterdam has been quite open about its belief that there is too much low-cost rental housing in the city. In broad lines this belief is shared by all major political parties and institutional partners of the city, including the six housing corporations, non-profit organisations that own approximately half of all Amsterdam housing. Accordingly this sentiment is echoed repeatedly in all major policy documents and is standard currency in circles of housing experts (i.e. Amsterdam Department of Housing 2009, Thinktank Market and Government 2011).

Similarly, it is easy to obtain literature describing the concentration of social housing throughout the city. Given the described policy consensus it is plausible that neighbourhoods with a high concentration of social housing, particularly those lying in economically attractive areas, will be acutely vulnerable to state-led gentrification. This, indeed, is exactly what happens in practice (e.g. in Amsterdam in the Indische Buurt and the Van der Pekbuurt).

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going upstream will provide more fruitful avenues for researching the *process of displacement*.

Moreover, policy documents do not only give an idea of where to look, but they also give clues as to the character of the displacement process, as gentrification at the level of blocks and neighbourhoods will often mirror the ambition level of policy at a more abstract level. For example, given the oft-stated goal of reducing the share of social housing in the city from 50% to 30% (Van Gent 2013), it is normal for an urban renewal project in Amsterdam to seek a comparable reduction at the local level when an individual block is upgraded or demolished. The advantage of using policy literature in this way is that it often signals future displacement hotspots, before they are fully realized, and thus gives clues as to where more fine-grained and labour-intensive displacement research techniques can be applied.

Our second method, *market monitoring,* is such a technique. The following example is illustrative. In the East of Amsterdam housing activists have undertaken an experiment whereby all significant (speculative) real-estate activities in certain streets and neighbourhoods (targeted for urban renewal) are carefully and systematically monitored over time (Action Group Stop Speculation 2008, Hotline Undesirable Landlord Behaviour 2008). Via public property registers (the *Kadaster*) it is possible to monitor who is buying which buildings and for how much. Public building permit registers indicate which house owners are looking for permission to renovate or demolish their houses, and the nature of the planned interventions. Administrative requests to transform rental houses into apartments for the owner-occupied market are also publicly available. Real-estate websites for private investors are regularly scrutinized for information, as dilapidated houses are sometimes presented as investment opportunities (conditional on being able to dislodge the remaining tenants). All this information is publicly available and when assembled into a whole not only provides a fine-grained image of the transformation of a neighbourhood over time, but also has a strong predictive function as to where displacement is likely to occur. For example, the sale of a dilapidated housing block to a speculative real-estate investor, and a simultaneous request for building permission is often a tell-tale sign that tenants in that block will in due course be put under pressure to leave (under the pretext of renovation). In this regard it is not unusual for housing activists to be able to predict this unhappy state of affairs, long before the tenant is aware that the situation has changed.

The third technique, examining *formal (displacement) frameworks,* is somewhat linked to the other two. In most liberal democracies a tenant usually has some formal avenues available to contest eviction, however large or small. The baseline option, available in all countries, is recourse to the civil courts. The chance of successfully blocking eviction through the civil courts depends heavily on the circumstances, and the country, in question. In any case such civil court procedures are often open to the public and leave an administrative paper-trail. In this way tenants in conflict with their landlords can be located through the court system before they are displaced, albeit at rather a late stage. (In the Netherlands, even if a judge rules that a tenant needs to leave, it is customary for the tenant to be given several months, or longer, to seek new housing, giving the researcher time to locate them). Some countries also have public sub-legal arbitration bodies in which tenants and landlords can address disputes about rent increases or maintenance (such as the *Huurcommissie* in the Netherlands and the *Commissions Départementale de Conciliation* in France); such disputes are often also a proxy for more fundamental displacement-related conflicts.

More interesting, however, are the more sophisticated tenant participation schemes that various European states employ to smooth the process of urban renewal (e.g. for England, see Blakeley & Evans 2009, for the Netherlands Uitermark 2009). Such schemes are a rich source of information about potential displacement. In Amsterdam the tenant participation model involves a heavy bureaucratic structure whereby tenants, organized in committees, and institutional house-owners negotiate, over a period often lasting several years, about the conditions under which the urban renewal will take place. Although on paper

this sounds attractive the reality is rather more complex (Huisman forthcoming). The ostensibly democratic core of the process is overshadowed by the economic and legal power of the house-owners to govern the terms of the negotiation and the prevailing policy climate which desires large-scale transformation of the renting stock into buying apartments. Indeed, tenants that initially challenge the plans of the housing corporation often find themselves either powerless and marginalized, or disciplined into reasonable behavior in which they do not negotiate over *whether,* but *how* they will be displaced.

Indeed, such negotiations often take years, during which it is possible to attend the various meetings between tenants and house-owners, and to observe how the hopes and aspirations of tenants shifts over time. Different individuals and groups internalize and process the threat of displacement in different ways and this can best be understood by directly participating as a researcher in the process. In the Netherlands such processes are (semi-)public and not too difficult to access.

The fourth and final technique involves accessing and leveraging *advocacy networks.* Broadly speaking such networks comprise all tenants and organizations that actively campaign for, or otherwise advocate, the interests of tenants. This can encompass politically-organized groups of tenants, lawyers specialized in defending tenants, sympathetic (often smaller, left-wing) political parties, non-governmental tenants organizations and quasi-governmental tenants organizations. Due to the nature of their activities such groups often have a broader understanding of urban renewal processes and quite expansive networks. Such groups are likely to be open to researchers trying to understand the phenomenon of displacement better, as (certainly in the Netherlands) the core of their advocacy is often defending the right of tenants to stay put under reasonable conditions. Such groups may also have 'upstreamed' information about which blocks and neighbourhoods are likely to soon enter the formal participation procedure discussed in the third point. I was, via such a tenant support institution, able to access information about 13 blocks at the very start of the participation procedure (Huisman forthcoming). If I had had the capacity to follow all such procedures in detail and to their conclusion I anticipate that I would have had access to potentially hundreds of tenants who – ultimately – were involuntarily dislocated.

With appropriate resources the four techniques I describe could be deployed on a large scale, providing a structural framework for detecting displacement upstream. The main limitation is manpower and (and much less significantly) some of the usual complexities associated with mining publicly-available databases for information. In any case I would dare to suggest that a focused and creative group academic researchers could, by going upstream in the ways I mention, document a significant percentage of all major displacement processes active in Amsterdam.

A burning question, of course, is how far this can be translated to other cities and other countries. I am optimistic about this. *Policy research* is possible in all countries, and is an essential prerequisite if one is to fully understand the political-economic reality of a city's housing market. *Market monitoring* is also possible in all countries, because almost all housing markets are characterized by a blend of private market, regulation (e.g. building regulations) and monitoring (e.g. property registers), although the balance of course shifts from country to country. *Formal (displacement) frameworks* are arguably more of a feature of welfare state economies although, as mentioned, such frameworks do exist (at least in a minimalistic, legalistic sense) in Anglo-Saxon economies. Finally, *advocacy networks* always exist at some level, although the balance between formal and informal advocacy is again country-dependent.

In any case I firmly believe that all four techniques, to varying degrees, can be applied in all countries. The question, of course, is whether researchers are really willing to invest the time and energy required to go upstream effectively…

Conclusion: Tackling the elusive problem of displacement by going further upstream

Due to the fact that gentrification is now a key goal of many urban renewal strategies, it has become a widespread global phenomenon affecting many households and neighbourhoods across the world. For this reason it is more critical than ever that the displacement that gentrification causes is researched rigorously. Unfortunately techniques for researching displacement are, as most scholars would admit, still unsatisfactory. In this paper I have argued that a fundamental reason for this shortcoming is the failure to understand that displacement is a *process*, stretched over time, and that this holds for direct displacement just as much as for more indirect forms of displacement. By only looking at the end of the river, downstream, we will at best obtain a picture of what happened to a neighbourhood, but not how or why, and this will offer no insight into why some tenants manage to stay while others do not. Only by following tenants from the beginning of the displacement process can we understand the accumulation of events and pressures that culminate in displacement and which shape the responses of tenants.

To address this limitation of the literature I have proposed the concept of *upstreaming*: identifying the displacement process at a very early stage, perhaps months or years before the moment a tenant leaves, and engaging with tenants as their status changes – sometimes gradually – from tenant to displacee.

By referring to the case of Amsterdam I have identified four strategies that allow the researcher to travel upstream and which will be reproducable in any liberal democratic regime. *Policy research* – what does local government actually say about urban renewal and transformation? - allows us to understand the general political framework within which state-led gentrification occurs. Often such policy documents are a strong pointer to the general location and intensity of future displacement hot-spots. *Market monitoring* allows us to predict potential displacement via the footprint it leaves in real-estate markets, property registers and permit procedures. Via *formal displacment frameworks* we are able to actively follow the tenant through the often protracted bureaucratic procedures which can preceed direct displacement, whether that be via the courts or more institutionalized frameworks. In European welfare states, for example, such procedures often accompany urban renewal and can last months or even years, and have a relatively accessible character. Fourthly, researchers should not shy from accessing *tenant advocacy networks* as these have every reason to be abreast of the spectre of displacement before it has fully materialised, and to assist those researchers striving to understand the phenomenon better.

Going upstream to locate displacees, however, is not enough. Locating tenants early in the process yields little gain if researchers then use the same 'snapshot' statistics that are currently used *a posteriori* to argue for (absence of) displacement. Regular surveys, interviews and participant observation should be deployed at high enough resolution and frequency to be able to watch the process of displacement truly unfold.

Upstreaming is a difficult task, certainly, but as I argue in this paper it is certainly possible. Displacees can be found, if resourceful researchers are willing to spend time watching for and tracking the many warning signals that displacement trajectories generate months, or even years, before the tenant is actually displaced.

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