



MIAMI UNIVERSITY'S
**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT**
IN OVER-THE-RHINE

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ECONOCIDE OVER-THE-RHINE
A Working Paper

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“What’s going on?” (Marvin Gaye)

“Like Genocide, So Econocide” (Alice Skirtz)



Every once in a while in the sea of intellectual discourse a term surfaces that resonates, that galvanizes the historical moment, that has gravitas. Stokely Carmichael’s “Black Power” was one of those terms. Betty Friedan’s “problem with no name” another. “Econocide” now is one of those terms. It is certainly the case in Cincinnati. And I am not talking about econocide’s lure as a term

bandied about by academics, not when eighty-two year-old Dorsey Stebbins religiously stands weekly on street corners pointing his “Econocide” sign to all passers-by. Something’s going on here.

These are arresting times, marked by an uncertain future made all the more so by a sense of futility that we can’t get a handle on the complexity of problems we face with the analyses and tools we now have. It’s as if today’s established institutions are no match for the large social and political problems of the world that need desperate attention. These problems hardly need an extensive recounting, we all know them—systems breakdown in world ecology (climate change, species extinction, water depletion, land and ocean degradation), political-economy (massive inequality, the permanency of unemployment, elimination of welfare support systems, increasing criminalization and incarceration), and spiritual health (epidemic stress levels, breakdown of community and family relations, unhappiness). None of these problems are helped by a current reality marked by data storms so thick that languages, discourses, vocabulary, and narratives have difficulty surviving to provide direction. This is especially so for those narratives countering the mainstream, most are swallowed up whole. The ways human society comes to grasp these arresting times is not an academic question but a matter of survival. We must do things differently. And part of this project must entail a struggle over new languages and narratives that can recognize and analyze the barriers impeding our capacity to do things differently. I believe econocide provides that recognition and analysis.

It’s a tall order indeed to suggest econocide as a theoretical frame capable of capturing this world historical moment and providing a way forward. But before I elaborate on such, I first want to pay homage to the rich history of theoretical analyses that has and continues to characterize central city communities of color through the lenses of urban colonialism or domestic neocolonialism. Econocide has a home within these analyses but also contributes something much more.

Domestic Neocolonialism Then and Now: From Colonialism to Econocide

In Fall 2007 *The Black Scholar* published my piece “Colony Over-the-Rhine,” (Dutton, 2007), which drew heavily from Robert Allen’s *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, published in 1969. In that article I sought to make sense of the dynamics affecting the community I have worked in since 1981 (which I see as a microcosm of national trends)—Over-the-Rhine, a poor mostly black neighborhood, adjacent to the downtown core of Cincinnati, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and marked by housing abandonment, homelessness, and a now surging white gentrification. This is only one side of the story, of course, as for over 40 years now an ensemble of organizations calling itself the Over-the-Rhine

People's Movement has consistently fought for social justice and human rights in areas such as affordable housing, homelessness, schooling, and cultural-political life.

In *Black Awakening*, Allen's analysis of a prompt by Philip Hauser, a population expert at the time, caught my attention. Paraphrasing Hauser, Allen said, "Either the country can make a heavy investment aimed at eliminating ghettos or it can suppress rebellious blacks" (1969, 173). Hauser himself continues: "If we are not prepared to make the investment in human resources that is required, we will be forced to increase our investment in the police, the National Guard, and the Army. And possibly—it can happen here—we may be forced to resort to concentration camps and even genocide" (173). For Allen, there was a third choice, discussing what he called the "corporate-capitalist strategy." Allen exposed to great effect what he called "domestic neocolonialism," which operated: 1) to establish a black middle class as a "beneficial force" to prove that blacks can succeed within capitalism; 2) to further corporate market-share into ghettos under the structure of a hidden white administration; 3) to tokenize organic black leaders; and 4) to translate black power into black capitalism. In "Colony Over-the-Rhine" I picked up where Allen left off, and posed three questions: 1) what happened to the corporate-capitalist strategy and what does it look like today? 2) why did the country not make the investment to eliminate ghettos? And 3) is it too rhetorical to suggest that urban policy today entails in large part what Hauser feared—a militarist suppression of people of color (and those homeless) in the form of expanding police forces, mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and punitive legislation that seek to regulate public space by evicting such "undesirables" and criminalizing them?

Certainly much has changed since *Black Awakening* was published forty-five years ago, throwing into relief how the meanings of "domestic neocolonialism" have changed over those years. Given new world historical conditions that are commonly described as "postcolonial," several contemporary scholars explore important issues that arise from this analysis. Does the frame of domestic neocolonialism still hold? Which meanings are still relevant, which have passed? Has the frame of domestic neocolonialism outlived its usefulness?

Several scholars look precisely at these questions, and in arguing for continued relevance, evoke new descriptors to indicate the new kinds of colonialism, both international and domestic, that seem to be in play today. For example, ethnic studies scholar Ramon Grosfoguel, building on the work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, evokes "coloniality" as the preferred term to "address 'colonial situations' in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system" (Grosfoguel, 2003, 146). Grosfoguel elaborates, "The dominant representations of the world today assume that 'colonial situations' ceased to exist after the

demise of ‘colonial administrations’ fifty years ago. This mythology about the so-called decolonization of the world obscures the continuities between the colonial past and current global colonial/racial hierarchies and contributes to the invisibility of ‘coloniality’ today” (147). Scholars Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Joao Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Meneses (2007) use similar language, insisting that “the end of political colonialism did not mean the end of colonialism as a social relationship associated with specific forms of knowledge and power” (xxxiv-v). Here colonialism continues today as an “authoritarian and discriminatory mentality and form of sociability” that illustrates just how much “the colonial past remains in the post-colonial present” (xxxiv-v). This continuation of a new kind of colonialism in postcolonial times is also investigated by Harry Magdoff in his *Imperialism without Colonies*. In the “Introduction” to Magdoff’s book, John Bellamy Foster distinguishes “the reality of an informal imperialism of free trade” from that of “overt instances of political and territorial control ushered in by actual military conquest” (Foster, 2003, 13, 15).

For many scholars these terms—coloniality of power, domestic neocolonialism, imperialism without colonies—while perhaps not completely interchangeable, can help in understanding today’s urban communities of color like Over-the-Rhine. I’ve long suggested that Over-the-Rhine is the domestic face of world colonialism, for example, and these analyses are helpful. More precisely, conversations about urban colonialism immediately conjure images of gentrification; gentrification as the “new urban colonialism” is more and more accepted as a given. But what kind of colonialism is it?

It may not be the kind that most worried Allen back in 1969. Then, the corporate-capitalist, neocolonial agenda was to establish a compliant black middle class, to transform black power into black capitalism, to tokenize black leaders, and to “ease corporate penetration of the black communities and facilitate corporate planning and programming of the markets and the human resources in those communities” (Allen, 1969, 187-88). Allen continues: “When this same process occurs between a major power and an undeveloped country it is called neocolonialism. This latter term has been used in this study to describe corporate activities in the ghetto, because these efforts...are analogous to corporate penetration of an underdeveloped country. The methods and social objectives in both cases are identical” (188).

Most of what Allen portrayed has come to pass, and certainly a compliant black middle class that bonds with capitalism through assimilation and tokenism are ends still pursued. But “corporate penetration” to utilize the human resources in ghetto communities may not be the corporate-capitalist strategy of choice today. This is the political line examined in *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism*, an anthology edited by urban studies

scholars Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge who elaborate how gentrification today “raises questions not just about its interrelation with globalization but also its manifestation as a form of new urban colonialism” (2). Atkinson and Bridge see three ways in which gentrification exemplifies colonialism: 1) Through its cultural power to privilege the white middle class as the “new savior of the city;” 2) through its “universalizing of certain forms of (de)regulation” that dispossesses public coffers and redirects those monies to subsidize market-rate development (“privatization of housing markets”); and 3) through its integration with public administration such that gentrification becomes the “entrepreneurial style of urban governance”—the public and the private become indistinguishable (2).

This is a colonialism of a different color, one not so interested merely in penetrating existing human resources or extracting labor from a dispossessed population. This is not about harnessing a left-behind, ghetto population as a labor force to be exploited or setting up the neocolonial infrastructure to oversee that exploitation and extract resources. No, this is a colonialism of another kind, but one that enjoys (perversely so) a long history in America. This is that variant of colonialism in line with the history of this country as a settler state that marginalized, exterminated, or removed the “undesirables” whose very presence hindered the (colonialist) project.

In this sense gentrification as a modern-day form of colonialism is nothing new, although characteristics may be different. It is certainly racist (“white middle class saviors”) in that it targets communities of color and mobilizes their residents for removal, or transfer, or displacement. It is also classist in that economic policies spur “homeownership” and market-rate development, all the while suggesting that the need of lower income residents can be met by such economically exclusive approaches. And insofar as the state aligns with gentrification and essentially sanctions it as urban policy, racism and classism now become institutionalized official state policy (Madden; Older).

As the city creates a favorable business climate based upon privatization and public/private partnerships, the flipside is that all benefits and awards accrue to “elite gentrifiers by violently removing all traces of the poor and homeless” (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005, 13; Diskin and Dutton, 2006). In other words, this is not a situation where the outcomes of urban policy just happen to impact the poor negatively. No, this is an intentional, revengeful, or “revanchist” (Smith, 1996) urban policy where the active defense of privilege and class is predicated upon the denial and removal of the poor. In the words of Martin J. Murray from his compelling *Taming the Disorderly City*, revanchist urbanism is “where urban stakeholders are actively engaged in a seemingly zero-sum competition over access to scarce resources, and where the victorious haves are willing

to go to great lengths to defend their privilege...and have become increasingly vicious in keeping the have-nots at bay.” For Murray the new urban paradigm is one marked by a “vindictive rhetoric of incipient social warfare that calculates the interests of the middle classes and the urban poor as a zero-sum game where there are either winners or losers” (234-35).

This is urban policy with a vengeance. The city promotes an agenda to “sanitize” urban neighborhoods. Countering crime, articulated through militaristic measures (more jails, more police, more punitive legislation) and never through addressing root causes, becomes the city’s number one issue. Militarism moves to center stage in implementing urban policy; the Indian reservation becomes today’s prison.

Econocide et al

That was my conclusion at the end of “Colony Over-the-Rhine” (2007), and this, I think, takes us beyond the parameters of domestic neocolonialism as a theoretical frame to explain places like Over-the-Rhine today. At that time I sensed terms like domestic neocolonialism were feeling a bit tired, that their usefulness in addressing new, world historical conditions playing out in cities, was waning. Something else is at work in cities and everywhere else actually, requiring newer, theoretical conceptions that a new term can provide. “**Econocide**” is now that term that should command attention. It’s not that econocide is counter to neocolonial models; it’s more that it extends and sharpens those analyses, opening up a new theoretical terrain where analyses can point to different horizons.

It is interesting, and more than a little compelling, that a range of scholars from across the political spectrum are grappling for new terms to capture these new conditions—conditions whereby whole peoples are being ignored, excluded, abandoned, written off, disposed of, erased, left to their own devices. The terms are plentiful, so much so the mere fact of their quantity suggests we may be on the cusp of a theoretical breakthrough. Though the descriptors are different, they are trying to characterize similar sentiments.

I was first introduced to the term econocide through theorist Arjun Appadurai (2006) in his poignant, small book *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Appadurai’s concern is how violence is taking new forms in our era of “intense globalization,” of which ethnic cleansing and culturally motivated violence perpetrated on a large scale are two of the most pressing examples. For Appadurai, the extent and rapidity of globalization have produced fearful conditions of anxiety and uncertainty, with one response being an increased violence against minorities, immigrants, the poor and homeless, and the outcast as a kind of exorcism to produce certainty and stability. Violence becomes a

kind of purification rite on the part of “majoritarian identities” to purge their fear of marginalized populations that now must be written off and targeted for removal. As he says, “Econocide is a worldwide tendency to arrange the disappearance of the losers in the great drama of globalization” (Appadurai, 41).

There is a lot to unpack here for such a simple sentence. Allow me to address three points.

1) First is the reference to “losers,” which brings to mind Orwell’s “**Unpersons**” from his dystopian, and in many ways prophetic novel, *1984*. For Orwell an unperson is someone who is not just killed (vaporized) but is also erased from the public record, from history, such that no trace can be found (Orwell).

Mike Davis evokes “**Surplus Humanity**” from his *Planet of Slums* as a descriptor for econocide. “Instead of being a focus for growth and prosperity,” he says, “the cities [of the world] have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade...” As compared to Orwell, Davis holds onto some optimism in his analysis, wondering to what extent an informal proletariat possesses “that most potent of Marxist talismans: ‘historical agency.’ Can disincorporated labour be reincorporated in a global emancipatory project?” While Davis hopes, he is more than aware of those powerful social-political forces managing “populist spectacle and appeals to ethnic unity” that undermine the emancipatory project at every turn (Davis).

Public intellectuals Henry Giroux and Zygmunt Bauman are not so optimistic. In **Politics of Disposability** Giroux cautions that “the unproductive (the poor, weak and racially marginalized) are considered useless and therefore expendable; a politics in which entire populations are considered disposable...consigned to fend for themselves.” Giroux continues, “Defined primarily through a discourse of ‘lack’ in the face of the social imperatives of good character, personal responsibility, and hyper-individualism, entire populations are expelled from the index of moral concerns” (Giroux, 2006). Bauman says something similar in his descriptor **Wasted Lives**, where disposed groups are the “leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking” (Bauman).

World intellectual and activist Arundhati Roy in her native context of India evokes through **Secessionist Struggle** a deepening class struggle where those most “vulnerable” are cast off. “You don’t have to be a genius to read the signs,” she says. “We have a growing middle class, reared on a diet of radical consumerism and aggressive greed...The greed that is being generated (and marketed as a value interchangeable with nationalism) can only be sated by grabbing land, water and resources from the vulnerable. What we’re

witnessing is the most successful secessionist struggle ever waged in independent India—the secession of the middle and upper classes from the rest of the country” (Roy).

These kinds of economic and class trends are alarming as French biographer and novelist Vivianne Forrester makes clear in *The Economic Horror*, her internationally recognized 1996 book about the world economy. Evoking **Superfluous**, she writes, “For the first time in history, the vast majority of human beings are no longer indispensable to the small number of those who run the world economy. The economy is increasingly wrapped up in pure speculation. The working masses and their cost are becoming superfluous. In other words, there is something worse that actually being exploited and that is no longer to be even worth exploiting” (Forrester). Scholars William Julius Wilson and Thomas Piketty chart similar waters. Wilson laments the consequences of “**Jobless Poverty**,” where people are made useless *When Work Disappears* due to global economic shifts that have gutted urban communities of color. Piketty argues persuasively that a return to America’s Gilded Age of “super-inequality” is not only in the offing, but is actually capitalism’s normal state of being. He might argue that *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is precisely what econocide actually is.

2) Second, stemming from Appadurai’s statement about arranging disappearances is a question of political capacity to resist those processes. In other words, as undesirables are being erased, pushed aside, idled, made to disappear, are there countervailing forces at play to resist? You have to wonder about the role of the state under conditions of econocide. To what extent does the state have the capacity today to be inclusive, to build or even promote a veritable public realm?

World philosopher Slavoj Zizek doesn’t think the state can do so. In “How to Begin from the Beginning” Zizek spells out four antagonisms he feels may not be contained by capitalism, with the fourth one being the most important in his mind for all humankind. Zizek’s concern is **Social Apartheid**, which is “the gap that separates the excluded from the included” through “new walls and slums.” “There is nothing more private than a state community which perceives the excluded as a threat and worries how to keep them at a proper distance” (Zizek).

Keeping the excluded at a proper distance has been the game plan for a while now, and it has been very effective. According to Adolph Reed in evoking **Proto-Fascism** as an econocide-like term, when Newt Gingrich and his comrades “took over Congress in 1994, they sneeringly boasted that they intended to take the federal government back to the 1920s...They also wanted to extirpate from the culture the idea that government can be an active force for making most people’s lives better” (Reed). Eric Mann, director of the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, offers a similar

analysis: “One of the greatest crimes of right wing ideology as perfected under Ronald Reagan was that, as it tore down support for social welfare and promoted the return of the U.S. to unbridled free-market capitalism, it undermined the credibility of any theories that held society responsible for the problems of economically and socially oppressed groups” (Mann).

The state is now hollowed out, disemboweled of any of its public welfare responsibilities, where “American liberty is tweaked to mean freedom *from* state protection” (Ong). This is from scholar Aihwa Ong, who through her **Incarceral Logic** worries like *Black Commentator* Editorial Board member Ethel Long-Scott: “Today the fundamentally inhumane contradiction of the American economy is that it doesn’t need American workers anymore—of any color...As a result America, like much of the world, faces a growing polarization of wealth and poverty. In that reality of harsh global capitalism, the new racism is poverty...We are becoming more of a police state as this impoverished low-wage and no-wage class is seen as potentially explosive and must be held in check...Managing and controlling the new class of dispossessed is the new paradigm of policing and incarceration” (Long-Scott). Managing and policing through exploding incarceration rates in the U.S. has been well documented through the important work of Michelle Alexander and what she calls **The New Jim Crow** (Alexander), and Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Davis and what they term **Mega-Incarceration** (Abu-Jamal and Davis).

3) Third, I wonder—under world, econocidal conditions that produce a surplus humanity of losers, disposed of and wasting away in a social apartheid where wealthy classes secede from responsibilities to attend to their less fortunate brethren and where the state furthers disappearances and polices the fallout—if a genuine public realm is even possible under conditions of econocide? Is social empathy possible that can actually develop into a deeper solidarity? What do community or the commons mean under these kinds of conditions?

In her insightful review of Louis Uchitelle’s **Acquiescence**, another evocation of econocide, JoAnn Wypijewski describes how “Uchitelle floats a theory that the acquiescence he describes has something to do with a breakdown in community.” For Uchitelle the trajectory of the breakdown begins in the “fractal Sixties” and then moves forward in time as “economic contraction, oil shock, stagflation and the famous Carter-era ‘malaise’” piles on to “topple Keynes and embrace a manic individualism wallowing in Christopher Lasch’s ‘culture of narcissism.’” Wypijewski refers specifically to the fallout from Katrina that exposed an American underbelly for all to see and that no one wants to acknowledge, “It is unimpeachable that a country that leaves people to die on roofs and overpasses has lost its sense of the common” (Wypijewski).

Losing a sense of the common is precisely what concerns writer Tim Wise in **Empathic Collapse**, “The reason why we don’t think about the unemployed in a way that ends the suffering of unemployment and poverty is because at some level we’ve decided that they are not us and we are not they” (Wise). Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich characterizes this as **America’s “We” Problem**, but now in a way reminiscent of Arundhati Roy’s concern of class struggle, says “The pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’ are the most important of political words. They demarcate who’s within the sphere of mutual responsibility, and who’s not.” Reich feels that one of the most important political questions is how any nation draws these boundaries. “Why in recent years have so many middle-class and wealthy Americans pulled the border in closer...Being rich in today’s America means not having to come across anyone who isn’t. Exclusive prep schools, elite colleges, private jets, gated communities, tony resorts, symphony halls and opera houses, and vacation homes...all insulate them from the rabble” (Reich).

Losing a sense of the common also entails a loss of history. Mumia Abu-Jamal is particularly poignant here with his descriptor for econocide, **Mentacide**. “The more black children watch popular culture, the more damage it does. It creates a kind of mentacide, it destroys their consciousness. [We see] the obliteration of African American culture in the minds of African American children so they do not know their history or from whence they come...a kind of historical genocide” (Abu-Jamal).

Acquiescence through manic individualism or empathic collapse through the loss of a social “we”—the loss of the common—suggests a social subjectivity where the self comes to believe that they are on their own, that they are the agents of their own destiny and as such there is no responsibility that anyone has for anyone. This is what scholar Norman Geras is getting at with his **Contract of Mutual Indifference**: “Unmoved by the emergencies of others, no one can reasonably expect to be helped in deep trouble themselves, or consider others obligated to help them.” Characterizing the overall moral culture as one unmoved by the calamity of others, “The contract of mutual indifference licenses that everything may be done to you and your fellow human beings, that anything at all may befall you or them, without this impinging on anyone’s obligations; no one need disturb the continued pursuit of their own ends” (Geras).

It is one thing to navigate these churning waters of econocide if one has the resources to support one’s agency. But what happens on the part of those with very limited resources, who were stranded on roof tops, who live far below the reach of the mainstream market, who have been beaten down so far to where they internalize their own agency as a lack or vacancy, and worse, they come to see their own need of care as a “scourge or pathology” (Giroux, 2014) on the wider society?

This must be econocide's end game, downloaded into people's consciousness where through a daily life under conditions of erasure, of not being seen, of being told they are criminals, lazy, drug dealers, low-lives, the end result is that "people have difficulty seeing themselves as human beings at all." Those are the words of scholar Christopher Kolb whose anthropology dissertation on Over-the-Rhine reveals great insight into how too many Over-the-Rhine citizens, because they are currently experiencing the blunt edge of gentrification and removal, their "erasure seeps into their self-experience and existential orientation in the world," meaning, they are "routinely forced to actively navigate their own lack of existence." Experiencing their own disappearance, citizens slide from "helplessness to hopelessness to nothingness" (Kolb).

Econocide in Over-the-Rhine

Christopher Kolb's sober analysis returns us to Over-the-Rhine and specifically to scholar and activist Alice Skirtz and her excellent book *Econocide: Elimination of the Urban Poor* (Skirtz). Skirtz exposes in biting detail just how, through what can be only considered as a conscious alliance of city power and the corporate sector, institutionally violent gentrification actually is. Her book couldn't be more timely.

Over-the-Rhine is changing rapidly—gentrifying—and it is now marked by the extremes of wealth and poverty, with a burgeoning whiter middle class and a community mostly of color fighting for visibility and their rights, but living day-to-day on the edge of displacement and homelessness. The neighborhood is adjacent to the downtown core and, because it never experienced the urban renewal wrecking ball, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its contiguous and beautiful Italianate urban architecture.

Through the establishment of the Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC) in 2003 with the City's blessing and support, the city administration and corporate power have essentially merged into one entity, pursuing a "bring-in-the-rich" scheme under the guise of "economic mix" and "mixed-income development."¹ And on this score the City/corporate alliance has been quite "successful," so much so that everyone is getting giddy. In the mainstream media outlets 3CDC can do no wrong (the owner and publisher of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* sits on 3CDC's board, which has representation from nearly every other powerful corporation in Cincinnati at the CEO-level—3CDC is no ordinary development company). What seems to make everyone so happy is now codified by the term "Urban Renaissance," a brilliant term that frames people's consciousness about the changes taking place in Over-the-Rhine in two ways.

First, by evoking Renaissance with its allusions to the Italian Renaissance of the 1400s and the birth of a new human spirit coming

out of the Dark Ages, a subtle and subliminal connection is made between Over-the-Rhine in its recent history with the Dark Ages. Equating Over-the-Rhine with the Dark Ages effectively erases the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement and its multiple gains (Dutton, 2012). Urban Renaissance is an econocidal term because, since "nothing" happened during the Dark Ages (which is why we call them that), so too the claim is that nothing of consequence happened in Over-the-Rhine in the last four decades. The neighborhood—its people and organizations who built life when everyone else turned their backs on those oppressed and who still are trying to remain—is simply erased, not seen, made invisible. Perfect. Equation complete.

The second way in which the narrative of Urban Renaissance frames people's consciousness is the assumption that upscale development is automatically good for all citizens of all classes. There is a lot to unpack here, but no matter what register one selects, the subliminal message reinforced over and over is that a white middle class of hipsters, "urban pioneers," and empty nesters is the barometer of success for anyone else—that black people will benefit by the presence of white people; those homeless will benefit by homeowners; that the unemployed will now be moved to gain employment no matter the wage; and so on. There is no reciprocity here. It's all one directional.

Skirtz's analysis shows the recent trends of gentrification and the narrative of Urban Renaissance that ideologically greases those trends for the scams they are. Without going into a full book review, which I have done elsewhere (Dutton, 2013), suffice it to say is that *Econocide: Elimination of the Urban Poor* should be required reading for all interested in urban America. While concentrating on Cincinnati, and specifically Over-the-Rhine, it is not parochial. Skirtz's analysis is happening in every city. And what bothers her, and should bother everyone, is the extent to which—through legislation, policy, zoning and other codes, and ordinances—erasure and elimination of the urban poor form the objective of overall urban policy. That is, econocide, is not some aberration or unfortunate byproduct of gentrification. It is the game plan, the directive, the intention. And this is why gentrification is institutionalized violence, no matter how one tries to pretend otherwise, because at its core the point is erasure, making people disappear.

Skirtz' book brings the overarching analyses of Orwell, Appadurai, Giroux, Zizek, Davis and all the others to bear upon one city, to show how what she calls "economic others" are perceived as "threats to a larger, more privileged community," which sets the "stage for their exclusion from the universe of obligation." With econocide in the driver's seat of urban policy we are no longer talking about a relation between the haves and have-nots. No, the relation now is between *the haves and those-not-needed-nor-wanted*.

The power of econocide as an analytical tool is that it works at multiple scales. It explains processes leading to incarceration, gentrification, permanent poverty, and inequality at a large scale, and it is just as insightful describing processes of daily life. Imagine being on the receiving end of econocide, where your daily experience in Over-the-Rhine easily entails the following.ⁱⁱ

-You are told that the community you have spent your life trying to build is little more than a place full of drugs and darkness, of homelessness and black criminality, a void, an absence, a geography waiting for the “right mix of people” to bring about the new “urban renaissance;”

-You are told that your very presence in your own community is disorderly, unwanted, unattractive, displeasing, and that you are not a “good neighbor;”

-You come to feel that you are a stranger in your own neighborhood;ⁱⁱⁱ

-Your own history is retold in ways that edits you out;

-You are told that you don’t appreciate the historic architecture and that you don’t have the education to appreciate it anyway;

-You find that with the recent bankruptcy of one large landowner, which unleashed nearly a 1,000 Section 8 housing units to the private sector, also removed your clientele for your small neighborhood-serving hardware store, forcing you out of business (Roh’s Hardware);

-You are told, when you try to share your history with neighborhood newcomers, that that is all in the past, no longer relevant, and we should only look forward to the future;

-You watch a new, four-story mural being painted on an important entry point to the neighborhood from downtown. The image is the likeness of former white council member, an ardent supporter of gentrification in Over-the-Rhine, in tux and tails who is tipping his top hat as if to say, “Come gentrify;”

-You find that parts of your neighborhood are branded as the “Gateway Quarter” or the “Brewery District,” part of the gentrifier-friendly strategy to entice investment for the new urban playground;

-You confront every day on your walk through the neighborhood the posting of new maps of the Gateway Quarter and you see that just about every institution of the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement is excluded;

-You find that after a new, market-rate development is completed just across the alley from you that not only is the alley privatized through locked gates, but that your private backyard gate that allows you access to the alley is padlocked from the alley side;

-You are instructed to just say no to drugs, stay in school, stay married, get a job, and that homelessness is a choice you made;

-You are taught that “mass unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disenfranchisement” are personal problems (Marable, 2006);

-You are told that the use of force, backed by the police, prisons, surveillance, and punitive social policy, with a dash of free-market fundamentalism, will solve all social problems;

-You’re told that deregulation for the mobility of corporate capital, coupled with the regulation of urban public space by punitive social policy and police sweeps (what Don Mitchell (2003) refers to as the annihilation of space by law), are precisely needed to serve your interests;

-You are told of the need for outside, corporate forces—with the city’s blessing and money—to lead the charge in redeveloping your neighborhood because there is just too much fragmentation and the successful organizations you have built over the decades are deemed incapable;

-You find as a prominent non-profit housing development corporation with a long history in developing excellent housing for people in true need, that after generating and modeling a citizen-based vision plan for a multi-block sub-neighborhood that 3CDC knew about and supported, that 3CDC ignores it and pursues its own plan for that area without citizen participation;

-And you find that your political voice is neutralized because the City privatizes and surrenders its public decision-making over to the likes of 3CDC with no provision for grievance or recourse. While 3CDC will call for public meetings on the design of public parks, you never really know how and when decisions are made behind closed doors, because its meetings are inaccessible to public observation, participation, or oversight.

These actual experiences of citizens of Over-the-Rhine are harmful, punitive, econocidal. And while they rain down on all Cincinnatians, the effects are quite different for those generally whiter and wealthier. For too many Cincinnatians displacement by gentrification, crime prevention by police sweeps and mass incarceration, and social cleansing by criminalizing young blacks and those homeless are simply facts of life, commonsense. Econocide just is—naturalized (Dutton, 2010). But for Over-the-Rhine residents, such a soaking means that social oppression

becomes internalized. Econocide downloads—and this is why Kolb is right—econocide’s subjectivity moves almost seamlessly from helplessness to hopelessness to nothingness.

The Future? Dystopian or Empathic

Beyond Dorsey Stebbins and the citizens of Over-the-Rhine, as well as world scholars and intellectuals, the subject of econocide plays out in another important realm—popular culture and the Hollywood blockbuster. Though here again the term is not explicitly used, these films are clearly portraying econocide. Consider three recent blockbusters, *District 9*, *Elysium*, and *Divergent*.^{iv}

District 9 is not the typical alien movie, precisely because in the end the movie is not really about aliens at all. Here, aliens are metaphors for human stand-ins—homeless people, people of color, immigrants, marginalized groups generally, the perfect incarnation of those not-needed-nor-wanted. The storyline is simple. After 28 years of a spacecraft hovering over Johannesburg, South Africa, stalled out and appearing derelict, military forces break into the ship to find thousands of emaciated aliens. Not knowing what to do with the creatures, they are brought down into the Soweto ghetto (the visuals are stunning) and more or less left alone until a large conglomerate, Multi-National United (MNU), wants their land and technology. Denigrated and vilified as “prawns,” the movie charts the brutal removal of the aliens from what they understand as their home-away-from-home to a new and “improved” facility out of sight of humanity, and thus its moral sensibilities. The movie is a straight-up account of arranging disappearances to further dominant corporate interests.

In *Elysium*, directed by Neill Blomkamp who also directed *District 9*, the setting is 2154 and the extremes of wealth and poverty could not be more stark. In the film, Elysium is the large, circular space station clearly visible orbiting overhead, home to the wealthy and is a lush, green oasis where all needs are taken care of, especially healthcare. Back on Earth, life among the masses is ugly, wind-swept, dirty, full of drudgery (again the visuals are arresting). As would be expected, those on Earth who attempt to reach Elysium are literally blown out of the sky, at least until Matt Damon comes along. Talk about one hell of a gated satellite! Both Arundhati Roy’s secessionist struggle and Slavoj Žižek’s social apartheid are but two examples that come to mind that vividly exemplify the econocidal dimensions of this film.

In the recently released *Divergent*, an apocalyptic future society is broken into distinct factions, and as most of the film critics will tell you, there are five. According to top critic Christy Lemire, the five factions are arranged according to a defining trait, “The Amity are happy, hippie farmers who dress in shades of sorbet. The Candor run

the judicial system and value truth above all else. The Erudite are the serious-minded scholars who wear conservative, dark blue. The Abnegation are known for their selflessness and modesty. And the pierced-and-tatted Dauntless are the brave soldiers who protect the city” (Lemire). As the story unfolds it becomes clear the “Divergent” are those who don’t fit into just one faction.

There is one more faction, and it’s interesting to note that many critics fail to mention it (an example of econocide, of a group being written off?). This is the factionless, and even in Veronica Roth’s book they don’t receive a capital letter to dignify their existence. In the film *Divergent* the factionless’ rare screen time portrays them as discarded and homeless, who drift through the dark spaces of a ruined Chicago. The setup of *Divergent* clearly expresses a vastly unequal, econocidal society where Orwell’s unpersons roam the streets and the machinery of disposability fires on all cylinders.

The Challenge

Of course dystopian movie futures are never really about the future. They are a commentary on present times. This is their power to shape consciousness. And the very fact they have been made at all suggests a recognition within popular culture of econocide’s resonance, that what the term represents wafts all through American daily life. People sense it, and those most vulnerable and oppressed feel it, viscerally so.

Perhaps the only antidote to econocide is empathy—call it a radical empathy—which of course is not a trait one can simply flip on like a switch, especially given the social conditions of econocide that nurture empathy’s opposite. But that is the social challenge before us: to have more people move beyond merely sensing econocide to understanding it.

Econocide offers a language to open up new social imaginaries and horizons. The social project to foster empathy begins with a deep analysis to look current reality squarely in the face, to recognize econocide as the dominant social condition of this world, historical moment.

The hope is that empathy becomes the horizon revealed through the analysis, that empathy becomes a public pedagogy where humanity (re)learns what it means to be truly in community, to know how gentrification is indeed violent by casting people off to a manic individualism, and to stop the slide to nothingness.

This is the hope articulated by world-renowned educator Paulo Freire, that through the oppressed’s pedagogy not only would the oppressed be liberated but full humanity would be restored (Freire). This same hope is characterized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in describing “The Beloved Community.” Contrary to a white liberal

do-goodedness that mischaracterizes it to merely accept difference, even a “difference in unity” (King, 2013), at the core of King’s Beloved Community is the challenge, the struggle, to understand the other’s experience, to put oneself in the other’s proverbial shoes, to overcome the contract of mutual indifference by constructing a culture of mutual caring.^v Dr. King could not have been more clear about this when he said in his *Where Do We Go from Here*: “What is needed today on the part of white America is a committed altruism... True altruism is more than the capacity to pity; it is the capacity to empathize. Pity is feeling sorry for someone; empathy is feeling sorry with someone. Empathy is fellow feeling for the person in need—his pain, agony and burdens. I doubt if the problems of our teeming ghettos will have a great chance to be solved until the white majority, through genuine empathy, comes to feel the ache and anguish of the Negroes’ daily life” (King, 1968, 107).

In Over-the-Rhine, the challenges posed by Freire and King are not so different from one particularly strong ethic that the community poses to all in Cincinnati who might listen: “Seek out those most vulnerable and oppressed so that you may learn how to live.” This ethic runs through all the hearts and minds of social justice organizers in Over-the-Rhine and challenges Cincinnatians not just to place compassion, forgiveness, and even love at the heart of what they do, but to realize the responsibility to understand what life is like at society’s margins. This is a hard ethic to live up to, but that’s the challenge. This is the gift of the oppressed, a gift that deep down is really an appeal to understand the machinations of oppression and their effects on people’s daily lives (Mann, 2011, 6-7). It is an appeal to *learn*, which is why Freire saw the quest for liberation as a *pedagogy* of the oppressed.

The starting point is that you have to ask what people’s lives are like. And to do that requires connecting, and better, affiliating, in authentic ways with those oppressed, such that one’s class interest has a chance of becoming unsettled through the affiliation. Anything less risks reproducing that form of colonialism where privilege and power are reinforced through noblesse oblige and a language of help that is just what Freire calls “false generosity.” To Freire “false generosity” is a dehumanizing process whose outcome is more about fixing people rather than assisting or walking with, or learning from, people and the circumstances that brought them there. Fixing or correcting can never develop a radical empathy. But the struggle to understand can be that lever to dislodge the disability of privilege (Dutton, J.), that steel trap of certainty that rarely allows learning to penetrate. The struggle to understand is the gift of people oppressed.

Dorsey Stebbins, with his econocide sign, remains hopeful that people will understand.

e-con-o-cide (ě-kõn-õ-sīd) *n.* **1.** The primary socio-political relation of the current historical period. **2.** The political-economic arranging of the disappearance of ‘economic others’—those deemed not needed nor wanted—from the universe of obligation. **3.** Gentrification, incarceration, deportation, gated communities, gated alleys, walls and slums, loss of the commons, rewriting of history, ignoring one’s story by focusing only on the future. **4.** The loss of democracy—the collapse of the public into the private—via city and state governments surrendering their decision-making authority to corporate interests that now act as quasi-public bodies making decisions that serve their interests under the guise of the public interest.

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ⁱ Actually to say the City blessed 3CDC's beginnings is a bit of an understatement. 3CDC is self-appointed and self-incorporated—no one voted for their board but the board itself—and then after its establishment the City essentially surrendered public decision-making to it with no provision for grievance or recourse. 3CDC endures without accountability to anyone but itself for both so-called successes as well as failures.

ⁱⁱ Some of the points that follow were originally published in "District 9 Over-the-Rhine," available at <http://arts.miamioh.edu/cce/papers.html> (May 18, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Bonnie Neumeier, long-term resident of Over-the-Rhine, activist, and co-founder of many of the organizations that ally within the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement has written extensively over the years about her experiences. As the neighborhood changes to a hip upscale feel with new high-end commercial establishments, Bonnie doesn't "think that many customers at these places care about the fact that I feel like a stranger in my own neighborhood. The new businesses are making lots of people happy with a cool downtown destination to go to. I probably could be happy about that, too, if at the same time there were businesses that served my consumer needs as well." She continues, "We are continually asked to trust in the intentions and motivations of the developers. There is no real visible sign that they want me/us here" (Neumeier).

The research bears out the feelings of people like Bonnie in gentrifying neighborhoods all across the land. Under the guise of mixed-income development and "economic mix," which sounds all inclusive, a genuine exchange of culture and a learning from people across class and race lines seems not what is happening. See, for example, James C. Fraser et al (2013).

^{iv} *District 9* was nominated in 2009 for Best Picture from the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

^v And let us be clear here too that the Beloved Community is a very long way from kind-hearted motivations that typically take the form of noblesse oblige, or volunteerism, or charity because those forms rarely bring into focus the social circumstances that motivated people to be charitable in the first place. The Beloved Community is just not possible through noblesse oblige or charity.