



### **Gentrification or...? Injustice in large-scale residential projects in Hanoi**

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## Gentrification or...? Injustice in large-scale residential projects in Hanoi

### Abstract

Large-scale residential developments on expropriated lands in periurban Hanoi resemble forms of gentrification seen elsewhere. But is it gentrification? Current debate over the definition of gentrification has focused on whether the term has become too broad to be useful in different institutional and spatiotemporal contexts. While some push for a generalizable definition based in capitalist development, others argue that the term harbors Western assumptions that fail to usefully explain unique local circumstances. The paper first identifies one such conceptual assumption that must be made explicit since it provides the term's politicizing thrust: displacement generates an experience of social injustice. Then, drawing on surveys and interviews with residents as well as interviews with real estate agents, government officials, and academics conducted in Hanoi between 2013 and 2017, the paper evaluates five types of displacement on the city's outskirts. Because displacement only occurs in marginal cases and generates limited feelings of social injustice, the term "gentrification" is of little use. Instead, the paper suggests that in a context of rapid urbanization and relatively inclusive economic growth like that of Hanoi the terms "livelihood dispossession" and "value grabbing" may better capture the experience of social injustice and are therefore more likely to generate political traction.

**Keywords:** gentrification, social justice, Hanoi, periurbanization, large-scale residential projects.

### Introduction

"The sense of injustice is eminently political." (Shklar, 1992: 83)

The periurban landscape of developing Asia is undergoing a profound transformation typified by the expansion of urban forms, functions, and socio-economic relations into rural territories, often well beyond established city boundaries. An important instantiation of this process in the periurban zones of Hanoi is the massive development of large-scale residential projects geared towards the rising local upper-middle and upper classes and towards

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3 expatriates. These comprise both master-planned communities of 20 hectares or more known  
4 as “new urban areas” (*khu do thi moi* in Vietnamese, hereafter NUA) and mixed-used  
5 commercial and residential complexes built on smaller sites.  
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10 Most NUAs are built in densely settled peripheral areas where former agrarian communities  
11 and migrant populations drive a largely *in situ* urbanization. Since the 1980s, rural  
12 settlements around Hanoi have transformed into urban or quasi-urban places with limited  
13 geographical relocation of their populations. In contrast to city-based urbanization processes  
14 dominated by rural-urban migration, the populations living around Hanoi have expanded into  
15 non-agricultural work, adopted urban settlement patterns and housing forms, and embraced  
16 ‘urban’ ways of life without permanently leaving their place of residence (Nguyen, 2009;  
17 DiGregorio, 2011). While increased incomes and living standards accompanied this *in situ*  
18 urbanization, Hanoi’s periurban areas are still home to significantly less wealthy populations  
19 (GSO, 2017).  
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28 The migration of capital and residents to these zones appears to be gentrification. The  
29 redevelopment of urban spaces for more affluent users situates this transformation in line  
30 with Hackworth’s (2002) definition of gentrification as “the production of space for  
31 progressively more affluent users”. But appearances may be deceiving.  
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36 Grounded in the comparative urbanisms debate, current disagreement over the definition of  
37 gentrification has focused on whether the concept has become too broad to be useful in  
38 different institutional and spatio-temporal contexts. While some authors push for a  
39 generalizable definition based in capitalist development (e.g., Lees et al., 2016), others argue  
40 that unique local circumstances call the application of the term “gentrification” into question  
41 (e.g., Maloutas, 2012; Yip and Tran, 2016). The latter contend that superficial similarities  
42 between local urban transformation and gentrification processes in the West disguise  
43 substantively different urban processes because they surreptitiously embody socio-spatially  
44 distinct ideological and ontological assumptions. Just because a process resembles  
45 gentrification in other locations does not mean that it is gentrification (e.g. Betancur, 2014;  
46 Ghertner, 2014). This concern with the applicability of “gentrification” is explored here  
47 through the case of Hanoi and its large-scale periurban residential developments.  
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58 This paper first outlines and responds to the debate over the applicability of generalized  
59 conceptions of gentrification, particularly in East Asia. Adopting a class transformation-based  
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3 notion of generalized gentrification, it then applies displacement experienced as unjust as a  
4 measure of gentrification to the test case of Hanoi. After offering evidence that displacement  
5 occurs only in marginal cases, we offer two alternative concepts that may better characterize  
6 the injustices experienced by our interviewees and offer more political traction: “livelihood  
7 dispossession” and “value grabbing”.

### 12 13 **Generalized gentrification**

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16 In their proposal for a “planetary gentrification” research agenda, Lees et al. (2016: 203)  
17 conclude that the concept of “gentrification” is generalizable and applicable across a wide  
18 range of contexts. This conclusion lies at the current endpoint of a trajectory that began with  
19 Glass’s (1964) description of middle-class gentrifiers returning to London in the 1960s. This  
20 cultural and class specific concept of gentrification expanded to describe similar processes of  
21 neighborhood change in other Western contexts (e.g., Smith, 1986). Later it was used to  
22 describe not just residential but also commercial and even sectoral gentrification as  
23 commercial uses displace industrial uses (Clark, 1992; Lim et al., 2013). While the original  
24 notion of gentrification focused on individual homeowners, the range of actors involved  
25 quickly expanded. It soon became apparent that in some cities, real estate developers and the  
26 state play an active role in capturing rent by fostering gentrification. This consistent  
27 broadening of the term has led to a fairly common definition of gentrification as “the  
28 production of space for progressively more affluent users” (Hackworth, 2002: 815) (see also  
29 Clark, 2005).

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32 While *generalized gentrification* points to a core process that can be employed in  
33 comparative studies, others argue that such definitions are so open-ended that they lose their  
34 utility (Ghertner, 2014). Maloutas (2012), for instance, argues that gentrification is a  
35 historically, culturally, and geographically specific phenomenon and that this generalization  
36 of the concept has produced a “half-way de-contextualization” that distorts our understanding  
37 of non-Western urbanization by ignoring the particular circumstances under which the  
38 concept has been theorized, viz., deindustrialization, neoliberalism, and urban abandonment.

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41 Recent interventions build on this critique to interrogate the applicability of this broad  
42 conception of gentrification in non-Western contexts. One notable trigger was Ley and Teo’s  
43 (2014) argument that the absence of the term “gentrification” in government, newspapers,  
44 and academia despite its ontological reality in Hong Kong was evidence of an

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3 epistemological gap that was only recently being reduced as the term gained currency. This  
4 article prompted a number of researchers based in and around Hong Kong to counterclaim  
5 that the absence of the term reflected its contextual inadequacy (Cartier, [2017](#)).  
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9 This group's objections follow two rough strategies. First, a *"too narrow" strategy* returns to  
10 earlier, more culturally and geographically narrow definitions of gentrification to argue that  
11 the term does not apply in East Asian cases (Lui, [2017](#); Tang, [2017](#)). The second approach,  
12 which we call the *"too broad" strategy*, highlights the Western bias inherent in gentrification  
13 studies and contends that it blinds researchers to other relevant processes or  
14 conceptualizations like Hong Kong's "culture of property" (Haila, [2017](#); Smart and Smart,  
15 [2017](#); Tomba, [2017](#)).  
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18 The *"too narrow" strategy*, however, ignores the methodological goal of generalizing the  
19 concept (cf. Boddy, [2007](#); Davidson and Lees, [2010](#)). Broadening the definition to a mid-  
20 level theory aims, at least for Lees et al. ([2016](#)), to facilitate comparisons across contexts, a  
21 position endorsed by Robinson (2015). Paradoxically, some of the works produced through  
22 this strategy show generalized gentrification's methodological utility by demonstrating how it  
23 plays out in different contexts and by identifying other factors that must be incorporated to  
24 fully understand these local instantiations.  
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27 From the *"too broad" perspective*, Tomba ([2017](#)), however, suggests that generalized  
28 gentrification simply describes fundamental urbanization processes, especially in Mainland  
29 China. In the same vein, Haila ([2017](#): 506) asks, "Does it really matter whether we call the  
30 phenomenon 'gentrification' or something else?" In this immediate sense, the answer is "no".  
31 The broader definition of gentrification seeks to identify a political economic process of  
32 spatial and class transformation and is a product of the evolution of research on socially  
33 unjust neighborhood change. In a sense, then, the phenomenon could be called by a less  
34 culturally specific term. In the same way, those accusing Western-trained researchers of  
35 fetishizing "gentrification" and allowing the concept to limit their vision may also be guilty  
36 of the charge.  
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39 In another sense, naming does matter. The *"too broad" strategy* suggests that using the  
40 gentrification lens can limit researchers' field of vision by carrying along unrecognized  
41 Western cultural baggage. This argument does not reduce to the claim that using the  
42 gentrification lens cannot work; it reduces to the claim that some researchers do a sloppy job  
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3 of exploring gentrification processes in other contexts, making the uncritical assumption that  
4 Western institutions and practices also apply in these other contexts. This paper seeks to  
5 excavate one of these assumptions to help avoid future misapplications of the gentrification  
6 lens. Specifically, it argues that gentrification is an inherently political term that is dependent  
7 upon the perception that a given transformation is socially unjust.  
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13 Similar to Tomba (2017), Lim et al. (2013) have argued that the broad definition of  
14 gentrification matches that of redevelopment and aims to explain the same broad class  
15 transformation (see also La Grange and Pretorius 2014). Both terms describe the progressive  
16 displacement of poorer users by wealthier users. The central difference lies in one's  
17 perception of whether the transformation is good or bad. Those who consider the outcomes to  
18 be positive (generally focusing on the new users) prefer to call the process redevelopment.  
19 Those who consider the outcomes to be negative (generally focusing on the displaced users)  
20 prefer to call it gentrification. As Robinson (2011: 22) reminds us, "The vocabulary we use  
21 can perpetuate certain assumptions about power relationships". Though academics may  
22 conceive of the terms as strictly analytical, they remain political and are used to mobilize  
23 different and typically conflicting interests (see also Davidson and Lees, 2005; Lees et al.,  
24 2008; Slater, 2009). The significance of this terminological politicization goes beyond  
25 pointing out that gentrification is deeply embedded in power relations. It also unearths at least  
26 one of the Western assumptions some scholars argue is buried in the concept of generalized  
27 gentrification: the presupposition that gentrification produces social inequality and injustice.  
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33 Displacement in Western cities is consistently experienced as socially unjust (e.g., Curran,  
34 2004; Slater, 2004; Newman and Wyly, 2006). And, as Marcuse (2010) argues, "If the pain  
35 of displacement is not a central component of what we are dealing with in studying  
36 gentrification...we are missing the central point that needs to be addressed". But as Slater  
37 (2006) points out, for gentrification studies to retain their critical edge they need to more  
38 clearly identify the social injustice involved in displacement.  
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43 This aligns with Shklar's (1992) argument that, regardless of any purportedly objective  
44 determinations of injustice, individuals' belief that they have experienced injustice and the  
45 accompanying indignation are essential for the politics of reconstructing social  
46 understandings of justice and remedying injustice. Shklar suggests that individuals consider  
47 negative outcomes that cannot be attributed to the concrete actions or inactions of others as  
48 'misfortune', while those attributable to others are considered 'injustices'. The first leads to a  
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3 begrudging acceptance of fate, while the second engenders a “political sense of injustice”  
4 (114) that fosters political action.  
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8 Shklar recognizes that the distinction between the two is blurry and shifting, but for her it  
9 depends fundamentally on social expectations, which evolve as social conditions, morality,  
10 and ideology change. She suggests, for example, that though being a woman was long seen as  
11 an unavoidable misfortune, as expectations of gender equality have increased over the last  
12 century, the experience of inequality has fostered a stronger sense of injustice and political  
13 mobilization. Such political mobilization can in turn lead to new forms of formal distributive  
14 justice through legislation and judicial processes. For Shklar, the experience of injustice  
15 drives the evolution of legal justice.  
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23 We might similarly view the pain of displacement as indignation at the injustice of failing to  
24 realize social expectations of emerging rights, such as the right to affordable housing, the  
25 right to the city, and the right to community. Thus, to the extent that gentrification is a  
26 politicized term that works to secure such rights, displacement must be experienced as an  
27 affront to justice to constitute gentrification. This warrants a redefinition of gentrification that  
28 incorporates the perception that the process produces injustice. On this basis, we adopt a  
29 definition of generalized gentrification as the displacement of less affluent users by more  
30 affluent users *that is experienced as socially unjust*.  
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38 If the experience of social injustice is seen as central to a politicized conception of  
39 gentrification, then it is perhaps possible to reinforce Ley and Teo’s claims about Hong  
40 Kong. Rather than a form of intellectual colonialism, some scholars’ and activists’  
41 application of the gentrification lens in that context would reflect their perception of injustice  
42 in Hong Kong’s ongoing class transformation. Meanwhile, the diminishing epistemological  
43 gap they report would indicate that displacement has not been experienced by local residents  
44 as socially unjust and therefore as “gentrification” but that there is an increasing perception  
45 that the class-based displacement is unjust. As will be shown below, this more nuanced  
46 notion also complicates efforts to label the case of periurban Hanoi as gentrification, as only  
47 some displaced persons experience redevelopment as unjust.  
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### 56 **Analytical Framework and Methodology**

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59 To classify a given process as gentrification in accordance with our definition, it is thus  
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3 necessary to demonstrate that displacement has occurred and that it is experienced as unjust.  
4 In a seminal article, Marcuse ([1985](#)) identified four types of displacement that fall under two  
5 categories. The first category of direct displacement includes physical and economic  
6 displacement. Physical displacement refers to the forcible, physical eviction of existing  
7 residents. Economic displacement refers to residents being forced to move because they are  
8 unable to afford housing in their current neighborhood. The second category of indirect  
9 displacement includes exclusionary displacement and displacement pressure. Exclusionary  
10 displacement refers to the inability of households to move into neighborhoods they  
11 previously would have been able to move into. Displacement pressure, meanwhile, refers to  
12 rising prices inducing current residents to move out before they are actually priced out.  
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21 To these four types of displacement Davidson and Lees ([2010](#)) add phenomenological  
22 displacement, a form of indirect displacement. They argue that displacement goes beyond  
23 mere spatial displacement, that is, the moment of forced exit from a particular space. Rather,  
24 displacement entails an ontological scission between the person and the security or identity  
25 embedded in one's lived experience of a place. Thus, this form of displacement refers to the  
26 loss of a way of life or local identity due to neighborhood change.  
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33 The academic literature offers at least two suggestions supporting the view that large-scale  
34 periurban residential developments like those around Hanoi constitute a form of  
35 gentrification. First, Smith's notion of the rent gap has been employed to inform both  
36 gentrification and periurbanization. The rent gap refers to the difference between the  
37 capitalized ground rent (the land value based on current rent) and the potential ground rent if  
38 the property were redeveloped. When the potential ground rent exceeds that of the capitalized  
39 ground rent and amortized redevelopment costs, there is pressure to redevelop the property  
40 for more affluent users (Smith, [1996](#)). That is, there is gentrification pressure. This notion is  
41 at the core of political economic understandings of gentrification and was developed to  
42 explain them (cf. Lees et al., 2008), but it has also been applied to periurbanization. Shatkin  
43 (2017), for instance, has argued that the rent gap between the capitalized ground rent of  
44 agricultural land in periurban areas and the potential ground rent of new master-planned  
45 developments drives periurbanization in several developing Asian countries. This claim is  
46 aligned with a second set of arguments that large-scale redevelopment can constitute "new  
47 build gentrification" (Davidson and Lees, 2005), especially in the rapidly urbanizing Global  
48 South. Ha (2004) and Shin ([2009](#)), for instance, have argued that such developments have  
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3 been the preeminent form of gentrification in Korea. Periurbanization thus generates  
4 pressures that often reallocate land use from agricultural to residential, positioning periurban  
5 gentrification as a type of sectoral gentrification by which a “newer and higher use” displaces  
6 agricultural uses.  
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11 So there is reason to hypothesize that the construction of NUAs around Hanoi involve  
12 displacement that may generate an experience of injustice, positioning them as a solid test  
13 case for what Waley (2015: 618) has termed “rice-paddy gentrification.” Additionally,  
14 selection of a novel case offers two benefits. First, it eliminates preexisting bias in making a  
15 determination of whether or not gentrification has taken place. Second, it establishes a ground  
16 for future studies.  
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23 Our test case analysis draws on an array of data collected in Hanoi between 2013 and 2017.  
24 We rely on a survey of Hanoi’s NUAs and on a review of relevant policy papers, research  
25 reports, and newspaper clippings related to land and property redevelopment in Vietnam. A  
26 dozen interviews with individuals working in government, banking, real estate, and academia  
27 were conducted to augment these sources of information and enhance our understanding of  
28 real estate development in Hanoi.  
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33 We also draw on semi-structured interviews with residents of urbanized villages upon whose  
34 agricultural land three NUAs were built: Linh Dam, Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh, and Van Quan.  
35 These projects display key characteristics of the first generation of NUAs built in the late-  
36 1990s and early 2000s: They are located relatively close to the city centre, were invested in  
37 and developed by state-owned enterprises, and originally targeted Vietnam’s emerging urban  
38 middle-class (see Table 1). All three projects entailed forced appropriation of agricultural  
39 lands but none involved residential expropriations. Such expropriations however occurred for  
40 a road-widening project near at least one NUA studied (Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh).  
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48 [Table 1 about here.]  
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50 Focusing on first generation NUAs allowed us to explore their short- and long-term  
51 displacement impacts on the populations living next to them. In particular, we could  
52 document how this population experienced and reacted to NUAs taking over the agricultural  
53 land they used to till and to the multiple social, spatial and economic changes these  
54 redevelopments brought about in their locality.  
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3 We conducted 60 interviews with representatives of local households in the urbanizing  
4 villages listed in Table 1 except Yen Xa for which we could not secure authorizations. The  
5 politically sensitive nature of land expropriations limited our ability to freely select  
6 households. Initial informants had to be recruited through local authorities, but a relaxing of  
7 this control thereafter gave us more freedom to select participants through snowball  
8 sampling. We sought to reach households with various profiles in terms of educational  
9 qualifications, land holdings, and livelihood diversification prior to the NUA construction. A  
10 majority of the selected households (n=39) lost agricultural land-use rights to the NUA. This  
11 purposeful sampling aimed to capture the experience of the long-term residents assumed to  
12 be most negatively affected by the projects. The sample also included a handful of local  
13 leaders in each community (e.g., heads of residential groups and local communist party cells).  
14 Our semi-structured interview covered three main themes: evolution of livelihood strategies  
15 before and after redevelopment, socioeconomic opportunities and obstacles generated by the  
16 NUA, and perception of changing socio-spatial relationships. Data from these interviewees is  
17 complemented by observations of activities at the interface of the former villages and NUAs  
18 and of social interactions in the public spaces of both areas.  
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## 31 **Displacement in Hanoi**

### 32 *Displacement*

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35 This section considers each of the five types of displacement in the context of periurban  
36 Hanoi. Yip and Tran ([2016](#)) argue convincingly that there is effectively no direct  
37 displacement by large-scale residential projects in Hanoi's inner-city, as they are typically  
38 built on uninhabited brownfield sites. They do not, however, consider NUAs in periurban  
39 areas. Our survey shows that between 1993 and 2016, approximately 27,000 hectares were  
40 forcefully appropriated for the construction of 252 NUAs across Hanoi. Some complexes are  
41 built on smaller sites (10 ha or less), occupy brownfields or other types of "vacant" land, but  
42 these represent less than a quarter of all NUAs. The remaining 75 percent are much larger  
43 redevelopments (20 to 3,000 ha) built on agricultural lands originally farmed by neighboring  
44 populations. In these periurban areas, households typically possess land use rights over  
45 residential land in former village spaces and, in the case of farming households, also over  
46 agricultural land around it.  
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58 Over the last two decades, the Vietnamese state progressively leveraged the limited property  
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3 rights that users have over these lands and strengthened its powers to forcefully recover vast  
4 tracts of agricultural land and to transfer them to corporate actors for commercial  
5 redevelopment (Labbé, 2014). Land redevelopment for NUAs rarely involves residential  
6 evictions, but this process separates preexisting periurban households from the productive  
7 lands upon which their livelihoods still partially depend, an aspect further explored below.  
8 NUAs can nevertheless induce direct displacement. Residential land is often expropriated in  
9 order to provide the supporting infrastructure that connects NUAs to the city center.  
10 Residential projects may also encroach marginally upon existing villages, leading to  
11 residential expropriations. While comparatively small in scale, direct physical displacement  
12 can and does occur in Hanoi.<sup>1</sup>  
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21 Some marginal indirect displacement also takes place. At first glance, exclusionary  
22 displacement would not seem to apply in Hanoi, since new developments are typically built  
23 on non-residential lands. Since the 1980s, local governments in periurban areas have been  
24 permitted to reclassify agricultural land adjacent to existing residential zones, subdividing  
25 and allocating them to local households in need of more housing space (Labbé, 2014). As  
26 NUA projects often appropriate the entire agricultural zone surrounding former villages, they  
27 remove the possibility of future residential expansions. This has several implications. At the  
28 household scale, it reduces the housing options of newly married couples in poorer local  
29 families who typically have limited residential land and cannot afford the new housing units  
30 in the neighboring NUA. Echoing a Western gentrification phenomenon (eg., Newman and  
31 Wyly, 2006), they are left with a choice between moving away and living in overcrowded  
32 conditions. Commenting on this enclosure, a man living in an urban village next to the Linh  
33 Dam NUA remarked, “Our generation didn’t have to worry because [residential] lands were  
34 bequeathed to us by our ancestors, so we could rely on that.... But for our grandchildren, it  
35 will be much more difficult” (15 July 2013).  
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49 In a more complex way, there are other interactions with displacement pressure in Hanoi.  
50 New commercial activities (cafés, restaurants, hair salons, franchise convenience stores, etc.)  
51 generally emerge next to large residential projects. Often located at the interface between old  
52 villages and NUAs, these businesses tap into the middle- and upper-middle class customer  
53 base introduced by the NUA and therefore tend to offer products and services above the  
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58 <sup>1</sup> Large-scale residential expropriations for the construction of NUAs has occurred in other  
59 Vietnamese cities (cf. Harms, 2016).  
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3 means of or at odds with the needs of the pre-existing populations (e.g., upscale spas and hair  
4 salons, private English-language schools, and international travel agencies).  
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8 While this represents a form of commercial upscaling, the question is who benefits from this  
9 change? Both observational and interview data show that residents who owned or bought  
10 residential plots adjacent to the three NUAs studied have either established their own  
11 commercial activities or rented ground level spaces to commercial enterprises. Commenting  
12 on this locational advantage, a villager who operates a teashop in his house remarked, “If  
13 there was no New Urban Area, I wouldn’t sell drinks like this. It’s because of this project that  
14 I could open this business” (Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh, 28 June 2013). Though rarer, some  
15 households residing further into neighboring village spaces have also reported benefiting  
16 from or even establishing a new business because of the new customer base brought by the  
17 NUA. While these people now enjoy higher returns by operating or renting to businesses, the  
18 influx of a more affluent clientele has also boosted potential ground rent in adjacent  
19 neighborhoods, thereby excluding businesses that might otherwise have moved into the area.  
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30 Phenomenological displacement is trickier to make sense of in the context of rapidly growing  
31 and modernizing economies. It is also the phenomenon that most profoundly interrogates the  
32 applicability of the gentrification concept in a place like Hanoi. In the neoliberal context of  
33 developed Western cities where inequality is rising and income growth predominantly goes to  
34 the already wealthy, such transitions tend to disrupt existing ways of life and the social  
35 networks on which the social security of precarious households increasingly depends (cf.  
36 Fullilove, [2005](#)). It is therefore easy to understand why such phenomenological displacement  
37 is resisted by pre-existing residents in such a setting. However, in the context of rapid and  
38 widely—though unevenly—distributed economic growth, such changes may be welcome  
39 rather than resisted.  
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48 And such is the case in Hanoi. The introduction of large-scale residential developments  
49 represents a major transformation of place-based livelihoods and social relations. This was  
50 felt most strongly by households who lost their use-rights over agricultural lands for the  
51 construction of NUAs. In interviews, members of these households regularly used  
52 expressions such as “hardship,” “strenuous,” and “unstable” to describe their lives in the first  
53 years following the land loss. Conversely, households who had stopped farming in the 1980s  
54 or 1990s, and therefore were not affected by the land expropriation, recalled having  
55 enthusiastically welcomed the NUAs.  
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3 Yet, taking stock of the changes in their living environment and households' economy a  
4 decade or more after the construction of the NUA, both farming and non-farming populations  
5 concur that these projects have, overall, ushered in a new era of prosperity and well-being.  
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7 The positive changes mentioned include more business opportunities, a wider range of  
8 entertainment and services in their immediate vicinity (NUAs' supermarkets, public parks,  
9 etc.), and a better quality of life. Many interviewees also emphasized the accompanying  
10 infrastructural improvements. "When the project was implemented," a man living next to  
11 Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh conveyed, "land was seized to build better infrastructure. Roads were  
12 raised to higher levels, water drainage was improved, there are more great buildings now, and  
13 the environmental sanitation is better" (28 June 2013). Looking back, most ex-farmers  
14 expressed a positive view of urban changes. Periurbanization did not necessarily make them  
15 wealthier—and, indeed, left some of them less well off. But many explained that it has put a  
16 welcome end to exhausting and precarious agricultural livelihoods and given them access to a  
17 small capital fund (i.e., monetary compensation) that they could invest in profitable ways.  
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29 Moreover, in line with Ley and Teo's (2014: 1291) recognition of the aspirational character  
30 of redevelopment, neighboring populations almost unanimously praise the NUA, describing it  
31 as "clean," "beautiful," "modern," and "civilized." Commenting on the construction of Linh  
32 Dam NUA, a housewife remarked, "I've been so happy to see the state build up the city  
33 properly" (15 July 2013). Another interviewee stated that urban development is making  
34 "everything more beautiful and civilized, from village to city" (26 June 2013). Harms (2016)  
35 comes to a similar conclusion in his research on two NUAs in Ho Chi Minh City. He finds  
36 that pre-existing populations, including those evicted by these projects, are often "very  
37 supportive of the project's underlying development goals". He argues that this support stems  
38 from the prevalent association of large-scale urban schemes with "a nationalist vision of  
39 Vietnam's advance into modernity" (Harms 2016: 22). Thus, planned periurban land  
40 redevelopments represent a new way of life that is welcomed rather than resisted and does  
41 not thereby create phenomenological displacement. Or, perhaps more accurately, the  
42 phenomenological displacement so produced is not necessarily a negative experience.  
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54 This conclusion however requires nuance. Earlier studies have identified a generational  
55 difference in responses to periurban changes such as those discussed above (DiGregorio,  
56 2011; Labbé, 2014). While younger generations tend to be more accepting of the  
57 transformation of their communities, older generations are more likely to resist them. In all  
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3 three locations, people over 50 deplored the loss of the earlier “village culture” marked by  
4 solidarity and respect for traditional social roles and rituals. But it is not the NUA *per se* that  
5 appears to concern these people. Much more problematic for them are the massive numbers  
6 of rural migrants, suburbanizing dwellers, and expatriates who move into or use their former  
7 village space. These “outsiders” (*nguai ngoai*), as some interviewees call this new  
8 population, not only outnumbers native villagers but are also seen as corrupting local mores.  
9 As a 50-year-old resident living next to the Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh NUA explained:

16 [Urbanization] surely brought about many benefits for the people here.  
17 However, the most disturbing thing is the social safety. Gambling, drinking,  
18 and drug addiction affect young generations more than before. In the old days,  
19 the village was peaceful, but now there are many “love hotels,” karaoke,...  
20 Sometimes they fight and quarrel. So noisy all night! (22 June 2013)

26 Thus, despite a broad welcoming of phenomenological displacement, especially by the youth,  
27 it is also experienced negatively by some groups. To the extent that NUAs transform existing  
28 settlements, they, too, have this ambivalent impact.

### 32 *Injustice*

34 In Hanoi, as in Hong Kong, there is only limited evidence that urban transformation is  
35 experienced as unjust. In practice, there has been minimal opposition to urban transformation  
36 *per se*. Echoing DiGregorio’s (2011) and Harms’ (2016) findings, the individuals interviewed  
37 generally welcome such change, viewing it as both inevitable and generally desirable. This  
38 embrace of periurban transformation calls into question gentrification designations that rely  
39 on superficial similarities. The in-migration of more affluent households to periurban areas  
40 does not *ipso facto* constitute gentrification. Rather, as we have argued above, any notion of  
41 gentrification must include the experience of social injustice. This requires a careful  
42 evaluation of the forms of injustice generated by displacement.

### 51 *Displacement as injustice?*

53 As discussed above, NUA development involves limited residential land expropriations,  
54 resulting in minimal direct physical displacement. In fact, when developers plan a new  
55 project, they make every effort to avoid encroaching on residential lands because of the  
56 extreme difficulties and high cost they incur when they try to displace households from their  
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3 residential land. This problem is, in turn, directly linked to the specific form of injustice  
4 generated by urban development projects in and around Hanoi.  
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8 Urban populations across Vietnam perceive direct residential displacement as extremely  
9 unfair. As Nguyen (2009) and Labbé (2014) have shown, Hanoi's periurban residents "have  
10 long considered housing land as an inalienable form of property on which they can safely rely  
11 for the purposes of both social reproduction and economic production" (Labbé 2014: 174).  
12 Residential land is also seen as the safest way for households to protect and grow their  
13 wealth. In the absence of a strong social safety net, real estate acts as a form of insurance.  
14 Residential land also plays an important productive role in household economies, especially  
15 among the most vulnerable segment of the periurban population. Poorly educated ex-farmers,  
16 for instance, are largely excluded from Hanoi's increasingly competitive urban labor market.  
17 These economically marginalized individuals often have no choice but to rely on their  
18 residential land for a living. In the three areas studied we found that after losing their  
19 agricultural land, these people tended to set up small businesses inside or next to their house  
20 (makeshift rental lodging for students and labor migrants, tea stalls, motorbike washing  
21 services, etc.). These generally become their main income source. Though the arrival of a  
22 NUA can boost residential land's economic potential, this opportunity is eliminated when  
23 projects confiscate residential lands and relocate their occupants to high-rise apartment  
24 buildings where it is difficult, if not impossible, to set up a business.  
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39 So though a rare occurrence, poorly compensated residential land confiscation spurs a strong  
40 sense of injustice among displaced populations. Their indignation drives political action to  
41 remedy this injustice: they petition governmental authorities, invite domestic media to cover  
42 their cases, and in some extreme instances, organize public protests or even take violent  
43 action (see Harms 2016: ch. 6). Reporters and scholars for the most part sympathize with  
44 expropriated households' injustice claims, emphasizing the economic loss that results from  
45 direct displacements (e.g., Pham and Lam, 2000; Le, 2009). In contrast to situations  
46 documented in the West (Davidson and Lees, 2005; Fullilove, 2005), the deterritorialization  
47 process that follows from households' relocation (e.g., loss of sense of place and dislocation  
48 of place-based community relations) is however either ignored or treated as a secondary  
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3 As discussed above, NUAs trigger two other indirect forms of displacement: indirect  
4 exclusionary displacement through land value increase and the enclosure of village  
5 settlements; and phenomenological displacement through the erosion of local social relations  
6 associated with an older “village culture.” Neither of these forms of displacement are  
7 perceived as unjust by the people living around the NUAs we studied. In the first case, the  
8 lack of residential land is generally seen as a misfortune and as a household-scale issue. In  
9 the second case, we have seen that phenomenological displacement is felt by only a segment  
10 of the pre-existing population. These people however do not blame NUA projects or their  
11 residents. They are much more concerned by the social impacts of large numbers of  
12 “outsiders” living in their midst. In short, both indirect forms of displacement are experienced  
13 as misfortune, not injustice. They are attributed not to the construction of a specific large-  
14 scale residential project but to a much broader and inevitable periurbanization process.

#### 25 26 *Livelihood dispossession and value grabbing*

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28 This is not to say that large-scale residential projects have not given rise to other forms of  
29 injustice around Hanoi. Quite the opposite: strong claims of injustice stem directly from these  
30 projects. But, echoing Maloutas’ (2012) and Ghertner’s (2014) arguments, gentrification falls  
31 short of capturing these injustices. This is because the claims of injustice expressed by  
32 Hanoi’s periurban people have little in common with the loss of place or of the sense of place  
33 as experienced in established neighborhoods of post-industrial cities. The injustices raised in  
34 Hanoi instead concern the distribution of the costs and benefits of land redevelopment as the  
35 country rapidly shifts from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society and  
36 economy. At this stage in Vietnam’s urban transition, we suggest that concepts other than  
37 gentrification may more effectively evoke the injustices generated by large-scale residential  
38 developments. Here we briefly proffer two possibilities for future investigation: “livelihood  
39 dispossession” and “value grabbing”.

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41 The notion of *livelihood dispossession* refers the loss of both livelihoods and natural capital  
42 that follows from agricultural land expropriation. But it is not the loss *per se* that informs this  
43 claim of injustice. Several dispossessed interviewees reported that they were ready to stop  
44 farming and had hoped that the next generation would be able to transition towards post-  
45 agrarian livelihoods. In fact, many households had already started this process years earlier  
46 by diversifying their livelihood strategies or investing in their children’s education. The  
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3 injustice experienced is not that they cannot farm anymore. Rather, they begrudge the manner  
4 and speed with which they were compelled to make this livelihood transition. For this, they  
5 attribute blame to local governments and developers. Grievances included: low land  
6 compensation rate offered, limited employment opportunities in NUAs (as opposed to  
7 industrial zones), and insufficient time given to prepare their transition from farming. Some  
8 ex-farmers also complained about local government and investors' failure to mitigate the loss  
9 of livelihoods engendered by agricultural land takings:  
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17 The investor promised to create jobs for the households whose land was taken....  
18 Beside the [cash] compensation handed to us, they had promised to build  
19 companies and factories that would recruit the children of people having lost their  
20 land. [But] since the land acquisition, I haven't seen any such announcement of  
21 recruiting the relatives of people who lost their land. (Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh, 26  
22 June 2013)  
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29 The second most important area of contention might be considered a form of *value grabbing*,  
30 which Andreucci et al. (2017: 31) have defined as “the appropriation of (surplus) value  
31 produced elsewhere through rent—rather than accumulation” and positioned as a  
32 distributional concern. As is the case with most land expropriation practices around the  
33 world, land use rights holders in Vietnam are compensated not on the basis of potential  
34 ground rent but on actual pre-development ground rent. Thus, the increase in land value from  
35 urban redevelopment is grabbed away from pre-existing residents by businesses and  
36 governments involved in property development. Again, as in Hong Kong, claims of injustice  
37 have grown in Hanoi as this value grabbing becomes more evident. A woman living next to  
38 the Linh Dam NUA raised this issue as follows, “They gave us only 59,000 VND per m<sup>2</sup> [in  
39 compensation for agricultural lands], then they built and sold buildings for billions. For  
40 example, the 70-80 m<sup>2</sup> flats, they sell them at least 2-3 billion VND. It is right on this  
41 peninsula, right on my fields” (8 July 2013).  
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52 Activists, bloggers, reporters, and intellectuals (Vietnamese and foreign) regularly amplify  
53 residents claims of livelihood dispossession and value grabbing (e.g., Tran, 2006; Brown,  
54 2013; Taylor, 2014). Media practitioners in Vietnam (as well as foreign scholars) not only  
55 report but also broaden peasants' claims, notably by denouncing the state and land  
56 developers' appropriation of the value generated by periurban land redevelopment and by  
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3 highlighting its contradiction with the party's egalitarian discourse (Labbé 2015). The claims  
4 of injustice put forth by these actors are however less concerned with the direct impact of  
5 projects and more with ways in which their surplus value is distributed.  
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## 8 9 **Conclusion**

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12 We have argued that East Asian critiques of generalized gentrification stumble by insisting  
13 that the term is used too narrowly or too broadly. In the spirit of these critiques, however, we  
14 have unearthed a buried assumption in the Western literature on gentrification: displacement  
15 produces injustice. Following Shklar (1992), we argue that it is this experience of injustice  
16 that politically mobilizes the term "gentrification" and that the absence of a "political sense of  
17 injustice" calls the attribution into question. Quite simply, we argue that a determination of  
18 gentrification requires both displacement *and* the experience of displacement as unjust.  
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26 Large-scale real estate investments in Hanoi demonstrate elements of displacement only at  
27 the margin. Because NUAs are built on reclaimed agricultural land and leave residential land  
28 untouched, direct displacement is virtually nonexistent. Households are not economically  
29 displaced since they retain residential land use rights. Any physical displacement that does  
30 occur is indirect, taking the form of land expropriation for public infrastructure. Indirect  
31 displacement is also highly limited. Like economic displacement, displacement pressure is  
32 absent, since there is no need to move away. Exclusionary displacement, however, can be  
33 associated with the corner case of enclosure that excludes the possibility of expanding urban  
34 villages' residential land to accommodate future generations.  
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42 Phenomenological displacement exists for some demographic groups. NUAs introduce new  
43 lifestyles and values that create unwelcome phenomenological displacement for some,  
44 typically older, villagers. However, the resistance to lifestyle changes triggered by the arrival  
45 of more affluent populations in polarizing, neoliberal, Western cities is not necessarily  
46 prevalent in the rapidly growing economies of East Asia, where such changes may actually  
47 be embraced. In the test case examined here, resistance is less about the transformation of  
48 community space and more about protecting households' long-term economic interests.  
49 Additionally, in contrast to Western urbanites' efforts to preserve household financial  
50 security in the face of growing precarity through the maintenance of existing social networks,  
51 periurban households in rapidly growing economies see ample opportunity and embrace  
52 changes that will position them effectively within that transition. Thus, urban transitions that  
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3 are understood as gentrification in Western cities are often welcomed in countries  
4 experiencing somewhat more inclusive forms of rapid economic growth.  
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8 Displacement either does not exist or is welcome. However, justice claims are still made. In  
9 Hanoi, people typically object not to displacement but to the distribution of value created by  
10 land redevelopment. This leaves generalized gentrification proponents with two choices.  
11 First, they could argue that the form of injustice in rapidly growing economies may differ  
12 from that in developed Western cities. If one accepts Shin's (2009) claim that the form of  
13 gentrification in East Asia differs from that of the West, then it follows that injustice may  
14 also take different forms. One could argue that gentrification in the West is experienced as  
15 unjust due to the displacement it generates, and that this injustice manifests in place-based  
16 claims while the large-scale gentrification of East Asia, on the other hand, is experienced as  
17 unjust due to the inequitable distribution of newly created value. That is, the definition of  
18 justice must be contextualized. While this would be consistent with Shklar's claim that the  
19 definition of justice evolves through localized experiences of injustice, some might object  
20 that this strategy would only further dissipate the concept of gentrification. More importantly,  
21 it also risks obscuring the terminological clarity of other forms of injustice that are not unique  
22 to one geographical region, like value grabbing, and thereby undermining the terminological  
23 traction for mobilizing resistance to those forms of injustice. We thus offer a second option.  
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27 If political traction matters, then naming matters (Fainstein, 2010). As argued above,  
28 "gentrification" is employed to mobilize political action in the face of perceived injustice.  
29 While the word has proven effective where the production of space for more affluent users  
30 initiates displacement that threatens households' well-being, it is unlikely to be as effective  
31 when displacement offers new opportunities and promises a better living environment (real or  
32 imagined). For it is the experience of social injustice through displacement that gives the  
33 accusation of "gentrification" its political weight. Following Shklar (1992), it can be argued  
34 that the voice of the victims is primary in determinations of injustice that drive political  
35 action, and in Hanoi victims are concerned with different forms of injustice. New forms of  
36 injustice require new names. To mobilize around the injustice created by Hanoi's large-scale  
37 residential projects, we therefore propose the alternative notions of "livelihoods  
38 dispossession" and "value grabbing". These terms respectively capture the loss of livelihood  
39 security and the inequitable distribution of profits from redevelopment, the genuine concerns  
40 of villagers.  
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3 Our reliance on Shklar’s position that injustice depends fundamentally on the perception of  
4 victims opens up an important avenue for future debate. We must now explore whose  
5 perception of injustice matters. As Shklar (1992: 39) points out, some people take up the  
6 cause of others they perceive to be victims of injustice even when those others do not make  
7 justice claims themselves. For instance, as discussed above, outside academics, media  
8 practitioners, and activists are often involved as political actors in reinforcing and broadening  
9 villagers’ injustice claims. If they identify injustice in the absence of victims’ claims, is it  
10 appropriate to call an urban transformation gentrification, livelihood dispossession, or value  
11 grabbing? Perhaps their political action can convince others that they, too, are experiencing a  
12 particular form of injustice, as may be the case for Ley and Teo’s claim that the  
13 epistemological recognition of gentrification is growing in Hong Kong. Perhaps victims of  
14 displacement are also victims of false consciousness and simply misread their plight. Perhaps,  
15 as DiGregorio (2011) and Hila Zaban (personal communication) suggest, social injustice only  
16 becomes clear years later after the true costs are reckoned as expansion turns to  
17 overexpansion or socio-economic conditions change. If so, the present welcoming of urban  
18 transformation may not reflect long term costs, and the voices of those currently anticipating  
19 or experiencing benefits from displacement must be discounted, a clear challenge for  
20 democratic process. If these politically mobilizing terms require a determination that social  
21 injustice is being done, we are now compelled to ask who has the authority to make that  
22 designation.  
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**Table 1.** Characteristics of the NUA studied

	<b>Distance to city center</b>	<b>Construction period</b>	<b>Developer</b>	<b>Surface area</b>	<b>Population (approx.)</b>	<b>Adjacent urbanized villages</b>
<b>Linh Dam (peninsula)</b>	8 km	1998-2008	Hanoi Urban Development Corp. (HUD)	130 ha.	25,000	Hoang Liet
<b>Trung Hoa-Nhan Chinh</b>	5 km	2001-2006	Vietnam Construction Import-Export Corp. (Vinaconex)	32 ha.	15,000	Hoa Muc Trung Kinh
<b>Van Quan</b>	10 km	2002-2007	HUD	62 ha.	14,000	Van Quan Yen Phuc Yen Xa

Source: Authors' data