“Gentrification or ghetto”: making sense of an intellectual impasse

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The debate on the causes, effects and extent of the “gentrification” of working-class neighbourhoods in the central areas of our cities has animated (and divided) the fields of geography and urban sociology for the last decade or so in France. This debate was reignited in September 2013 by the publication of a book by Anne Clerval titled Paris sans le peuple *(“Paris Without the People”). In this article, Anne Clerval and Mathieu Van Criekingen reply with force to those fellow researchers and those politicians and administrators who see gentrification as a positive process that can modify social structures and encourage urban renewal.*

Is it possible that the gentrification has become rather a bourgeois concept? This question may seem somewhat ridiculous in view of the original meaning of the word “gentrification” – that is, the processes whereby working-class neighbourhoods become middle-class, and in particular the social and symbolic violence that typically accompanies these processes (eviction of working-class residents and businesses, complexification of access to housing, funding of amenities or events completely at odds with the local population’s needs and desires, etc.). However, this question appears less risible when we consider the stances adopted by a number of geographers and sociologists in the media or when consulted by urban-planning agencies. Recent examples we might cite here include pieces by Chris Hamnett in *The Guardian* (2008), Guy Burgel in the journal *Les Cahiers Espaces* (2010), Jacques Lévy in French daily *Libération* (2013), Sofie Vermeulen and Eric Corijn in *The Brussels Reader* (2013) and Jacques Donzelot (2013) in a publication produced by the IAU-ÎdF (Institut d’aménagement et d’urbanisme de la région Île-de-France – Institute for the Urban Planning and Development of the Paris–Île-de-France Region).

The same argument can be found in each of these contributions, namely that the increased or renewed attractiveness of certain working-class neighbourhoods among better-off categories of residents, retail entrepreneurs and property developers should not be feared for its effects – such as eviction or marginalisation – on the local population and on existing activities, but rather viewed as a source of opportunities to be seized. Guy Burgel (2010), for example, when asked, “Does gentrification contribute positively to urban regeneration and heritage protection?”, gave the following response: “The answer is yes. In order to prevent an irreversible loss of built heritage, accepting measured gentrification can be a solution. The arrival of wealthier populations in an underprivileged neighbourhood leads to the renovation of the area’s buildings by these new residents, who have the means to improve and refurbish their dwellings. This helps to protect heritage.” Others claim that gentrification brings with it new “diversity” (social, functional and usage-related) in working-class neighbourhoods, a byword for “urbanity that involves all the components of urban society” (Lévy 2013). Gentrification, it is purported, keeps the “human capital” required by advanced service-sector and high-tech activities in the heart of the city, and also leads to the development of new patterns of cultural or retail consumption. Lastly, it is often held that gentrification helps to resolve the environmental crisis by slowing down urban sprawl. In sum,

gentrification is portrayed as having become a positive dynamic to be encouraged and managed rather than discouraged or combatted.

In our view, however, this interpretation of contemporary transformations of working-class neighbourhoods – an interpretation that is now shared by many politicians, planners, architects and property developers – suffers from several serious errors of perspective.

Gentrification: a natural and painless process?

For those who hold a positive view of gentrification, this concept seems to have little relevance any more, given the extent to which social structures have been transformed in recent years in those cities that are home to command functions of the global economy. For them, gentrification appears to designate nothing more than a process whereby "downwardly mobile (unqualified) middle classes" are replaced by "upwardly mobile middle classes and their supply of new graduates" (Donzelot 2013), in what is seen as a logical extension of the metropolisation of the professional sphere to the residential sphere. As Sofie Vermeulen and Eric Corijn (2013) suggest in the case of Brussels, "it was only during the period of decline due to the deindustrialisation and rapid periurbanisation of Brussels that these central neighbourhoods have been 'allowed' to experience ethnically centred development. Today, metropolitan dynamics are back" (p. 181). This interpretation firmly places gentrification within the "normal – 'biological' – life cycle of the city as a living organism" (Burgel 2010) and consequently leads to other terminology, such as "urban regeneration", being used in direct opposition to "urban decline" (Hamnett 2008).

It is this interpretation of gentrification as a "normal" – or even "natural" – process in an era of metropolisation that is problematic at a number of levels.

First, the multiscalar approaches of gentrification, which link it to contemporary macroeconomic transformations of global capitalism as well as to transformations in the role of nation states (Smith 2002; Harvey 2011), clearly show that metropolisation is not a process that is inevitable; it results from the political choices and strategies implemented by economic players that give substance to the neoliberal configuration of the capitalist system (Clerval 2013). While gentrification logically follows in the wake of metropolisation, this does not mean that these developments are "natural".

Second, the "scissor effect" that can be observed in the falling numbers of manual jobs versus rising numbers of managerial and intellectual jobs cannot alone explain gentrification. In particular, this reasoning ignores the processes of residential selection at work within the urban space, which are themselves the result of land and real-estate price mechanisms and their modes of public (non-)regulation. For example, in Paris, growing divergences have been observed since the 1980s between the categories of jobs located in the urban core (i.e. the city of Paris proper) and the categories of residents that live there. In 2008, for instance, while 32% of all jobs in Paris were in management and the intellectual professions, some 42% of the city's working population were employed in posts of this kind – a difference of 10 percentage points (INSEE, 2008 census). In other words, while it is predictable that metropolisation reinforces the concentration of highly qualified jobs in the city of Paris, this does not in any way explain why highly qualified workers set up home in the city's working-class neighbourhoods, to the detriment of manual workers (difference of -2 percentage points between the proportion of manual jobs in Paris and the proportion of working residents who occupy these posts) and clerical workers (difference of -6 percentage points). Furthermore, the residential and consumption spaces of working-class neighbourhoods tend to change in order to adapt to and accommodate these new populations.

Third, it is risky to take the decline in the number of manual, industrial workers in global alpha cities as a pretext for concluding that the managerial class are not displacing working-class residents from central neighbourhoods but replacing them, by filling in the gaps they left – a position defended in particular by Chris Hamnett (2003) and strongly criticised by Tom Slater (2009). In fact, the working classes, far from having disappeared, have changed in terms of their profile. While

the proportion of working-class residents is falling significantly in the heart of metropolitan areas, the make-up of this population group is evolving: the proportion of retirees is increasing, together with the proportions of clerical service-sector employees and foreign workers (Clerval 2013). The working classes are therefore more often employed in service-sector jobs that are insecure and racialised – and gentrification is doing nothing to stop them getting poorer (Davidson and Wyly 2012).

Finally, the multiple examples of resistance to gentrification[1] serve as a reminder that the social antagonisms resulting from class relations have not "evaporated" into the "post-industrial" urban ether, and neither have the working classes. Moreover, contrary to the claims of Jacques Lévy (2013), gentrification does not bring "social peace" to the centre of metropolitan areas, unless the peace in question is a sort of *pax romana*, where the "winners" impose their way of life and take over the city from the "losers".

Gentrification or death

Developments that support "positive gentrification" are also based on the construction of dichotomies that present gentrification as the opposite of impoverishment and urban decay in working-class neighbourhoods. This kind of thinking generates a false alternative (Slater 2014) between gentrification and "urban decline".

This artificial opposition is constructed first of all with respect to processes of periurbanisation. According to Chris Hamnett (2008), for example: "The question that those who criticise gentrification must ask is: what would they do instead? Would they prefer to turn back the clock, to the abandonment and urban decline of 40 years ago, or would they be prepared to accept that gentrification can have certain positive effects? Would they prefer the middle classes to abandon city centres and flee to the suburbs, as they did in the 1970s and as they still do in the United States, or to return to city centres? You cannot have it both ways." And yet the facts amply show that both processes – gentrification and periurbanisation – are concomitant, in a context marked by an increase in the number of households and the reduction of the average household size. More generally, choosing between the city centre and the outer suburbs (if such a simplification of urban structures can be made) is a residential decision that households make in accordance with numerous factors, in particular depending on the period in their life or their social trajectory (Van Criekingen 2010). Furthermore, households are not entities that are endlessly prepared to revise their position within the urban space as if they were holidaymakers choosing their next travel destination using online comparison sites.

A second, even less nuanced, form of artificial opposition pitches gentrification against the dilapidation or impoverishment of inner-city neighbourhoods, to the point of evoking the stigmatising case of the "ghetto". This second binary interpretation is exacerbated in Jacques Lévy's views on the matter (2013): "What you call 'gentrifiers', I prefer to call 'de-ghettoisers'. These people who would appear to have the means to live elsewhere and decide to settle in neighbourhoods alongside residents poorer than themselves have saved European and North American cities from collapse. Look what happens when they leave, as in Detroit – or Marseille." Once more, this interpretation prevents us from understanding the concomitant nature of the processes at work. The reality of the situation in these central working-class districts is that gentrification and impoverishment are taking place simultaneously, in the same neighbourhoods, in the same streets, and sometimes even in the same apartment buildings (Collet 2010).

[1] See, for example, the "Right to the City" website: www.righttothecity.org.

More gentrification = greater social diversity?

As Jacques Lévy's words clearly indicate, the residential choices of the "middle classes" are approached from a moral angle: those who set up home in periurban spaces are said to be shunning the city and its social mix, preferring to live among people similar to themselves,[2] whereas those who settle in central working-class areas are seen to be making a choice practically akin to activism in favour of "social diversity". Gentrification, we are told, is therefore the "right" choice as it is the choice that promotes social mix.

This interpretation is, however, incorrect on at least two counts. First, a number of surveys of recently arrived "middle-class" households in working-class neighbourhoods show that most of them could not, in fact, afford live in more salubrious central areas. Their desire to live in a centrally located, densely populated area close to all urban amenities (culture, urban services, employment hubs, etc.) means that they have no choice but to live in working-class neighbourhoods, and not always entirely willingly, either. The "social mix" of the areas they move into tends to be viewed as a backdrop that is appreciated *ex post facto* (Clerval 2013; Collet 2010). They have not, therefore, participated in any sort of activism or humanitarian action by moving into a working-class district, but are essentially there because of economic constraints, which brings us back to the question of the factors that determine households' residential "choices".

Second, contrary to the assertions made by Jacques Lévy (2013), gentrification does indeed lead to a reduction in the "social mix" present in central neighbourhoods. In 2008, the most socially diverse localities in the Greater Paris region (i.e. those whose resident population profile by social category was closest to the average profile for the region as a whole) were towns and villages in the north-western, southern and above all eastern outer suburbs (the *départements* of Val-d'Oise, Essonne and Seine-et-Marne respectively; Clerval and Delage 2014). Conversely, the social profiles of central districts of Paris clearly reflected an upward homogenisation of the population. While the "gradient of urbanity" (decreasing from the urban core outwards) so dear to Jacques Lévy is not devoid of sense, it is not at all correlated to a "gradient of social diversity".

Partial analyses that contribute to the depoliticisation of urban issues

Ultimately, pitching gentrification and periurbanisation – or gentrification and "ghettoisation" – against one another, creating a model where one must choose between these two options alone, is clear evidence of a refusal to accept a theoretical framework that seeks to consider all of the various and multiple dimensions of the capitalist production of the city at the same time. According to this framework, gentrification, periurbanisation and social relegation (whether in the urban core or the outer suburbs) can be understood as different facets of the same system of inegalitarian geographical development (Harvey 2011; Smith 1982). Gentrification is not the opposite of segregation but a process that itself forms part of the dynamics of segregation by shifting the boundaries of the social division of space, to the detriment of the working classes' right to the city.

By removing the capitalist framework of social production from the city (accumulation strategies, class relations, the role of the public authorities, etc.), the voices that defend a "positive" interpretation of gentrification are in reality contributing to a depoliticisation of the analyses of urban transformations, in favour of an interpretation in moral terms. The problem is that depoliticisation of this kind exacerbates the dispossession of the working classes by encouraging a political fatalism that disenfranchises them all the more.

[2] For a deconstruction of this argument, see: Rivière, J. and Ripoll, F. 2007. "La ville dense comme seul espace légitime ? Analyse critique d'un discours dominant sur le vote et l'urbain", *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, no. 102, pp. 121–130.

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Further reading

We encourage readers to download the longer, original version of this article (in French) published on the website *Terrains de Luttes*: http://terrainsdeluttes.ouvaton.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Gentrification-ou-ghetto_TdL.pdf.

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