

Gentrification and displacement: urban inequality in cities of late capitalism

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1. Introduction

This chapter provides the reader with an understanding of what gentrification is and why it is the cause of urban inequalities. In the last fifty years, gentrification has grown from a few cities in the Global North to become a world-wide strategy for capital accumulation. The following pages explore this evolution and contributes towards explaining why it has become a prominent topic for urban geography research, policy makers and social movements. The chapter shows the role of the state and neoliberal urban policies in advancing gentrification, stressing the fact that the growth of the phenomenon is a central ingredient for the reproduction of capitalism. Finally, it assesses the way in which gentrification displaces residents from their places and so provides a critical understanding of gentrification as a process of social exclusion.

2. The origins of gentrification

The classical process of gentrification is the transformation of working-class areas of the inner city into middle-class neighbourhoods, which ultimately means the displacement of low-income residents by high-income groups. The term was first coined by the sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe how many poor areas of London 'have been invaded by the middle class' (Glass, 1964, p. xviii) and 'once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly, until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed' (Glass, 1964, p. xviii). Glass observed that gentrification was related to housing rehabilitation, the tenurial transformation from renting to owning and the relaxation of rent control. She also noted the increasing liberalisation of urban policies and stated that 'in such circumstances, any district in or near London, however dingy or unfashionable before, is likely to become expensive; and London may quite soon be a city which illustrates the principle of the survival of the fittest – the financially fittest, who can still afford to work and live there' (Glass, 1964, p. xix). As has been noted, the term was coined as a 'neighbourhood expression of class inequality' (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2008, p. 80) to critically illustrate the displacement of working-class residents after the rehabilitation of the housing stock. Therefore, gentrification is a process of socio-spatial change in which the working-classes are displaced by the middle-classes and the residential and commercial landscape is upgraded. It is worth noting that the displacement of residents is inherent to any definition of gentrification so that there is no gentrification without displacement.

The origin of gentrification was a post-war phenomenon seen in a few cities in the Global North, especially London and New York, that started when small-scale gentrifiers entered run-down neighbourhoods in order to rehabilitate individual homes for personal consumption. The consolidation of gentrification in metropolitan cities in the Global North took place after the crisis of 1973 and lasted until the end of the 1980s. In this period, usually called 'second wave' gentrification (Hackworth and Smith, 2001), the role of development firms in rehabilitating housing for the middle-class became increasingly more powerful, which exacerbated the displacement of low-income residents.

Gentrification needs to be related to the abandonment and physical degradation of the inner city and the following process of urban regeneration. After decades of building expansion into the suburbs, which resulted in the decentralisation of middle- and upper-income residents, inner cities became home to concentrations of poor immigrants and working-class tenants who lived and worked in a decaying built environment. Deindustrialisation and the crisis of 1973 in Western societies made both physical and social conditions in the inner-city worse, including the decay of buildings, unemployment, and marginalisation. In response to this process of abandonment, successive governments adopted expansive regeneration programmes to change the social and material problems created by the decline of post-industrial city centres. As a result, the 1970s witnessed a euphoric 'back to the city' movement or 'neighbourhood revitalisation' which, according to the media and policy-makers, was bringing new life to old neighbourhoods after decades of disinvestment (Lees et al., 2008).

Simultaneously, some critical urban scholars searched beneath the euphemistic vocabulary to reveal a new geography of exclusion and depicted it as a process of

gentrification in which inner-city areas had been upgraded by pioneer gentrifiers and as a consequence the indigenous residents were being evicted or displaced (Clay, 1979; N. Smith, 1979). It is worth stressing that this origin of gentrification concerned metropolitan areas of the US and London, but research on the geography of gentrification (Lees, 2012) shows that its temporality and forms are different in different places. The chapter will explore this issue under the heading 'expanding the geography and forms of gentrification' below.

3. Explanations

In the late 1970s and 1980s two theoretical perspectives proposed different explanations for gentrification: consumption-side and production-side theories. The former are derived from the work of David Ley (1996) who explains gentrification as a consequence of changes in the occupational and income structure of advanced capitalist societies. According to Ley, the shift of cities from being manufacturing centres to centres of business and consumption services produced an expanding group of qualified new professionals that have displaced the industrial working-class in desirable city centre areas. Ley sees rehabilitation activity as being stimulated by the market power of the growing white-collar labour force and their consumption preferences and demand for urban living. In this sense, it is no coincidence that cities like New York and London, which are dominated by the financial services sector, were at the forefront of gentrification activity (Atkinson and Bridge, 2005).

Consumption-side theories have focused on the formation and behaviour of the middle-classes, exploring questions of class constitution such as who are the gentrifiers and why they are seeking to locate in central city areas. In *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*, Ley (1996) proposes a model of the potential gentrifiers who would typically be childless; primarily under 35 years of age; employed in the advanced services, that is, professional, administrative, technical, and managerial occupations; highly educated; and receiving a high income despite their young age. This model of the young professional as the prototypical gentrifier has usually been accepted in the classical explanation of gentrification (Lees et al., 2008). Regarding why gentrifiers prefer to locate in central city areas, Ley (1996) argues that a central location is valued because it offers access to work, leisure, and cultural activities, and it enables an urban lifestyle close to environmental amenities such as waterfronts, historical architecture, or local shops. Ley also relates this 'back to the city' movement to the counter-cultural awareness of the 1960s and 1970s during which the city centre was seen as a place for tolerance, diversity, and liberation, whereas the suburbs were the location for patriarchal families and political conservatism. The remaking of the central city was interpreted as a reaction against the structural domination of the modernist ideologies and planning (male-oriented society, industrial, authoritarian structures, mass production, religion, suburbs) and the arrival of post-modern liberation through the consumption of culture and diversity (minorities, pluralism, rights, feminism, multiculturalism, identity, individualism) (see Harvey, 1990). This 'emancipatory city thesis' (Lees, 2000) is more explicit in Caulfield's work (1994), and has also been applied to explain why women tend to locate in city centres as a rejection of patriarchal suburbia (Bondi, 1999).

Production-side explanations consider gentrification as part of a much larger shift in the political economy of the late twentieth-century, linking the process to a broader conceptualisation of the production of space rather than the outcome of new middle-class tastes and a demand for urban living. The theory was developed by Neil Smith as a reaction to the optimistic celebrations of an urban renaissance in the late 1970s. For Smith, the important point to understand gentrification would be the mobility of capital and investments instead of the mobility of people (N. Smith, 1979). Smith follows Harvey (1978) to explain how capitalism creates new places for profit and accumulation and in the process devalorises previous investments for future profit. The contribution of Smith was to connect these logics of uneven development – whereby the underdevelopment of an area creates opportunities for a new phase of redevelopment – to the conditions of American inner-cities. By analysing American processes of suburbanisation, Smith showed that inner-cities were affected by a movement of economic capital to the suburbs and that this historical process of capital devalorisation of the inner-city made profitable reinvestment possible. As a consequence, according to Smith (1979, 1996), a theory of gentrification must explain why some neighbourhoods are profitable to redevelop while others are not. In doing so, he proposed the so-called ‘rent-gap theory’, which focuses on the difference between the value of inner-urban land (low because of abandonment) and its potential value (higher if rehabilitated). The movement of capital to the suburbs, along with the continual devalorisation of inner-city capital, eventually produces the rent gap. In other words, the rent gap refers to conditions in which profitable reinvestment is possible, and therefore, once the rent gap is wide enough, rehabilitation can start and capital flows back in.

In the explanation of gentrification, Hamnett (1991) argued that production and consumption theories are partial abstractions from the totality of the phenomenon and so suggested the need to integrate both theories as complementary interpretations. Nowadays research has accepted that neither side is comprehensible without the other (Clark, 2005; Lees et al., 2008), and that an adequate explanation of gentrification will have to cover both aspects of the process: the production of urban space and the consumption of urban lifestyles.

4. Neoliberalism and the role of the state

Local governments have been advancing gentrification as a solution for urban decay since the 1970s and 1980s (Lauria and Knopp, 1985). However, state-led gentrification intensified in the 1990s after the global triumph of neoliberalism and urban entrepreneurialism (Hackworth and Smith, 2001). If in the first wave of gentrification the state played a crucial role in stimulating the back to the city movement, it also was concerned with the provision of public housing and decommodified components of welfare and collective consumption (DeVerteuil, 2015). However, as Hackworth (2002) illustrates, since the late 1990s state support has become more direct again, but this time outside of the Keynesian model and instead within the framework of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism involves the destruction of state redistribution and provision of welfare while creating new forms of state policy to promote capital mobility and consumption (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). The important point is that this role of the state has been translated into an increasing

targeting of high-income residents and in a policy framework in which gentrification becomes a positive tool rather than a form of exclusion. In the neoliberal context, gentrification has been incorporated into public policy as an engine of urban renaissance (Lees, 2003b).

The targeting of gentrifiers as a solution for urban decay has resulted in a number of policies aimed at ‘attracting the consumer dollar’ while criminalising poverty and marginalised communities. It is for this reason that Hackworth defines gentrification as ‘the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users’ (2002, p. 815). Among such policies, the deconcentration of poverty by demolition has been implemented in several cities. For instance, in the United States the HOPE VI programme provided grants for the demolition of public housing complexes that were partly substituted by middle-class dwellings (Wyly and Hammel, 1999), while in London council estates are in the process of being demolished and replaced with mixed income new-build housing (Lees, 2014). Such state-led gentrification policies rely on the rhetoric of social mixing or mixed communities. This rhetoric holds that the arrival of upper and middle-income residents will benefit poorer members of society by improving the economy as a whole. However, it has caused the displacement of tenants and a lack of affordable housing, while several empirical studies show little evidence of shared perceptions of community after gentrification (Bridge et al., 2012).

5. Expanding the geography and forms of gentrification

The chapter has so far discussed an understanding of classical gentrification as it was depicted by the literature in global cities of the Anglo-Saxon world, especially during the period between the 1970s and 2000. This was useful to provide an overall description and explanation of the process. However, it is worth noting (1) that gentrification can be traced back to the late 1970s and 1980s in other contexts as well, such as in provincial cities of the Global North (Dutton, 2005) and Southern European urban centres (Arbaci & Tapada-Berteli, 2012); and (2) that gentrification is now a global process that has also spread to cities in the South as well as to the suburbs, the countryside and even to slums. The expansion of gentrification has been explained as the result of (1) the international dominance of neoliberalism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; N. Smith, 2002); (2) the globalisation of real estate markets and the central role that urbanisation plays in the reproduction of capitalism (Slater, 2017; N. Smith, 2002); and (3) the emergence of a global gentrifier class (Rofe, 2003) and growing middle-classes in places such as Asia and Latin America (Janoschka, Sequera, & Salinas, 2014; Shin, Lees, & López-Morales, 2016). In recent years, accounts of planetary gentrification (Lees et al., 2016; Slater, 2017) show that the process is a global strategy of rent extraction and that it takes a myriad of forms in different places.

In relation to this, new forms of gentrification have been identified by several authors. The literature has described ‘rural gentrification’ as the process in which the post-productive countryside attracts middle-class residents from cities in search of the charm and natural environment that those locations provide (Phillips, 2005); ‘studentification’ refers to the formation of ‘student only’ enclaves that displace existing

populations (D. P. Smith & Holt, 2007); ‘new-build gentrification’ is the process in which residential developments in low-income neighbourhoods cater exclusively to the middle-classes, transforming the character of the place and resulting in the rise of rent prices in the area; (Davidson and Lees, 2010); ‘super-gentrification’ is the gentrification of neighbourhoods that have already experienced earlier rounds of the process by an elite of super-rich employees in financial centres (Lees, 2003a); and ‘slum gentrification’ is defined as a process of capital investment and new interest in the consumption of cultures of informal built environments such as favelas in Brazil, resulting in the partial or total displacement of incumbent populations (Ascensão, 2018).

Within the new forms of gentrification, ‘commercial gentrification’ and ‘tourism gentrification’ deserve special mention as they play a crucial role in contemporary urban change. Commercial or retail gentrification refers to the displacement of traditional and local stores and their substitution by boutiques, trendy cafes and franchises (Hubbard, 2016). Certain types of upmarket restaurants, cafes, and stores emerge in gentrified areas and thus are a highly visible sign of urban landscape change. Zukin (2008) stresses that commercial gentrification transforms the working-class character of the place into a new space for cultural distinction and differentiation. Although commercial gentrification tends to follow residential gentrification as the result of the consumption demands of new gentrifiers, it also needs to be contextualised within the trajectory of neoliberal urban policies aimed at transforming urban centres into spaces of consumption for affluent users. For instance, this is the case regarding the increased tendency to upgrade traditional food markets which are substituted by gourmet products and ‘local’ restaurants (Gonzalez and Waley, 2013). Importantly, authors like Gonzalez and Waley (2013) and Zukin (2008) note that, as a product of commercial

gentrification, the resulting new middle-class shopping environment destroys the services that are essential for low-income residents because of their affordability. Therefore, this retail change strengthens the displacement pressures that low-income communities experience in gentrifying areas. The chapter will focus on how residents experience gentrification below.

Tourism gentrification refers to the process by which residential areas are transformed into leisure spaces for visitors, threatening the right to 'stay put' of existing populations (Cocola-Gant, 2018; Gotham, 2005). The growth of tourism is a worldwide phenomenon and residents experience tourism-driven gentrification in both the North and the South. However, the way in which the process occurs varies in different places. Firstly, in cities of advanced economies, tourism has been promoted since the 1970s as a tool for urban revitalization after the decline of old industries. This involved a major round of capital investment in decaying areas aimed at bringing the middle-class back to cities, 'not as resident taxpayers but at least as free-spending visitors' (Eisinger, 2000, p. 317). In other words, the emergence of urban tourism parallels the emergence of gentrification and, in fact, they tend to coexist in similar urban environments. In this regard, some authors note that gentrification usually becomes a precursor for the promotion of the place, particularly because visitors and middle-class residents usually feel comfortable in similar landscapes of consumption (Cocola-Gant, 2015; Judd, 2003; Maitland and Newman, 2008). Gentrified areas create tourist-friendly spaces as they provide visitors with sanitized environments, consumption opportunities and a middle-class sense of place. As tourism brings further consumers into gentrified areas, the resulting intensification of land use increases property prices and accelerates the effects of gentrification.

Secondly, tourism gentrification is especially important in peripheral economies where tourism represents a key factor for development and growth and so is an important driver of gentrification into the Global South. An overview of case studies on tourism gentrification reveals a geography that covers secondary cities in the North such as New Orleans (Gotham, 2005), but particularly the Global South from Latin America and the Caribbean to the Mediterranean and from South Africa and Mauritius to the Asia-Pacific region (Cocola-Gant, 2018). In these places, the progression of gentrification is less related to the consumption demand of a local middle-class and more to the effects of tourists from advanced economies as consumers of urban, rural, and coastal environments. Consequently, tourism gentrification in the global South is an expression of uneven geographical development and regional inequality.

Recently, tourism gentrification has been strengthened worldwide by the rise of digital platforms such as Airbnb and the consequent proliferation of short-term rentals (Cocola-Gant, 2016; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018). These authors show that suppliers of holiday rentals are less single families that occasionally rent the homes in which they live – as Airbnb suggests – and more companies and landlords that are renting out residential properties permanently. The growth and professionalisation of holiday rentals leads to a shortage in the housing stock and a consequent price increase, which makes it increasingly difficult for residents to find affordable accommodation, exacerbating the effects of gentrification.

6. Contemporary definition of gentrification

Initially, the chapter defined classical gentrification as a process in which middle-class professionals were rehabilitating low-priced residences in working-class areas, resulting in the displacement of existing populations. Then, we showed that gentrification expanded as a global strategy of capital accumulation and that it takes different forms. Early definitions are problematic when it comes to describing new phenomena in different places and, in fact, some authors have wondered whether they were gentrification at all (see Davidson and Lees, 2010). However, the evidence that processes such as studentification, new-build gentrification or tourism gentrification also cause displacement and socio-spatial change and are usually led by the initiative of private developers resulted in a redefinition and a more flexible conceptualisation of gentrification. The important point is that the built environment is produced according to the demands of affluent users (Hackworth, 2002), and that such production displaces the indigenous inhabitants from their places. Regarding this, Lees et al. (2015, p. 442) state that ‘the phenomenon of gentrification is global to an extent that urban spaces around the world are increasingly subject to global and domestic capital (re)investment to be transformed into new uses that cater to the needs of wealthier inhabitants’. Consequently, Lees and colleagues conclude that any form of contemporary gentrification should include, in the widest sense, capital-led restructuring of the built environment with significant upper or middle-income newcomers and class-led displacement of the indigenous inhabitants. As Clark (2005, p. 263) pointed out several years ago,

Gentrification is a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital. The greater the difference in socio-economic status, the more noticeable the process ... It does not matter where, and it does not matter when. Any process of change fitting this description is, to my understanding, gentrification.

As Slater (2006) suggests, this understanding of gentrification retains the defining aspect given by Glass, that is to say, that the 'gentry' colonisation of urban space and the neoliberal 'principle of the survival of the fittest' cause the displacement of low-income residents and so it is an expression of urban inequality. This is a definition which reveals that a process of dispossession is taking place. It challenges the celebration of gentrification as a process that 'brings life' to disinvested areas and, instead, reminds us that the term was coined to depict a new geography of exclusion.

7. Experiencing gentrification: displacement and loss of place

This chapter has shown that the displacement of communities constitutes a key element of any definition of gentrification and that for this reason gentrification is regarded as an expression of class inequality. Displacement is a politically controversial issue and has strong implications for public policy. If for critical scholars displacement shows that targeting affluent users excludes low-income residents from urban space, for neoliberal

policy-makers evidence of a lack of displacement can be used to claim the positive effects of gentrification and to deny the need for protective welfare measures.

In order to disentangle these contradictory points of view, we need to pay attention to what displacement actually is and how it takes place. Regarding this, it is important to consider the conceptualization of displacement proposed by Marcuse (1985; see also Slater, 2009). Marcuse (1985) suggested that gentrification causes direct displacement, displacement pressures and exclusionary displacement. Direct displacement refers to a 'housing-related involuntary residential dislocation' (Marcuse, 1985, p. 205). According to this definition, displacement occurs when any household is forced to move out of its residence. This is the most widely accepted definition of displacement and, as a result, several authors have attempted to measure the amount of people displaced in gentrified areas (Atkinson, 2000; Freeman and Braconi, 2004).

However, Marcuse stressed that the involuntary out-migration of a place is not the unique socio-spatial impact of gentrification and that there are other consequences that usually remain hidden. For this reason, he suggested supplementing the definition of direct displacement with the concepts of exclusionary displacement and pressure of displacement. According to the author, exclusionary displacement occurs when any household is unable to move into a dwelling because it has been gentrified, and thus refers to affordability problems. Gentrified areas become increasingly expensive and this undermines the access to housing of low-income populations. Linked fundamentally to this concept, displacement pressure refers to changes at the neighbourhood scale that make it increasingly difficult for residents to continue living in the area. Those who avoid direct residential displacement may suffer the displacement of their neighbours, traditional retailers, public facilities, as well as the

upgrading of stores and services. The result is that the area becomes less and less liveable for the indigenous population, triggering feelings of frustration and dispossession.

Drawing on this conceptualisation, recent research on displacement has not only focused on the out-migration of residents but on exploring the daily experiences of people who managed to remain in gentrifying areas. For instance, Newman and Wyly (2006) find that, for many low-income residents, staying put means accepting poor quality accommodation, overcrowding as well as having to cope with high housing cost burdens. The authors conclude that those 'who have managed to avoid displacement are likely to be those people who have found ways to adapt and survive in an increasingly competitive housing market' (Newman and Wyly, 2006, p. 28). This shows that direct displacement is not a test for gentrification and that residents can adapt and remain, but at the expense of undermining their quality of life and well-being. In relation to this, DeVerteuil (2012) observes the importance of considering the disadvantages of passively 'staying put', especially because the literature on gentrification usually sees immobility as inherently positive and unproblematic.

In exploring how low-income residents experience gentrification on a daily basis, and linked to the concept of displacement pressures, several authors have concluded that a central impact is loss of place and a feeling of dispossession (Davidson, 2009; Davidson and Lees, 2010; Shaw and Hagemans, 2015; Valli, 2015). Place is usually defined as a space which people have made meaningful. It is not only a location but the subjective and emotional attachment that people have to any space (Cresswell, 2004). In addition, for Fullilove (1996) a sense of community is inherent to any definition of place. She emphasises that for low-income residents the

neighbourhood is a web of human bonds that leads to emotional links but also to mutual aid and solidarity that is essential for survival. In this regard, the loss of place caused by gentrification results both in an emotional loss and especially in the disintegration of the networks of exchange and solidarity that help low-income residents to stay put on a long-term basis (Betancur, 2011). For instance, Shaw and Hagemans (2015) find that despite the increase in restaurants and cafés in gentrifying areas, long-term residents expressed that they had fewer places to go out and meet their neighbours. As the authors state, ‘if the sources of the familiar – shops, services, meeting places, other people in the neighbourhood, the nature of local social order and governance – become unfamiliar, low-income people may lose their sense of place without the capacity to find a new one’ (Shaw and Hagemans, 2015, p. 327). The loss of resources that are essential for the everyday lives of low-income people such as meeting places, stores, and social networks make them vulnerable and leads to an emotional upheaval that is expressed in frustration, hopelessness and in the feeling that the place now belongs to others.

Consequently, the effects of gentrification cannot be reduced to the out-migration of the neighbourhood. The measurement of direct displacement leaves important aspects of space silenced and so, in order to assess the impacts of gentrification, there is the need to emphasise the lived spaces experienced by residents (Davidson, 2009). As Friedmann (2010) has pointed out, the destruction of places caused by gentrification inevitably imposes immense human costs and the capacity to protect them should constitute a moral imperative for planners and-policy makers.

8. Concluding remarks

This chapter has provided an understanding of gentrification as a process in which spaces are produced according to the needs of middle- and upper-income users and in which the indigenous population is displaced. Going back to the explanations of the process, both the cultural – consumers of space – and the economic – production of space – theories stress the fact that gentrification is the consequence of changes in late capitalism: the demand of the new white-collar class of the service society and urbanisation and investment in the built environment as a central strategy of capital accumulation. Neoliberalism has stimulated gentrification to the extent that it has been promoted by the state and celebrated by policymakers and local authorities. In addition, the lack of advanced industries and services in the Global South turns this production of space for affluent users into a central growth strategy by which local governments – often in conjunction with property developers – seek to attract overseas investment and consumers. In conclusion, gentrification is a central ingredient in the reproduction of capitalism. However, the evidence that gentrification causes socio-spatial inequality shows the need to work for a more equal society rather than excluding residents according to their consumption abilities.

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