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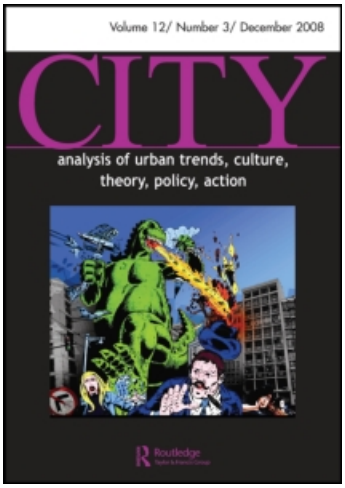

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The new Mikado? Tom Slater, gentrification and displacement

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The new Mikado?

Tom Slater, gentrification and displacement

Chris Hamnett

Key words: gentrification; displacement; replacement; class structure; London

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> 'My object all sublime
> I shall achieve in time—
> To let the punishment fit the crime—
> The punishment fit the crime.'
> W.S. Gilbert 1836–1911: *The Mikado* (1885)

Introduction

I was pleased to see Tom Slater's provocative article on gentrification research (2009), not least because it indicates that a concern with class and inequality in cities is alive and kicking. But, while I agree with several of his comments regarding the flaws of economic and policy-relevant research, his rhetorical and judgemental style means that many of his arguments regarding gentrification are flawed or over-simplistic and the purpose of this response is to take issue with them for those who may otherwise be seduced into seeing Slater as the Luke Skywalker of gentrification, wielding his light sabre on behalf of the true faith against Darth Vader and the evil empire of neo-liberal urban policy. Rather, it may be more appropriate to see Slater as the Mikado of gentrification research, seeking to burnish his own critical credentials and punish those who dare to question the emperor's theoretical and political edicts (Slater, 2006). Some of his criticisms of other work in the paper may well be valid but I confine my response to his criticisms of my own work.

Let me begin by stating that, like Slater, I view gentrification as essentially a class-based process whereby working-class or rundown areas of the city are transformed into middle-class residential areas often with attendant changes in commercial use. Transformation of the class and income structure of residential areas is at the heart of the process as Ruth Glass recognised 45 years ago. But, if we are to see gentrification as a class-based process, it is necessary to address the questions of where the expanded middle class come from, where the working class has gone, and what the connections are between gentrification, social class change and displacement. I do not think that gentrification always involves displacement or that displacement is the key cause of working-class decline.

At the heart of Slater's critique is that gentrification everywhere and always involves working-class displacement and anyone who denies or questions this is a neo-liberal stooge. Thus, gentrification is necessarily reprehensible and must always be opposed. He argues that in recent years we have seen the de-radicalisation of gentrification research with a number of academics, myself included, allegedly backtracking on their previous work. Contrasting my early 1973 work on gentrification and improvement grants to my recent work he takes particular exception to my statement (Hamnett, 2003a) that:

> 'There is a consistent assumption in the literature that gentrification is a direct

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> cause of working-class displacement. While this is undoubtedly true in some cases, it is argued here that the slow reduction of the working-class population in many inner-city areas is, in part, a result of a long term reduction in the size of the working-class population of London as a whole (by a combination of retirement, death, out-migration or upward social mobility) and its replacement by a larger middle-class population. In other words, the key process may be one of *replacement* rather than *displacement* per se.' (p. 2419)

He claims that I now view working-class displacement as a 'consistent assumption' and that I deny that large-scale displacement has ever occurred in London (Slater, 2009, p. 296). He is right that I view it as a consistent assumption rather than a universal corollary of gentrification and I will outline the reasons for this below. I do not, however, deny that displacement has ever occurred in London. On the contrary, there is no doubt that in the 1950s and early 1960s during the Rachman era, and before Labour introduced security of tenure legislation in the 1965 Rent Act, there was large-scale direct displacement as tenants were pushed out of their homes by landlords and developers (Milner-Holland, 1965). There was also active displacement in a number of private blocks of flats in the 1970s as a result of the 'break-up' process (Hamnett and Randolph, 1986, 1988). Concerns over landlord abuses led to the establishment of the government Nugee Committee of Inquiry (1985) on privately owned and rented flats (of which I was both a member and research director) and the subsequent Landlord and Tenant Act, 1987 based on the report which received all party support in Parliament. This Act managed to stop a number of abuses of both tenants and long leaseholders and led the way to wider leasehold reform (Tennant, 1987). Thus, not only do I accept that there has been large-scale displacement and linked problems but I have been actively involved in research and policy to address these issues.

Why then do I regard working-class displacement as a consistent assumption, rather than a universal corollary of gentrification? There are several reasons for this. First, the notion that gentrification equals displacement has been uncritically accepted as the conventional wisdom. Second, unlike the USA, which has virtually no private rented tenant protection outside New York and Santa Monica, Britain has extensive security of tenure protection from the 1965 Labour Rent Act to the introduction of assured shorthold tenancies in 1997. Consequently, US findings are likely to be less applicable in Britain and other European countries. Third, as the private rented sector in London greatly declined in size since the 1960s, so has the scope for direct displacement. Owners cannot be directly displaced and council and social rented tenants generally have considerable security of tenure. Slater cannot simply assume that American findings are of equal applicability in the UK.

Fourth, while there is no doubt that rapid house price inflation can and does effectively price out low-income groups (Hamnett, 2009) this is not the same as direct or forced displacement as is often simplistically assumed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the working-class population of London, and many other major cities, has been in a long-term process of decline as a result of structural changes in industrial and occupational class structure which have generated growth in the size of the middle classes. While the middle classes have expanded, and the working classes have declined, it is misconceived to view the former as a direct cause of the latter through gentrification-induced displacement as Slater seems to believe. Rather, as one class has grown and the other shrunk it can be argued that what we have seen is a process of *class replacement*, rather than class displacement, though I do not dispute that this has also occurred. It appears, however, that Slater is so convinced about the inevitability of displacement in all its forms that he

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cannot see, and thus denies, the possibility of forms of urban social class change which do not necessarily hinge on displacement but reflect underlying changes in occupational class structure. This point is elaborated below.

Industrial and occupational change and the changing class structure

In order to understand why changes in class structure come about it is necessary to look at some of the economic and social changes which have taken place over the last 40 years. During this period, London has seen a dramatic change in its industrial structure, from a city in which the largest sector was manufacturing industry (about a third) to one in which the largest sector is financial and business services (about a third against 8% for manufacturing industry). The relative proportions of the two sectors have been inverted over the 40-year period from 1961 to 2001. Manufacturing industry in London is now a residual economic activity (Hamnett, 2003a, 2003b).

This change in industrial employment structure has been accompanied by a change in occupational class structure whereby the size and proportion of the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled working class have fallen sharply whilst the size and proportion of the white-collar professional, managerial and technical middle classes have increased. These findings, first documented for the 1961–91 period (Hamnett, 1996, 2003b) have now been updated to 2001 (Butler *et al*., 2008) and confirm that the process of middle-class growth has continued and intensified, particularly in inner London which has seen an extremely strong growth of managerial and professional workers. As Ruth Glass accurately predicted, London is now a much more middle-class city than it was 40 years ago. Similar findings have been noted in Paris by Preteceille (2007), in Singapore (Baum, 1999), Cape Town (Borel-Saladin and Crankshaw, 2009) and other cities.

Slater disputes these findings, arguing that 'the insistence on a changing class structure to refute critics of gentrification *exaggerates* the expansion of the middle classes beyond all sensible limits' (2009, p. 297). Why this is exaggerated or what precisely these 'sensible limits' are, we are not told as he produces not a shred of evidence to support his contention. Instead, he quotes work of Paul Watt (2008) who has argued that the analysis of social class in London in 2001 by Butler *et al*. (2008) showed that group of London's population aged 16–75 were 'not classified' and this invalidates the analysis by excluding the long-term unemployed, the sick, the elderly and the disabled, 'many of whom are likely to be working class' (Slater, 2009, p. 297).

Watt is quite correct that 23% of the population were unclassified, but it only requires a moment's thought to realise that a significant proportion of the 16–75 age group are not in the labour force because they are still at school, retired or looking after the home. Almost without exception, all analyses of social class change look at those in the labour market, not those who are still at school or retired. Analysis of the non-classified group shows that students comprise 39%, the retired 35%, looking after home and family 11%, the permanently sick and disabled 10% and other unclassified 5%. Thus, the unclassified do not comprise a vast hidden army of the disadvantaged and the dispossessed as Slater and Watt would have us believe. No less than 85% of them are students, retired or looking after home and family. They are unclassified for easily understandable reasons and they are by no means all working class. Indeed, many university students will go on to become members of the middle class. But while Slater rightly points out that 'social class cannot be reduced to measurement' (2009, p. 297), measurement is important if ideology, belief and assertion is not to replace analysis. Sadly, when Slater dislikes the findings they are labelled empiricist or exaggerated though no counter evidence is produced. This is the

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triumph of ideology and belief over analysis and evidence.

The issue of long-term changes in class structure raises the important question of what has happened to the large number of working-class residents in London 30 or 40 years ago and why there are fewer of them today. Contrary to what Slater seems to think, the decline of the working classes in major cities is not necessarily a result of gentrification-induced displacement. In fact, the size of the working class has declined in almost all advanced capitalist economies (Marshall and Rose, 1985; Wright and Martin, 1987; Marshall *et al*., 1988; Esping-Andersen, 1993). Are these changes the result of gentrification? If so, this has evaded the attention of leading class researchers.

What are the processes by which one class group can shrink and another can expand? Occupational class position derives primarily from employment, not from housing. Thus, if a large sector of employment (manufacturing) contracts and is not replaced by a sector with equivalent occupational class structure, the size and proportions of the occupational class groups in question will decline. This is essentially what has happened in London, and in many other cities over the last 40 years. The mechanics are quite simple. If we assume that the average working life is 40 years over any given 10-year period 25% of the labour force will be replaced simply via retirement and new entrants. Some retirees continue to live where they have always done, others will move and all will eventually die. There is therefore an *inevitable* process of change in the labour force which, over a 40- to 50-year period can totally change its composition as some groups contract and others expand through differential recruitment and retirement.

Thus, a large proportion of the decline of the London working class of the 1960s and 1970s and the parallel growth of the middle classes, has taken place via changes in composition of the labour force through differential retirement and new recruitment. In addition, part of the decline of London's working-class population occurred as a result of the growth of the post-war new and expanded towns and the out-migration of working-class residents to new jobs and houses outside London (Heraud, 1966; Deakin and Ungerson, 1977).

These changes have also changed the income structure of the resident population and the price structure of the housing market, which has made housing much more expensive and priced the working class out of most private housing in inner London but this does not imply that the erosion of London's working-class population has occurred *primarily* as a result of gentrification. Many working-class households living in inner London 30 or 40 years ago have either retired, moved or died and been replaced by different households. Thus the decline of the working class in London has partly occurred for structural reasons rather than as a result of direct displacement. There is no doubt that an unknown number of working-class residents have been actively displaced as a result of gentrification in the private rented sector and others have been indirectly displaced by rising prices but the decline of the working class is not a simple result of gentrification-induced displacement and nor is displacement the most important factor in urban class change.

Loft conversions and new build gentrification

Then we come to Slater's critique of the work by Hamnett and Whitelegg (2007) on loft conversions in Clerkenwell. He notes our statement that:

> 'Commercial gentrification has significantly and probably irrevocably changed the social mix and ethos of an area which was dominated by social rented housing tenants. This has not, however, been accompanied by significant *residential* displacement as almost all the new housing units were in what were previously warehouses, industrial or office

> buildings. As such it is a clear example of gentrification without displacement although it may well have been accompanied by growing feelings of relative deprivation on the part of existing residents who have seen traditional working men's cafes and pubs replaced by swish restaurants, wine bars, kitchen shops and florists.' (Hamnett and Whitelegg, 2007, p. 122)

He comments rhetorically:

> 'gentrification without displacement … yet the social mix has changed, the area was (it no longer is) dominated by social housing tenants, and working men's cafes and pubs have disappeared in favour of swish establishments? … What Hamnett and Whitelegg are describing is Marcuse's *displacement pressure*—so they have actually discovered a clear example of gentrification *with* displacement.' (Slater, 2009, p. 305)

Again, I have to disagree. Our research which was part based on analysis of planning applications for residential conversion suggest that the new loft units are all in former warehouses, factories or offices, other commercial uses or new build. In other words, there has been net addition through conversion to the housing stock, and none of the existing residents have been displaced for the simple reason that the buildings had no previous residents. It goes almost without saying that few, if any, of the existing social housing residents can afford to buy or rent the new housing units, but previously there were no such units. Slater may not like the new social mix, but this is an example of new build or conversion gentrification without residential displacement whereby commercial and ex-industrial properties in this area have been converted to residential use. If Slater wishes to term this displacement pressure because of the rise of new shops and restaurants he is stretching the term so far as to make it almost meaningless.

A parallel set of issues are raised regarding new build gentrification where new houses or apartment blocks are constructed on former non-residential sites. This has happened quite extensively along London's riverside in recent years (Davidson and Lees, 2005). In these cases a new middle-class population has been introduced but as there was, by definition, no existing working-class population resident on the sites to be displaced, it is difficult to see how this can be defined as displacement unless, as Slater seems to suggest, the very presence of new middle-class residents of itself, constitutes displacement, even if they are living in new build housing and no working-class households have lost their homes. Once again, this is stretching the definition of displacement to an unrealistic extent.

Property sales by working-class owners and the impact of the right to buy legislation

It is also the case that *some* gentrification (it is impossible to say how much) in the owner-occupied housing market will have taken place as a result of working-class homeowners selling to middle-class buyers and cashing in the gains. Slater may find this a distressing example of class disloyalty, but many inner London areas had some working-class owner occupiers 40 years ago, and as they sell or die they are generally replaced by middle-class buyers. The 2001 census shows that 29% of routine occupations, 31% of semi-routine, and 36% of lower supervisors and technical occupations were still owner occupiers in inner London, and in outer London the figures were double this.

In addition, a substantial (though unknown) number of working-class council tenants bought their homes under the right to buy legislation and have subsequently sold their properties to middle-class owners or landlords thereby reaping a substantial capital gain. Some of this will involve gentrification but it poses the question of whether voluntary sale, departure and replacement can be seen as displacement and if so of what kind? I would accept that it can be seen as a form of indirect displacement in that the

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original class are being replaced and their successors would now not be able to buy in the area, but the root cause is not gentrification per se, but the right to buy legislation introduced by the Conservatives in 1980 which has dramatically reduced the amount of council housing in London and in Britain as a whole and has led to an increasing concentration of the economically inactive, the unemployed, the low-income groups and some ethnic minorities in what remains of the council sector (Forrest and Murie, 1988; Hamnett and Butler, 2009). The process was very marked in Conservative-controlled boroughs such as Wandsworth and Westminster, under the leadership of Lady Shirley Porter, as part of an explicit process of social engineering to reduce the amount of social housing in marginal wards and replace Labour voting working-class council residents by Conservative voting homeowners under a policy termed grotesquely 'Building Stable Communities'.

An inquiry by the district auditor found Porter and her colleagues guilty of 'disgraceful and improper gerrymandering' and 'wilful misconduct' and surcharged her £27 million. This was supported by the High Court and she eventually paid back £12 million to the council (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3867387.stm). At the time of writing Hammersmith and Fulham council allegedly have a plan to demolish large parts of the council estates in the borough which could have similar implications (Waugh, 2009). In addition, as Watt (2008) has pointed out, the impact of large-scale voluntary transfers to other social landlords has also greatly reduced the size of the council sector in London. These are important issues which have a major impact on the availability of social housing to low-income groups but they are a result of central and local government policy rather than gentrification as such.

More generally, however, what Slater seems to be arguing, though he does not seem to appreciate this, is that the middle classes should be confined to middle-class suburbia or existing middle-class areas and should not be allowed to move to any area where there is a working-class population because of the risk of direct or indirect displacement. This seems highly unrealistic given that the middle classes constitute the growing class in many Western cities. Not only does Slater seem to be denying them the possibility of middle-class housing outside existing areas, but he appears to embrace, if not celebrate, the continuation of existing forms of residential class segregation in cities with, for example, a solid and largely homogeneous working class in East London and a middle-class West End, as was the case for much of the 19th century (Steadman-Jones, 1971; Green, 1986). By extending the definition of displacement so widely as to embrace provision of any new middle-class housing in the city, whether conversion or new build, and any shops or restaurants that the middle classes might visit, Slater's arguments lose both analytical coherence and political bite.

The arguments made above do not celebrate gentrification or necessarily view the middle classes as a vital new force for urban regeneration. What they do is to try to highlight why the rise of the urban middle classes cannot necessarily be seen as an agent of direct displacement. But, pointing to my emphasis on the major role of the middle class in the changing social structure of cities he asks rhetorically 'Might Chris Hamnett be morphing into Richard Florida?' (Slater, 2009, p. 297). The answer is a clear no, but this is the politics of guilt by association which the Mikado and Joe McCarthy would have been proud of. Surely the analysis of urban class change and gentrification deserves better than this?

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