

ESSAY ~

THE EVOLUTION OF GENTRIFICATION

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¹ R. Atkinson and G. Bridge, *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005); L. Lees, T. Slater and E. Wylie, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2007).

² N. Smith, *New Urban Frontier, Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 29.

The extraordinary thing about gentrification at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century is its ubiquity. Unrecognised and undefined until the 1960s, gentrification remained such a novelty through the 1970s that the Parisian or New York Intellectual aware of the process was rare. Today, by contrast, in Beijing or Sao Paulo, Mumbai or Cape Town, academics¹ and even the populace at large are well aware of gentrification – what it does, whom it enriches, and whose lives it wrenches apart. Its advent in the post-war world was contingent on urban disinvestment concentrated in districts of earlier development and expansion. By the 1980s the term had come to be perceived as a dirty word, or at least the urban ruling classes in Europe and North America feared it would become so. For them, the problem with 'gentrification' was not so much that it evicted and displaced people from their homes and communities, but that the very name itself, derived from the term 'gentry', had the temerity to let the dirty little secret of social class out of the bag. 'Is Gentrification a Dirty Word?' was actually the masthead of a developer-sponsored real estate advertisement in the *New York Times* during this period.² Even as postmodern liberals and intellectuals distanced themselves from class analyses, the language of gentrification insisted that class was integral to the refashioning of urban geographies which in turn expressed and reaffirmed class as well as other forms of social difference. Since the 1980s such strenuous ideological dismissals of the existence of

social class have been central in repositioning gentrification as preferred neoliberal urban policy. However much we may lament or organise against the mass displacement it causes, in the public media gentrification has steadily and deliberately been morphed from a dirty word into a symbol of hope, a component of inevitable urban progress. In many places academia has largely followed rather than led this ideological shift, abandoning the critical perspective on gentrification.³ Whether in English, or in its various translations – French or Spanish, Japanese or German, Chinese or Cajun – gentrification is fast becoming international code for smart and creative cities, high-end residences, expensive and trendy restaurants, fashionable clubs and cafes, the coolest neighbourhoods. Against this powerful ideological reframing of gentrification in a far more conservative era, it is necessary to recover the critical edge that made gentrification such a dirty word in the 1980s, as a means of insisting on the larger point that gentrification is a *dirty process*.

³ T. Slater, 'The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, 2006, pp 737-57

In grudging recognition of the power of gentrification many European states have led attempts to displace the word and rename the process 'urban regeneration', which is now not only the policy of various European states but also the official urban policy of the European Union. While various regeneration projects may provide a modicum of working-class housing or include other components of greater or lesser benefit to working-class residents, the market-based logic of such policies ensures that while public funds may subsidise some housing, the central rationale is a regeneration of land, housing and other markets in the built environment, and this guarantees that gentrification, in various forms, is at the core of such policies. The state-sponsored language of urban regeneration is therefore little more than bureaucratese for the more honest language of class removal, an epidemiological camouflage for the supposedly natural (if policy-prompted) ecological succession of urban land uses. Powerful class interest is discursively bleached away while the real life class topography of geographical change is viciously reasserted. It might be objected that the intent of regeneration is not immediately concerned with markets and profits, more with communities and individual lives, but, to the extent that this is the case, the implications are no less troubling. The language of urban regeneration actually orchestrates a vilification of people's communities and daily lives: for one to be regenerated suggests that one must have already been degenerate. Such a presumption would of course be consistent with the intense social and economic individualism of the neoliberal era.

It is hardly surprising that over the course of nearly half a century the process of gentrification has transformed significantly. It has evolved from an economically, socially and politically marginal oddity of the housing market in the largest cities of the advanced capitalist world into something quite different. The larger urban-global context is part of the story in the sense that the contemporary city is very different from that of the 1960s. Postwar European and North American cities largely fulfilled the function

of providing a labour force for national economies, hence formative urban theory, especially Marxist work, of that period emphasised the connection between urbanism and social reproduction. The work of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Manuel Castells come especially to mind. Yet by the late 1970s the social and political economy of cities had begun to change dramatically. Globalisation was not new to the post-70s; it is ingrained in the DNA of capitalism. Yet some things did change in the final decades of the last century. Globalisation was as much ideology as fact, and while it never led to the much-predicted withering away of the nation state it did selectively erode the economic, political and cultural power of national states. National economies were increasingly losing their coherent identity. Globalisation marked a shift of political economic activity up and away from the national scale, driven by the steady growth of global capital accumulation, but as part of that process the urban scale also moved into focus and accumulated greater power. As national borders eroded, at least economically, cities increasingly moved, and were compelled to move, to compete economically across those borders. In the 1970s very few large cities had offices of international development aimed at attracting capital from the global markets, and when these existed even in the largest proto-global cities they usually amounted to one or two people in a side office. Only three decades later, urban governments even in quite small cities have major departments devoted to siphoning every dollar from global tourist capital, industrial capital, construction capital, financial capital, capital in all its forms. Cities now find themselves competing economically with each other across national borders in a way that would have been inconceivable in the 1970s. A new geo-economic competition has arisen between cities of which gentrification within cities is a central strategy.

Today's global-urban interface still seems quite novel. Our ideologies of the post-WWII period tended to keep urban, national, global and domestic affairs quite separate, but as even the language of globalisation suggests, we are undergoing a significant restructuring of geographical scale. Some previously global responsibilities have been made national (e.g. US global military dominance) while other national functions have gone global (the definition of economies); regional questions become simultaneously global and local (Palestine, Darfur, Ossetia, Tibet), and urban questions, from New York's Lower East Side to Beijing's Tiananmen Square, take on their own global significance. None of these activities and events was ever completely mono-scalar in the past; rather all operated on multiple scales. Nonetheless, a new *interscalarity* is certainly emerging. Cities today have quite different global powers, and a greater global presence, than in the 1970s.

It has therefore become possible to identify several dimensions of change in the gentrification process. Unlike its earlier manifestations, gentrification is now generalised, increasingly planned, somewhat democratised and of a totally recalibrated scale. First, gentrification has become geographically as well as structurally generalized. It now occurs in cities on all continents

⁴ N. Smith, 'New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy', *Antipode*, 34, 2002, pp. 434-57

and is at the same time diffusing out from city centres where it first took root. It now occurs well down the urban hierarchy such that medium-sized and even small cities now experience gentrification. And it has become functionally generalised to the extent that the process now applies to a narrow segment of the housing market as well as to a range of social geographical activities in the built environment.⁴ Thus residential gentrification is increasingly intertwined with the restructuring of the recreational, consumption and environmental aspects of the built environment as well as the employment market. In the residential sector itself, the distinction between the renovation of old buildings and the construction of new ones, which made some sense in the early phases of gentrification, no longer resonates in a world where the production of large public housing projects has given way to condominiums and market rate luxury housing.

Second, gentrification has become much more systematic and planned. In the 1980s and 1990s Europe was very much the leader; for better or worse, European gentrification represented the cutting edge of city centre transformation. Compared with North America, for example, where the state prerogative to seize property for gentrification has generally been more circumscribed, most European states have deployed more robust legislation in the name of larger scale gentrification and redevelopment projects. If one thinks of the Disneyfication of New York's Times Square, for example, which came to symbolise the large scale of contemporary US gentrification, it pales in comparison with, for example, the remake of London's Thames River corridor from Westminster through Canary Wharf to Greenwich. It pales too in comparison to the remake of the Barcelona waterfront or Berlin's post-wall Potsdamer Platz. As a counterpoint, one might also consider the non-reconstruction of post-Katrina New Orleans. In the days following the hurricane, developers, some politicians and even the media were salivating about the sudden possibilities for retaking the city from its working-class and largely black population. Katrina was a gentrifier's dream. From a European perspective, the inaction on New Orleans more than three years after the destruction seems unfathomable. There are many reasons for the dysfunctional response to Katrina, both before and after; these include an ingrained racism and class discrimination, actual and threatened resistance to large-scale gentrification plans, disputes between different levels of the state (federal, State, local), and comparatively circumscribed state powers to requisition private property.

At the same time, and third, there is a certain countervailing democratisation of gentrification. I use the language of democratisation advisedly. Part of the globalisation of cities around the world involves not only the movement of capital in its various digital and electronic forms but also its movement in human terms. Today's levels of global migration are not unprecedented but they are extreme. More importantly, the rural-to-urban migration that so occupied academics in the 1960s and 1970s is no longer contained within national boundaries. Africans move to Europe, Asians to the US, South

Asians to the Gulf States, East Europeans to Western Europe, and so on. Although multiple steps may be involved, the majority of migrations today still involve moves, however protracted, from the countryside to the city, but they are simultaneously international. Many immigrants who moved to North America or Europe in the wake of revised immigration laws in the 1960s or of corporate or military interventions and/or decolonization struggles settled in their destination cities and have been there long enough now to have families of one or two generations. In contrast to their earlier predicaments, some may be in a position to be small-scale gentrifiers themselves. Their own globalism has become part of the globalisation of gentrification. From London to Toronto to Barcelona, numerous immigrant entrepreneurs have become major gentrifier developers. In terms of an urban geography which, however dubiously, recognised white yuppies as 'pioneers' of the city centre in the 1980s, such immigrant families – reverse pioneers of the global citadel? – have themselves become new pioneers of neighbourhoods much further out from the centre. What are the social geographies of this new immigrant gentrification? It is important to remember that gentrification is a class phenomenon, and this applies within as much as between racialised communities. What are the socio-geographical and political implications of a gentrification process that reproduces, accentuates and builds class divisions within immigrant communities?

Fourth, the scale of gentrification as a recognisable process has expanded dramatically. The extraordinary expansion of the Chinese economy, at a rate of between 8% and 10% per year between the early 1980s and 2008, has been the most massive industrial revolution in history accompanied by the most extraordinary remake of the urban built environment. This in turn has been matched by a gentrification of Shanghai and Beijing that dwarfs anything seen in North America or even Europe. The remake of Beijing since the early 1990s has been extraordinary. As millions of displaced rural workers and farmers streamed into China's cities, Beijing grew from a population of 9.5 million in 1985 to more than 17 million in 2008. In the years leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games, the Beijing authorities demolished several thousand *hutangs* – small neighbourhood alleyway communities – and razed other working-class neighbourhoods. With the power of the state – and \$40 billion – behind them, planners attacked traditional neighbourhoods, replacing them with stadiums, condos, parks, civic 'improvements', institutional buildings, and gated communities with European or North American brands.⁵ At least 600,000 people were displaced as Beijing transformed itself, with some estimates exceeding a million. Such a level of transformation far outstrips the urban remake in Europe or North America.

⁵ B. Schiller, 'Extreme Makeover', *Toronto Star*, August 7, 2008, G4.

That Beijing's remake was tied to its hosting of the 2008 Olympics does not make it exceptional but rather paradigmatic. The Olympics and other such sporting and global EXPO events have morphed into a perfect vehicle to help orchestrate gentrification and displacement. Unlike four decades

ago, gentrification is now entirely entwined with global events, whether systemic, for example tourism or economic crises, or discrete events such as the Olympics. And in any case, except in its scale, the transformation of Beijing is not exceptional. Many cities from Barcelona to Athens used their Olympics to remake parts of their cities. It is not even unique within China; Shanghai, for example, which did not host an Olympics, has undergone a similarly dramatic transformation as part of its growing power in global finance.

In Europe, gentrification is guaranteed to continue to evolve into a greater synergy with global processes. The question is what form such transformation will take and the extent to which Europe and individual European states do, can or attempt to emulate the large scale, state-centred and state-sponsored urban remake of Beijing or Shanghai. It is already clear that the London Olympics in 2012 will grease the wheels of urban regeneration, entirely as intended, and facilitate the gentrification of significant parts of the city, especially in the East End. Yet the global economic recession that set in during 2007-2008, triggered by the home-mortgage meltdown in the US and exploding in the global debt and financial markets, will have predictable effects. Before the 1980s gentrification was effectively counter-cyclical, or at least unperturbed by economic cycles, but as it became more systemic, gentrification became highly susceptible to the cyclical movements of the wider market. A lot hinges on the economic power taken by, or allowed to, the state. The contentious 2008 bailout of Wall Street marks the denouement of a neoliberal ideology, if not necessarily neoliberalism per se. The state has finally revealed itself as a central puppeteer of neoliberalism. Although not itself a gentrification measure, this and related international bailouts will have the effect – sooner or later – of enhancing the gentrification market.

While the evolution of gentrification may contain few surprises, the scale of its most recent results does represent an extraordinary new departure. Gentrification can be seen as a simple class (and sometimes race) retaking of the city, but it has a much broader significance. It simultaneously involves a certain economic excommunication of working class people from their communities. Gentrification represents a nexus of class memory with contemporary social violence. Just as capital and culture have become quintessentially global, class and politics are also global. Gentrification, as a class conquest of the city, is one of the touchstones of that recognition today and its globalisation requires a global response.