

Box 3 Toward a Theory**Plate 9 Neil Smith.**

It is very difficult to write a commentary on this article, not least because it has been more than 30 years since the original was penned – literally – and the process of gentrification has itself changed and developed so much. At the time gentrification was a very new process, visibly affecting a few of the world's largest and richest cities. It was notable precisely because it bucked all of the urban theory we had in the 1970s: postwar suburbanization, downtown decline and Third World rural-urban migration were the urban stories of the day, and this new phenomenon of "gentrification" seemed to deny everything we thought we knew. To be slightly autobiographical, the "we" here is a bit pretentious: I was an undergraduate when I first ran across gentrification, specifically on a year's exchange from Scotland to Philadelphia, and the empirical reality of the process in Society Hill seemed to deny everything I was learning about cities. I remember reading at the same time the economic geography of Alfred Lösch who famously (if pompously) said that if his models

did not agree with reality, then it was reality that was wrong. Well, gentrification seemed to prove that Lösch was right and that reality was somehow wrong.

Or was it? The earliest writing on gentrification in the 1960s and 1970s broadly explained the process as a result of consumer sovereignty. Consumer demand drove the shape of cities. That was the paradigm. And yet the geography of the city now suddenly reversed itself because consumers all over the world apparently in lockstep began demanding the geographical opposite. This did not seem quite plausible. The paradigm, as Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) might have put it, seemed to embody a paradigm-threatening contradiction: empirically, were the world's "consumers" really that robotic? Or was something else happening?

At the time I was deeply involved in an exploration of marxist thought and Marx in particular, and the power of capital which never figured in explanations of gentrification was very much on my mind. The "Toward a Theory" paper very much came from this context. The main challenge was integrating a sense of historical spatiality into an already existing body of social theory which, itself, seemed space-blind. Amidst the maelstrom of social change, how do places change in relation to other places with which they are connected, and how do such spatial changes themselves constitute social change? Marxist work was more useful in this exploration than any other available theory. Still, the result is a clear amalgam.

I did not guess at the time that anyone would take the paper too seriously. I thought I was doing the usual journeyman graduate student work of taking on my betters. I was confirmed in this judgment when my advisor let the paper languish for months and months on his desk, water leaking on it from the unfixed ceiling, and especially when he finally delivered the assessment that no-one would ever publish it because my efforts at theory were much too simple and definitively obvious. I had already corrected the journal's proofs.

I think and hope that the paper helped to re-orient the debate on gentrification. Much of the subsequent debate has quite reasonably settled around the question of how production-side and consumption-side arguments meld with each other, and I think this has now become an old debate. Far more interesting for me today is the extraordinary scale of gentrification in cities around the world especially in Asia – Shanghai, Mumbai, Beijing – which I think completely changes the nature of the beast. In comparison, New York looks unambitious. This is all part of

the evolution of global urbanism and deserves a lot more attention than any of the older texts. If I learned anything from the original text, it was the dialectic of empirical and theoretical inquiry: without the theory I would never have understood how cities were supposed to work; but without the empirics of walking around Society Hill I would never have understood why the paradigm was wrong and needed to be changed. What are the new empirics that challenge all the existing work? We are still, inevitably, “toward a theory”

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