

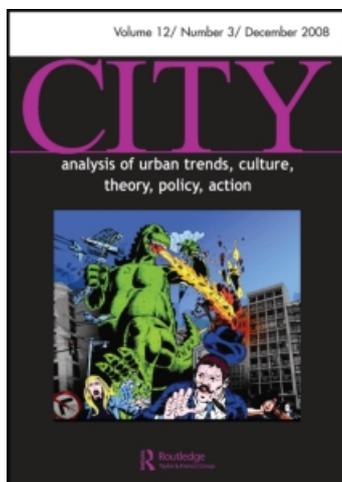
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On gentrification

A note from Peter Marcuse*

In the concluding two pages of his paper ‘Still missing Marcuse...’¹ Slater makes two points each of which is of major importance.

The first is that decent research, and certainly critical research (for all research, given the way the world is today, must be critical, or it is dishonest) must look at structural causes, and can only understand them by contrast with alternative lines of development not taken but possible. Let’s take gentrification research, and consider the implications of Hamnett’s substitution in his earlier paper² of occupational progression for class conflict. So there are more middle class (limited occupational analysis, but let that be) people today, and fewer workers, and that explains gentrification.

Very simple. But why are there more middle and fewer working class households? Is it because there is a rising birth rate among middle class people and a declining birth rate among workers? Are immigrants mainly middle class and are workers disproportionately fleeing to far-off shores? Of course not. If it were simply technological advance that increased demand for middle class skills and decreased it for working class skills, a logical alternative scenario would be that workers would acquire the necessary middle class skills. There would be no gentrification or displacement, however defined; people’s occupations would change while they remained in place. Bodegas might be replaced

by boutiques, pubs by cafes, but they would serve the same people the old served.

But that isn’t what’s happening. Why not? For structural reasons, that demand attention, analysis, and research that ultimately will expose unjust structural conditions needing to be changed. Every component of gentrification, when radically analyzed, leads to the same conclusion, Hamnett’s facts, I suspect, if critically thought through, no less than Slater’s. The question is, do we draw those conclusions, or avoid and thus obscure them?

The other point Slater makes at the end I interpret, perhaps only through my own experiences, as having to do with the position of the researcher. We are neither scientists dispassionately solving complex equations, nor passive servants doing what we’re told, answering only questions someone else asks of us. We are human beings, and the questions we deal with are about other human beings. If we do not understand and do not intuitively put ourselves in the place of those whose problems we examine, we will not understand them – either the people or the problems. If the pain of displacement is not a central component of what we are dealing with in studying gentrification – indeed, is not what brings us to the subject in the first place – we are not just missing one factor in a multi-factorial equation; we are missing the central point that needs to be addressed. That’s why researchers need to be with,

*With the two papers above by Slater and Hamnett, which were preceded by earlier papers by each of them, we conclude this stage (see the account in the Editorial to this issue) of the gentrification debate with a note from Peter Marcuse, whose work has been central to the discussion. We welcome new contributions to this, or some other, aspect of the gentrification debate, or to the debate about mainstream versus critical urban studies – Ed.

ultimately stand with, those whose problems they analyze, describe, explain, try to understand. That proposition arises not from some prejudgement or personal bias, but rather from the understanding developed by the research.

I've used the motto, Expose, Propose, Politicize, to suggest a necessary sequence: first analyze and expose the real roots of a problem, then place it against basic alternatives and propose actions, based on what has been exposed, then politicize to help put into effect what has been proposed. That's not the

conventional paradigm for how research should be conducted, but I think it's what Slater's article clearly, logically, calmly, and inexorably, points out is needed.

Notes

- 1 Slater, T. (2010) 'Still missing Marcuse: Hamnett's foggy analysis in London town', *City*, 14 (1/2), 170–179.
- 2 Hamnett, C. (2003) 'Gentrification and the middle-class remaking of inner London, 1961–2001', *Urban Studies*, 40, pp. 2401–2426.