

## "Alternatives to Orthodoxy: Invitation to a Debate"

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### ON DEFINITIONS

More than 20 years have passed since the term "gentrification" was first used. Originating in Britain, gentrification has become a popular concept in the United States, where its terminological debut in established dictionaries was an unheralded but nonetheless significant event. According to the *American Heritage* dictionary of 1982, gentrification is the "restoration of deteriorated urban property especially in working-class neighborhoods by the middle and upper classes." In similar vein, the *Oxford American* dictionary of two years earlier contains the following definition: "movement of middle class families into urban areas causing property values to increase and having the secondary effect of driving out poorer families."

It is remarkable how quickly this quite specific definition of a new process has become institutionalized. The explanation probably lies in the speed with which gentrification has proceeded in the urban landscape, and its high visibility in the popular press as well as academic circles. Even more remarkable is the fact that in a society and in a period when class analysis is widely held to be an historical or geographical anomaly – a holdover from the 19th century or quaintly Old World – these dictionary definitions embrace a class analysis of gentrification without the least hint of squeamishness. The temptation to dilute the phraseology must have been considerable, but perhaps the most remarkable thing of all is that with the process itself developing rapidly, these highly innovative definitions may already be outdated.

As the terminology suggests, "gentrification" connotes a process which operates in the residential housing market. It refers to the rehabilitation of working-class and derelict housing and the

consequent transformation of an area into a middle-class neighborhood. Much of the early research focused on immediate empirical questions: Where is the process occurring? How widespread is it? Who are the gentrifiers (their age, race, income, life-style, occupation)? This empirical documentation marked a first phase of research into a newly emerging process. With few exceptions, the focus was on the gentrifying middle class, not the displaced working class, and on the gentrifying neighborhood, not the location and fate of displacees. Although often detached in tone, much of this early empirical work represented an uncritical celebration of the process and was at times indistinguishable from the fiscal boosterism which permeated treatments of gentrification in the popular and parochial press, especially in the United States. As such the emphasis was on effects rather than causes; the causes were generally taken for granted, but the effects were hailed by many as a timely answer to inner-city decay, and research was often orientated towards extrapolation of statistical trends and public-policy prescriptions. This empirical phase still dominates the North American literature (James 1977, Laska & Spain 1980, Schill and Nathan 1983, Gale 1984).

A second phase of research, with its origins in Britain, emerged in the late 1970s. This work emphasizes causation over effect, theoretical analysis over statistical documentation. This second phase of research tended to see gentrification not as a unique and isolated process but as integral to the broader spheres of the housing and urban land markets. Several authors attempted to explain the phenomenon in terms of public and private policies toward housing (Hamnett 1973, Williams 1976, 1978, Kendig 1979). This led, in turn, to further theoretical attempts to explain gentrification (Smith 1979a, Berry 1980b, Ley 1980) and to set it in the context of uneven

development and the massive restructuring of urban space and urban land uses that is currently under way (Holcomb & Beauregard 1981, Smith 1982, Anderson *et al.* 1983). Suffice it to say that this work has been done to allow for the recent appearance of two comprehensive and critical reviews of theoretical work on gentrification (Hamnett 1984a, Rose 1984). [...]

If we look back at the attempted definitions of gentrification, it should be clear that we are concerned with a process much broader than merely residential rehabilitation. Even into the late 1970s, this particular definition of gentrification *vis-à-vis* redevelopment may have made some sense. But as the process has continued, it has become increasingly apparent that residential rehabilitation is only one facet (if a highly publicized and highly visible one) of a more profound economic, social, and spatial restructuring. In reality, residential gentrification is integrally linked to the redevelopment of urban waterfronts for recreational and other functions, the decline of remaining inner-city manufacturing facilities, the rise of hotel and convention complexes and central-city office developments, as well as the emergence of modern "trendy" retail and restaurant districts. Underlying all of these changes in the urban landscape are specific economic, social and political forces that are responsible for a major reshaping of advanced capitalist societies: there is a restructured industrial base, a shift to service employment and a consequent transformation of the working class, and indeed of the class structure in general; and there are shifts in state intervention and political ideology aimed at the privatization of consumption and service provision. Gentrification is a visible spatial component of this social transformation. A highly dynamic process, it is not amenable to overly restrictive definitions; rather than risk constraining our understanding of this developing process by imposing definitional order, we should strive to consider the broad range of processes that contribute to this restructuring, and to understand the links between seemingly separate processes.

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