

"The Order and Simplicity of Gentrification – a Political Challenge"

From Gentrification in a Global Context (2005)

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As the concept of gentrification celebrates an even forty years, some of the most basic questions about the process itself remain contentious. What is gentrification? What are its root causes? There are surely no lack of answers, though these are largely stamped by disciplined convention. The purpose of this chapter is to revisit these basic questions and formulate answers that facilitate 'having gentrification clearly in view' so it can 'be scrutinized effectively' (Beauregard 1986: 54).

I will argue for a broader definition of gentrification than is commonly found in the literature. Our overly narrow definitions render the concept genuinely chaotic by conflating contingent and necessary relations. This effectively interferes with probing underlying causes and slants our view towards particularities. I will also argue for a more inclusive perspective on the geography and history of gentrification.

I will argue that the root causes of gentrification are: commodification of space, polarised power relations, and a dominance of vision over sight associated with what Wendell Berry calls 'the vagrant sovereign' (1977: 53). We are so busy pursuing superficial particular truths we lose touch with and fail to maintain these deeper more universal truths about gentrification. I will argue that we need to break with the present norm insisting upon emphasising and focusing on the chaos and complexity of gentrification. We wrongly assume that seeking to identify order and simplicity in gentrification is tantamount to reductionism and simple-mindedness, and that critical thinking requires us to stick to the lodestars of chaos and complexity. This overriding tendency in

gentrification research is not unrelated to more general trends in social science where there has been 'a remarkable turnaround in radical political sensibilities' which has seen the social construction of objects of study dominate over other discourses of understanding (Sayer 2001: 687).

A question less frequently posed is: why does gentrification lead to violent conflict in some places and not in others? Another purpose of this chapter is to suggest what the key factors are behind this difference and argue for more engagement in developing policies and practices effectively removing the bases for severe conflict. I will argue that two key factors are degree of social polarisation and practices surrounding property rights. In places characterised by a high degree of social polarisation, short on the rights of users of place and long on the rights of owners of space (i.e. where there is an abundance of vagrant sovereigns given free reins), the conflict inherent in gentrification becomes inflammatory. That is not so in places characterised by relative equality and judicially practised recognition of the rights of users of place.

I doubt any reader of this volume will have failed to notice the connection between the title of this chapter and the title of Robert Beauregard's influential chapter in *Gentrification in the City* (Smith and Williams 1986). It may appear that I aim to show just how wrong Beauregard was. Not at all. I agree with Beauregard's basic arguments and regard his seminal work among the best on gentrification.¹ My complaint is not with Beauregard but rather with how his thoughtful statement has been received and used in ways I see as misdirected.

Generally interpreted to focus on the chaos and complexity of gentrification, its 'essential causes', its 'essential processes', its 'essential consequences' have been glossed over. If Beauregard wrote in 1986 a need to record the complexity of gentrification, even today.

Beauregard's 'theory' of gentrification, the layers of ideology which clothe gentrification, to pass by its concrete reality. An alternative title of the chapter, 'The purpose and direction of gentrification', I suggest would be 'The purpose and direction of gentrification'. I suggest that this does not provide a clear picture of the regular and contingent processes in specific contexts. (Clark 2005: 10)

In the end, the purpose of the chapter is a base for presenting research. The challenge is to provide alternative analyses with a focus on the political and social field is evened, the voice of the poor is more fully influenced more fully inherent to gentrification.

GENTRIFICATION TARGETED DEFINITION

Gentrification is a process of land-use change in a population of land-use change of a higher socio-economic status, together with an environment through gentrification. The greater the status, the more noticeable the change because the more people are marked will be of the environment. It does not matter when. Any description is, to my mind, a description of the environment. There are more of the factors attached to definition of gentrification, narrow it down to more of the definition is an inner city. It occurs in other places in many Scandinavian countries. This means that any

Generally interpreted as a call to recognise and focus on the chaos and complexity of gentrification, Beauregard's genuine concern for the 'essence of gentrification', its 'essential meanings and underlying causes', its 'essential form', and the 'structural forces necessary for its general form' (1986: 35, 36, 40) has been glossed over. Indeed it would not surprise me if Beauregard would find in the literature since 1986 a need to recognise the order and simplicity of gentrification, every bit as much as its chaos and complexity.

Beauregard's 'theoretical goal was to penetrate the layers of ideology and positivist social research which clothe gentrification, yet not probe so deep as to pass by its concrete manifestations' (1986: 54). An alternative title of the present chapter indicating its purpose and direction might be 'Gentrification: probing deep'. I suggest we need more deep probing, and that this does not preclude sensitivity to the particulars and contingencies of gentrification processes in specific contexts. On the contrary, it can help us to grasp better these manifestations as opposed to resigning before their complexity.

In the end, the arguments forwarded provide a base for presenting a challenge to gentrification research. The challenge is to engage in comparative analyses with a focus on policy issues in order to foster a politics of place in which the playing field is evened, the voices of all actors involved and influenced more fully recognised and the conflicts inherent to gentrification openly negotiated.

GENTRIFICATION: AN ELASTIC YET TARGETED DEFINITION

Gentrification is a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital. The greater the difference in socio-economic status, the more noticeable the process, not least because the more powerful the new users are, the more marked will be concomitant change in the built environment. It does not matter where, and it does not matter when. Any process of change fitting this description is, to my understanding, gentrification.

There are more often than not a variety of qualifiers attached to definitions of gentrification which narrow it down to more specific contexts. 'Gentrification is an inner city process'. Why? The process occurs in other places as well, which social change in many Scandinavian fishing villages attests to. This means that any explanation for it taking place

predominantly in inner cities must be based on scrutiny of contingent relations of historically specific contexts. 'Gentrification takes place in residential areas'. Why? Are not daytime and workplace populations as relevant as night time and residential populations? What about the gentrification of waterfront warehouses and shipyards, for instance Aker Brygge in Oslo? 'Gentrification involves the rehabilitation of architecturally attractive but unmaintained buildings'. Why? In many instances, yes, but these are hardly necessary or definitive. For years I have waited for the convincing argument why renovated buildings can be sites of gentrification, but not new buildings replacing demolished buildings. With as much anticipation, I have awaited the succinct delineation between rehabilitation and clearance/new construction, wondering in which category the cleared lot with braced and girded facade will fall.

It is easy to confuse narrowness with precision, but when qualifiers are not based on relations necessary to the phenomenon, they detract from precision, the narrowness being arbitrary rather than meaningful. For some phenomena, racism for instance, a broad definition is more accurate and therefore more interesting than a narrow one, the additional qualifying abstractions of which may work in social contexts to reproduce the broader phenomenon they supposedly narrow in on. This is easy to see in the case of racism, where narrow definitions cluttered with qualifiers protect racist perspectives from scrutiny. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves, and empirically investigating, to what extent our narrow chaotic conceptions of gentrification play a role in reproducing the phenomenon we claim to zero in on.

Abstractions based on non-necessary relations lead to chaotic conceptions, and 'No amount of sophistication in research methods can compensate for such sloppy abstractions' (Sayer 2000: 19–20). There is a simple reason for these abstractions slipping into our conceptions. Causal forces are commonly found in contingent relations, analysis of which is therefore necessary for adequate explanation of a concrete process – for instance the location of a gentrifying neighbourhood. But being necessary for explaining a particular case is different from being a necessary relation basic to the wider process. Central location may be one important cause of the process in some cases, but abstracting this relation to define the process leads to a chaotic conception of the process, arbitrarily lumping together centrality with gentrification. What becomes of gentrification in rural areas? Calling it something else would involve just another form of chaotic conception based on another form of bad abstraction that arbitrarily divides gentrification, 'thereby "carving

up" the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form' (Sayer 1992: 138).

There is nothing chaotic about gentrification in inner cities and in rural areas, in neighbourhoods and in non-residential areas, through rehabilitation and through demolition/new construction. There is, however, something chaotic about conceptualising gentrification according to these aspects, since none of them stands in a necessary relation to its occurrence.

This may seem like hair-splitting, but it has consequences. The qualifiers 'inner city', 'rehabilitation' and 'residential' have been repeated enough times to become entrenched. Time and time again when inquiring about gentrification in cities I have visited the answer has been, 'No, we don't have gentrification processes here', only to find out later, after follow-up questions occasionally spurred by visual evidence, that there was gentrification going on, but not in the inner city, not through rehabilitation of buildings, and not in old residential neighbourhoods. The collective efforts of gentrification researchers have given the world a chaotic conception of a process we are supposed to know much about. How can we expect others to have more rational conceptions than the ones we generate as researchers?

This kind of chaos, not the mundane chaos associated with complexity, needs to be addressed. I agree with Atkinson (2003b: 2347) that 'the problem of gentrification is less its conceptualisation and more about the need for a project which will begin to address the systematic inequalities of urban society upon which gentrification thrives', and will address this below. I believe, however, that our infatuation with a shifting and complex understanding of gentrification and our predominantly chaotic conceptualisations of the process hinder recognition of that need and render ourselves poorly equipped to fulfil it. There is nothing quite so useful as good theory.

Another conventional truth I want to dispute concerns the time-space delineation of gentrification. There is a story about the historical origin of gentrification that reads like a mantra: once upon a time (the early 1960s to be more precise), Ruth Glass discovered the very first instance of gentrification in a London neighbourhood. She is accredited in so many words as having found and identified a *new* process whereby a *new* urban gentry transformed working-class quarters. The story conflates the origin of the concept with the origin of the phenomenon. Ruth Glass did indeed coin the term in 1964, but it is careless to turn this into an assumption that we have here the origin of the phenomenon.² This is untenable even with the narrowest of definitions,

yet is repeated with sufficient frequency to become believed.

With the definition forwarded above it would be a tall task to show that gentrification started in London in the early 1960s. This 'process of conquest' (N. Smith 1996: xv) goes at least as far back as the mid-1800s when Friedrich Engels observed spatially concentrated displacements of workers to make space for new 'spatial fixes' of capital in search of potential profits and land rents. And did not Haussmann's remodelling of Paris entail in some places the two kinds of change associated with gentrification? Urban history holds many examples of gentrification far earlier and far away from 1960s Islington. Holding on to the story about gentrification's origins in postwar London is grounded in convention, not critical thought.

There is a similar story about the global spread of gentrification. Confident proclamations ring out: Gentrification is now global! The problem with this is not if gentrification can be observed in places around the world, but is again the issue of time: it is *now* global. The broader, more 'rational' (less chaotic) conception of gentrification argued for here extends not only the history but also the spatial scope of the phenomenon beyond the received limitation to large postwar western Cities. This is again a matter of conflating concept with phenomenon. It is more accurate to say that the concept of gentrification is now global, diffusing as the geographic foci of gentrification research has expanded. The extent of occurrence of the phenomenon from a global historical perspective remains however largely uncharted.

If the global reach of gentrification is not new, it is certainly widened and accentuated by what Neil Smith calls 'the generalization of gentrification as a global urban strategy', based on 'the mobilization of urban real-estate markets as vehicles of capital accumulation' (2002: 437, 446). The language of this strategy is sugar coated with images of revitalisation, regeneration, renewal, reinvestment and redevelopment, while its legitimacy is anchored in the 'necessity' to become a 'global city', a 'creative city', an attractive city, in competition with other cities. The social costs of the strategy are, if at all recognised, deemed necessary and unavoidable (Asheim and Clark 2001; Lund Hansen, Andersen and Clark 2001).

THEORISING ORDER IN CONTINGENCY

A rational, non-chaotic conception of gentrification must be delineated by underlying necessary

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As a process c related to colonialism Smith's analysis of Colonialism suggest but the underlying polarised power rela ings of vagrant sover (cf. Cindi Katz 2001 c trification is coloniali though the structures by no means limited as ties to foreign dir politics makes abund

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relations and causal forces as distinguished from contingent causes and relations. The root causes of gentrification are: commodification of space, polarised power relations, and a dominance of vision over sight characteristic of 'the vagrant sovereign'. Much energy has been spent in the gentrification literature distinguishing between and arguing for and against production/supply-side theory and consumption/demand-side theory. But neither side is comprehensible without the other, and all present theories of gentrification touch bottom in these basic conditions for the existence of the phenomenon.

The commodification of space opens up space for conquest, facilitating 'highest and best' land uses to supplant present uses (Blomley 2002), or as David Harvey puts it, 'forcing the proper allocation of capital to land' (1982: 360). Note the normative naturalising tendency – who would care to argue for lower and worse uses or improper allocations? It works in tandem with the seeking of vagrant sovereigns to realise visions through the economic exploitation of potentials, destroying the actual in the process. Polarised power relations – economic, political and judicial – are a necessary condition for the tandem dynamic to work: the more polarised, the more forceful and active the dynamic.

As a process of conquest, gentrification is related to colonialism, a relation laid bare in Neil Smith's analysis of *The New Urban Frontier* (1996). Colonialism suggests another geopolitical scale, but the underlying forces of commodified space, polarised power relations and the impulsive roamings of vagrant sovereigns connect the two processes (cf. Cindi Katz 2001 on 'vagabond capitalism'). Gentrification is colonialism at the neighbourhood scale, though the structures and mechanisms involved are by no means limited by neighbourhood boundaries, as ties to foreign direct investment and 'global city' politics makes abundantly clear.

The following passage from Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* is not about gentrification, but provides nonetheless a concise formulation:

Generation after generation, those who intended to remain and prosper where they were have been dispossessed and driven out ... by those who were carrying out some version of the search for El Dorado. Time after time, in place after place, these conquerors have fragmented and demolished traditional communities, the beginnings of domestic cultures. They have always said that what they destroyed was out-dated, provincial, and contemptible. And with alarming frequency they have been believed and trusted by their

victims, especially when their victims were other white people.

(Berry 1977: 4)

This is as relevant in the 'new' urban post-industrial frontier as it is in the 'old' rural agricultural frontier.

The dreams and visions of vagrant sovereigns disembody and displace those of present users, a process powerfully facilitated by the operation of land markets in capitalist space economies. Potential land rents are boosted by how much vagrant sovereigns are willing to pay to realise their dreams. Actual land rents are limited by how little present users can afford in order to hang on to their dreams. Though the political economics of the rent gap mechanism and its underlying structures are vastly more complex (Clark 1987, 1995, 2004; Harvey 1982; Sheppard and Barnes 1990), this simple relation of conquest is essential to its workings.

As long as ideas of a feasible and desirable alternative to capitalism are in short supply, the possibility of capitalism within a moral society becomes the next best thing to which to turn.

(Sayer 2001: 705)

Gentrification leads to violent conflict in many cities (N. Smith 1996). In other places we can observe a 'more benign unwinding of the process' (Atkinson 2003b: 2343). I believe a comparative analysis aimed at understanding why this process turns into tumult in some places and not in others would find two key factors to be degree of social polarisation and practices surrounding property rights. In places characterised by a high degree of social polarisation, short on legally practised recognition of the rights of users of place and long on legally practised recognition of the rights of owners of space, the conflict inherent in gentrification becomes inflammatory. Not so in places characterised by relative equality and legally practised recognition of the rights of users of place. If so, this indicates a direction for political engagement aimed to curb the occurrence of gentrification and to change societal relations such that when it does occur (and it will), conditions are established for more benign ends.

This kind of comparative analysis is strikingly absent in the gentrification literature. Academia, it seems, does not encourage interest in policy issues and political engagement, rewarding instead awareness of the 'chaos and complexity' of the phenomenon. While there is no lack of critique of gentrification as a strategic policy, there is a dearth of effort to outline alternatives. This poses a considerable challenge to gentrification research.

Conflicts arise between interests associated with linear rhythms of 'consecutiveness and reproduction of the same phenomena' (users of place seeking continuity in place) and interests associated with cyclical 'rhythms of new beginnings' (owners of space, vagrant sovereigns seeking new 'rewards'), as rents flow through the circuit of built environments (Lefebvre 1996: 231). The 'essential and determinant factor is money' argued Lefebvre (1996: 225), and concluded:

When relations of power take over relations of alliance, when the rhythms of 'the other' make impossible the rhythms of 'the self', then a total crisis explodes, with the deregulation of all compromises, arrhythmy, implosion-explosion of the city ...

(1996: 239)

While conflict is the necessary outcome of the forces at play, it is possible to reduce conflict and foster 'more benign unwindings'. Compromise can be regulated. Gentrification cannot be eradicated in capitalist societies, but it can be curtailed and the playing field can be changed such that when gentrification does take place it involves replacement rather than displacement, however difficult it is to draw an unambiguous line between them (Atkinson 2000b).

Gentrification underscores the importance of developing radical alternative politics of place and provides a field in which negotiations can be pursued and alternative politics honed. Where 'recognition is distorted by distribution' (Sayer 2001: 704), this needs to be addressed, partly through mechanisms of redistribution, partly through insistence on recognition in spite of warped distribution. We need a politics of place whereby political priorities are 'established out of the open but fair power-play between agonistic actors and their competing and often conflicting claims' (Amin 2004: 39). And we need to acknowledge that it is not a simple issue of defence and conservation: 'Challenges to the current construction and role of a place may sometimes be a more appropriate strategy than defence' (Massey 2004: 17).

To move successfully in this direction, we need to avoid the pitfall of simple division into conquerors and victims:

We can understand a great deal of our history ... by thinking of ourselves as divided into conquerors and victims. In order to understand our own time and predicament and the work that is

to be done, we would do well to shift the terms and say that we are divided between exploitation and nurture. The first set of terms is too simple for the purpose because, in any given situation, it proposes to divide people into two mutually exclusive groups ... The terms exploitation and nurture, on the other hand, describe a division not only between persons, but also within persons. We are all to some extent the products of an exploitative society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do not bear its stamp.

(Berry 1977: 7)

Visiting Malmö, Neil Smith asked me to show him the battlefields of gentrification. At the time, I was at a loss to explain that there were processes of gentrification in Malmö, but no battlefields. Conflicting interests, displacement, personal tragedies, yes, but not the desperation behind battlefields. The cumulative outcome of political and legal battles in Sweden during the twentieth century set the stage for less violent ways of dealing with inherently conflictual processes of change. I believe it is fair and accurate to say this is changing, with increasing polarisation and decreasing concern for the rights of users of place. Perhaps there will in the foreseeable future be gentrification battlefields also in Sweden. That depends on our willingness to face up to the 'faces of oppression' (Young 1990; cf. Harvey 1993), to develop relations of alliance between the interests of linear and cyclical rhythms. It depends on our capacity to see the order and simplicity of gentrification, and our willingness to participate far more courageously in the political challenge it presents.

Notes

- 1 It is unfortunate, however, that the understanding of chaotic conceptions Beauregard conveys is inaccurate. Given the authority the chapter continues to enjoy, this has not been helpful in edifying appreciation of the problems underlying chaotic conceptions of gentrification and how a more rational conception may be tailored.
- 2 David Harvey, *The Economist* and others have noted that globalisation is a new and fashionable term for imperialism. Similarly, gentrification is a middle-aged term for a process for which the victims may have had words long in use. This is pure conjecture, but I would wager a pretty penny that a good urban social historian could find

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some of those words with a modicum of concentrated effort. Little did Ruth Glass and whoever coined globalisation know just how successful their memes would be!

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