

BOOK REVIEW

Gentrification

Noah Ebner

Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly. *Gentrification*. New York: Routledge, 2008. xxvii and 303 pp. ISBN 0-415-95037-6.

Nearly 45 years after the term gentrification was coined, the first comprehensive textbook on the subject has finally arrived. Why this valuable book should be so long in coming is something of a mystery, especially considering that there have been so many introductory texts on much younger and less visible phenomena affecting urban geography, such as globalization or neoliberalism. Indeed, even 20 years ago urban sociologist Sharon Zukin (1987, 132) lamented that, “[f]or several years, a large portion of every article on gentrification has been devoted to a literature review. Although this may suggest a welcome quality of introspection, it more likely indicates a worrisome stasis in the field.” That stasis has since been broken, as Lees, Slater, and Wyly aptly demonstrate in their book.

The book is divided into seven chapters, tracing gentrification from its mostly First World and large-city beginnings in London and New York through its more recent manifestations on the global scale, touching base in cities like Moscow and New Orleans. The authors discuss the history of the phenomena by engaging in chronological order with the various lenses through which it has been understood. The result is a very subtle yet effective narrative device, which teases out the conceptual difficulty of the topic, especially as researchers have struggled to keep up with the various ways gentrification is expressed in the landscape.

The first half of the book is devoted to giving an historical background of gentrification. The authors begin with British sociologist Ruth Glass, who coined the term in 1964 to describe the changing composition of London’s West End from working-class residential neighborhoods to middle- and upper-class use. They go on to review “new middle-class” explanations of gentrification that appear throughout the 80’s and 90’s, which attribute the emergence of gentrification to increased demand for central-city housing by a swollen tertiary class. The second half of the book covers more recent research concerning gentrification over the last decade or so, while making room to elucidate what—aside from the pursuit of profit—is truly at stake in the process for impacted communities: “Displacement from home and neighborhood can be a shattering

experience. At worst it leads to homelessness, at best it impairs a sense of community” (p. 217). The dilemma of gentrifying neighborhoods is nicely summed up as a “false choice...of either long-term disinvestment and neglect or gentrification and displacement” (p. 264). Communities either continue to struggle with systemic disinvestment and its nasty concomitants or embrace gentrification as a solution, which in turn brings a whole new set of problems. Thus, there is not much of a choice at all for disadvantaged communities; the authors expose that gentrification as a “solution” to chronic disinvestment means gang violence and police harassment are exchanged for eviction and gelato stands.

Chapter one offers two detailed case studies of classic gentrification—one from Barnsbury in London, the other from Park Slope in New York City—involving the restoration of dilapidated (usually Victorian) inner-city homes by pioneer gentrifiers. Chapters two and three flesh out theoretical debates about the drivers of gentrification, contrasting Neil Smith’s (production-driven) rent gap hypothesis against David Ley’s postindustrial and Chris Hamnett’s professionalization theses on the consumption side. The authors also pause to consider how these debates reflect larger schisms within the social sciences generally, namely, structure versus agency. Chapter four considers how gentrification has mutated from its classic form in the central city to examine rural, new-build, and super-gentrification. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the politics of the term itself and briefly addresses its overuse in the literature. Chapter five discusses contemporary gentrification in terms of globalization, neoliberalism, and neocolonial discourses. Chapter six considers whether gentrification is positive or

negative, per se. Chapter seven speculates about the future of gentrification and provides case studies of anti-gentrification resistance.

Gentrification is near comprehensive in its coverage of the literature while still providing room to add valuable new contributions to the debate, most notably the following: an emergent fourth wave of gentrification, super-gentrification, a critical examination of ‘social mixing’ policies, an outline for a geography of gentrification, and a clarion call for humanistic geography to refocus on what its like to be on the receiving end of the process. These original developments are the most valuable part of the book and worth discussing in further detail.

They identify a fourth wave of gentrification investment—building on Hackworth and Smith’s stage model to outline the first three—by tying its emergence to the increasing linkage between local gentrification and global capital flows and explicit state policies that encourage gentrification (pp.173-186). Super-gentrification or financification describes the further embourgeoisement of already gentrified neighborhoods, by emphasizing the shades of meaning attached to the prefix “super”; not only a redoubled process of gentrification but one super-imposed on already gentrified neighborhoods. The empirical identification of super-gentrification calls into question both the historical continuity of earlier stage models, which assumed a “mature” state as an end-point for gentrified neighborhoods, as well as the rent-gap hypothesis, which is predicated on a cycle of disinvestment. Another novel insight concerning super-gentrification is the process by which pioneer gentrifiers, usually artistic, liberal-ish bobos (bourgeois bohemians), now begin to find themselves

being displaced from neighborhoods they colonized by a new super-elite class of international business managers and financiers (pp.148-154). Related to this, social mixing policies are becoming increasingly popular in Europe as a pretext for gentrification. The policies assume that social mix alone (upper and lower classes living together) within a neighborhood of concentrated poverty will stimulate economic growth by providing an influx of capital to those areas as well as resulting in a ‘rubbing off’ of middle class social capital to benefit poorer residents (pp.144-148). In response, Lees, Slater and Wyly duly expose such policies for what they are – domestic imperialism and modernity/dependency theory writ small – by pointing to the latest empirical evidence showing that the wealth flowing in to targeted neighborhoods is rarely, if ever, captured by local businesses and residents (pp. xxii-xxiv; 202-208). Additionally, their outline for a geography of gentrification, which takes into account a greater sensitivity towards context, locality, and temporality (pp. 187-189), provides a valuable countervailing argument to the predominant theoretical approaches, which largely ignore place as an insignificant contingency. As the authors state, “[o]f course, the process is different in different places” (p. 188)!

The book’s most substantial insight concerns future directions for gentrification research. Shot through the entire volume is a resounding call for research to address the effects of gentrification on nongentrifiers, underpinned by a social justice agenda as well as a “wish to point out that next to nothing has been published on the experiences of nongentrifying groups living in the neighborhoods into which the much-researched cosmopolitan middle classes are arriving en masse” (p. 122). The authors’ observation

that gentrification studies have for too long had a myopic focus on the motives of individual gentrifiers at the expense of those displaced by the process is the keystone of their text. They demonstrate how gynocentrism (a tendency for research to focus on mostly white, middle-class women gentrifiers), a hegemonic homosexual emancipation (focusing only on the heteronormative experience of “mainstream” gay gentrifiers), or research exploring age, race, or class lines generally have maintained this narrow focus. It is their synthesis of the old to emerge with the new—and their original contributions—that sets *Gentrification* apart as an exceptional textbook. The result is that newcomers to the topic will most likely find the first half of the book more useful, while those already familiar with the debates might be better served by giving the second half closer attention. Pictures and maps throughout the text give a good impression of what gentrification looks and feels like, while diagrams, charts, and graphs provide visual insight into the economic processes that underpin the phenomena. Activities and further reading sections at the end of each chapter re-enforce aspects just covered and give time for critical reflection. The authors have aimed at providing a text accessible to a wide audience, which can be used either in part or as a whole, and have largely accomplished their goal.

The tone of *Gentrification* is uniformly critical, a welcomed respite from the chorus of boosterish voices that have recently appeared, seeking either to attenuate the impacts of gentrification or assure us that it’s really a good thing for cities after all (e.g., Florida, 2005). The authors unwittingly show that this strategy backfires; towards the end of the book an attempt to even-handedly weight the positives against the negatives comes up one-sided. The ‘pro’

side of the argument draws largely on an opinion piece by a lawyer, which is buttressed with discursive treatments of government policies and some of the earlier consumption-theorists' work. The product is a jumbled straw man of easily dismissible and facile counter-arguments that quickly dissolves into criticisms of the pro-gentrification arguments themselves, instead of an earnest evaluation of their possible merits. Little effort is given to even reflecting on what is usually cast as gentrification's silver lining—namely a reduction of urban sprawl, revitalization without having to rely on state funds (this argument takes on special articulation in post-Prop. 13 California), facilitation of further development, reduced vacancy rates, increased property values, and stabilization of declining areas. The only tempered consideration of counter-arguments is reduced to a single table weighing the pros against the cons (p. 196).

Alternately, however, this could be viewed as a sign of the book's rhetorical force. By the time the authors examine possible positives of gentrification, the reader finds him or herself thoroughly convinced that there are none. They have a field day (perhaps rightly) at the expense of Richard Florida and his "creative class" hypothesis (which inverts the traditionally malicious mechanisms of gentrification by casting it as at once desirable and something to be celebrated), tearing it—and him—to bits any chance they get. Quoting Peck's (2005) very powerful critique, the authors find that Florida's "self-indulgent forms of amateur microsociology and crass celebrations of hipster embourgeoisement" make his arguments very easy to dismiss, while still taking some time to examine their tremendous influence on policy (p. 107; Preface). At the same time, however, that they acknowledge a continuity between Florida's creative

class and David Ley's new middle-class theses—both of which rely heavily on the consumption patterns of gentrifiers—the authors fail to realize that Florida has his finger on the pulse of "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson 1991); a logic through which not only housing, but entire neighborhoods, cities, and their aesthetics become commodified. The fact that none of this escapes Florida himself, especially as he's built a very profitable career around exploiting this logic to sell both books and economic violence, is regrettably beyond the authors' purview.

The authors' three unique perspectives give the book a complementary, if occasionally chaotic, voice, especially in moments of mid-chapter switching and overlap. Some of the sections penned by Lees—distinguishable by the frequency with which she cites and discusses her own work—will find a more comfortable home with readers more intoned to a British ear (a familiarity with the details of how housing estates work and the context of winking laws, for example, will yield a definite advantage).

Other additional criticisms I can offer are minor. The book fails to measure gentrification against other forms of new housing development, like tract-homes or gated communities, which may or may not be better or worse, all things considered. Think, for example, of the human and environmental impact of urban sprawl as farmland and rural communities are consumed by housing markets, or the *complete* privatization of wealth and space that results from gated communities. Fully one third of the book is devoted to the production or consumption debate. While I'm tempted to say this borders on excessive (particularly given that the preface to *Gentrification* argues that these divisions "have been overdrawn" (p.

xxii)), the chapter on production contains some of the book's most fluid passages. The section on new-build gentrification seems a bit exaggerated, primarily because it draws mostly on the authors' own work and buttresses that with other conjectural studies, leaving much to be desired in terms of empirical evidence. Occasional opportunities taken to exact research vendettas—against Neil Smith and Matthew Rofe, for example—are somewhat irksome, as they only marginally advance knowledge of the issues.

Finally, I would have liked to see a more substantive treatment of resistance to gentrification, particularly given the author's laudable goal of setting a social justice agenda for gentrification research. Because of their stance on this issue, I feel like this topic deserves its own chapter and a much richer treatment. As it is, they paint a quasi-bleak picture of resistance, concluding that equitable housing policy and social justice are incommensurable with private property. Although this may largely be the case, such an emphasis overshadows some of the more successful anti-gentrification campaigns that have solidified over the last decade and also ignores some of the more progressive policy solutions that have been examined (see, e.g., Logan and Molotch 1987, Ch. 5). Furthermore, their conclusion that "there is hardly a working class left in many neighborhoods" (p.250) is not only flat-out wrong (you can see them on the streets of American cities, protesting gentrification almost every day (see, e.g., www.righttothecity.org)), but reifies the questionable conclusions of the postindustrial and professionalisation theses, which they have previously shown themselves so adept at critiquing.

These faults notwithstanding, *Gentrification* provides an invaluable starting point for further research and deserves to be widely read. Anyone with an interest in urban issues will find something to take away from this book.

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Lead Photograph

Redevelopment in downtown Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2004. Photo by Christopher Gladora.

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