Relocating Gentrification: The Working Class, Science and the State in Recent Urban Research

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Abstract

This article amplifies Tom Slater’s diagnosis of the causes of the gentrification of recent gentrification research. It argues that the shift from the denunciation to the celebration of gentrification, the elision of the displacement of the established residents, and the euphemistic focus on ‘social mixing’ partake of a broader pattern of invisibility of the working class in the public sphere and social inquiry. This effacing of the proletariat in the city is reinforced by the growing heteronomy of urban research, as the latter becomes more tightly tethered to the concerns of city rulers. Both tendencies, in turn, reveal and abet the shifting role of the state from provider of social support for lower-income populations to supplier of business services and amenities for middle- and upper-class urbanites — among them the cleansing of the built environment and the streets from the physical and human detritus wrought by economic deregulation and welfare retrenchment. To build better models of the changing nexus of class and space in the neoliberal city, we need to relocate gentrification in a broader and sturdier analytic framework by revising class analysis to capture the (de)formation of the postindustrial proletariat, resisting the seductions of the prefabricated problematics of policy, and giving pride of place to the state as producer of sociospatial inequality.

Tom Slater’s provocative article on ‘The eviction of critical perspectives from gentrification research’ is a timely wakeup call for scholars of class, space, and politics in the city. It points to a surprising twist and troublesome trend in recent studies of gentrification, whereby the takeover of working-class districts by middle- and upper-class residents and activities is increasingly presented wholesale as a collective good if not boon. By focusing narrowly on the practices and aspirations of the gentrifiers through rose-tinted conceptual glasses, to the near-complete neglect of the fate of the occupants pushed aside and out by urban redevelopment, this scholarship parrots the reigning business and government rhetoric that equates the revamping of the neoliberal metropolis as the coming of a social eden of diversity, energy and opportunity. But Slater’s diagnosis of the facets and causes of what might be termed the gentrification of gentrification research after the close of the Fordist-Keynesian era does not go deep enough and, as a result, his plea for ‘reclaiming the term from those who have sugarcoated what was not so long ago “a dirty word” ’ (Slater, 2006: 737) risks falling short of its aim on both the scientific and the policy fronts.

1 A more elaborate argument than can be offered here due to space limitations would discuss the analytic and the political moments separately, and then proceed to link them. The reasoning would be the same with gentrification as is deployed to draw out the implications of ‘urban polarization from below’ for social theory and public policy (Wacquant, 2007: 247–56).
The shift from the acidic denunciation to the glib celebration of gentrification, the elision of the displacement of the established residents of the inner city of lower socioeconomic standing, the bland focus on ‘social mixing’ and euphemistic invocation on ‘residentialization’ are not isolated developments peculiar to the study of neighborhood upgrading. They partake of a broader pattern of invisibility of the working class in the public sphere and social inquiry over the past two decades. This literal and figurative effacing of the proletariat in the city is reinforced by the growing heteronomy of urban research, as the latter becomes ever more tightly tethered to the concerns and outlook of city rulers, and correspondingly unmoored from self-defined and self-propelled theoretical agendas. And both tendencies in turn reveal, confirm and abet the shifting role of the state from provider of social support for lower-income populations to supplier of business services and amenities for middle- and upper-class urbanites — chief among them the cleansing of the built environment and the streets from the physical and human detritus wrought by economic deregulation and welfare retrenchment so as to make the city over into a pleasant site of and for bourgeois consumption (Wacquant, 2008). I take each of these issues in turn, with a view toward sharpening as well as amplifying Slater’s exhortation to critical reflexivity in gentrification research.

The vanishing of the working class in the public sphere and urban research

Any rigorous study of gentrification would seem ex definitionis to hold together the trajectories of the lower-class old timers and of the higher-class newcomers battling over the fate of the revamped district, since this class nexus forms the very heart of the phenomenon (Glass, 1964; Lees et al., 2007). Yet Slater reports that the social and spatial dislocations caused by neighborhood upgrading have virtually vanished from recent research, and he argues that ‘the reason why displacement itself got displaced ‘is essentially methodological’ (Slater, 2006: 748). But the physical absence of those dislodged from the neighborhood hardly explains why researchers do not widen their observational scope to capture their peregrinations through urban space or resort to different methodologies (such as tracking a panel of former inhabitants or drawing out extended life stories) to document the housing turbulence brewing at the bottom of the urban structure. Certainly, these ‘methodological’ obstacles did not stump the founding generation of gentrification scholars! The empirical evaporation of working-class exiles from the literature on renovated urban quarters is not the result of defective research techniques: it mirrors the objective fragmentation of the industrial working class, in the historic incarnation in which we have known it during the long century (1870–1970) of industrialism climaxing with the conjoint maturation of the Fordist production regime and the Keynesian state, and its correlative marginalization in the political and intellectual fields.

With deindustrialization and the shift to deregulated service employment, the spread of mass unemployment and work instability, and the universalization of schooling as means of access to even unskilled jobs, the unified and compact working class that occupied the front stage of history until the 1970s has shrivelled, splintered and dispersed. Together with low-level service employees, workers continue to compose a majority of the active population of most advanced countries (Marchand and Thélot, 1997; Wright, 1997), but their morphology has been remade by deepening divisions of skills, employment status and reproduction strategy, as well as by spatial scattering. Many working-class households have left public housing estates, entered tract housing, or migrated outside the city in search of cheaper lodging. More crucially, these morphological changes have been accompanied by collective demoralization and symbolic devaluation in civic and scientific debate, as unions declined and left parties moved rightward. The educated middle classes and the knights of the financial, cultural...
and technological sectors that drive neoliberal capitalism now occupy both the cultural and the electoral center; their views and aspirations dominate public discussion and orientate the actions of politicians and government alike. There are workers, to be sure, but the working class as such is unfashionable, inscrutable, unnoticed if not invisible.  

Instead of tracking the mechanisms and modalities of class decomposition and its spatial correlates with the zest with which they tackled class consolidation and conflict in an earlier era, to plumb how deproletarianization and casualization are moulding the emerging urban proletariat of the turn of the century, researchers have turned away from it. Accordingly, the classic studies of ‘traditional working-class neighborhoods’ dissected by Topalov (2003) have disappeared, to be replaced by inquiries into ethnicity and segregation, on the one hand, and urban poverty and street crime on the other. For every book on a lower-class district focusing on social structure and everyday life among workers (such as Schwartz, 1990, and Kefalas, 2003), there are a dozen centering on racial isolation, ethnic tension and cultural succession (e.g. Hartigan, 1999; Small, 2004; Sharman, 2006; Wilson and Taub, 2006), and another dozen on immigration, violence and the underground economy (Bourgois, 1995; Lepoutre, 2005; Smith, 2005; Venkatesh, 2006).

At the foot of the metropolitan order, the language of class has been supplanted by the tropes of the ‘underclass’ in the United States and ‘exclusion’ in Western Europe wherever working-class neighborhoods have undergone involution, and by the theme of ‘regeneration’ and ‘renaissance’ in those areas taken over by higher classes migrating back into the dualizing city. When gentrification researchers ignore the tribulations of working-class residents displaced by rising rents, shrinking housing options, and state policies supporting business development and middle-class settlement, they are only following the general pattern of class blindness by urban researchers even as class inequalities sharpen before their very eyes.

The growing heteronomy of urban inquiry

The break-up of the industrial working class is not the only cause for its virtual vanishing from social inquiry and for the reincarnation of its established territories in the figures of the ‘ethnic ghetto’ and the defamed district of vice and violence (Wacquant, 2007). Another major factor at play here is the growing subservience of urban research to the concerns, categories and moods of policy- and opinion-makers.

Twenty odd years ago, inquiries into class and culture in the city were stamped by the battles of the theoretical schools vying for intellectual dominance: human ecology, Marxism, Weberian political economy and an insurgent culturalist current fed by identity theories, feminism and postmodernism (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Hayden, 1986; Walton, 1990). But in the new climate of political disenchantment and state withdrawal spawned by the concurrent collapse of the Soviet Union and rising hegemony of neoliberalism, intellectual radicalism receded and then seceded from reality. The ‘false promises of Marxism’ and ‘mirage of the cultural turn’ — to borrow the words of Michael Storper (2001) — left a gaping theoretical void, which was quickly filled by the prosaic attractions of conducting research on topical issues and the press of finding...
funding. Nowadays, urban research is guided primarily by the priorities of state managers and the worries of the mainstream media. A panorama of recent sociological investigations into ‘The texture of hardship’ in the American metropolis opens on this note:

The decade that spans 1995–2005 saw many new avenues of research develop among qualitative sociologists interested in poverty. Welfare reform, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1996, turned attention to the world of low-wage work as it began to dawn on journalists and researchers alike that poverty was as much, if not more, a matter of inadequate earnings as it was a consequence of welfare dependency. Employers emerged as actors whose expectations, normative orientations, and cultural distance from the low-wage world play a powerful role in the sorting of job seekers into success stories and excluded failures. Researchers gave renewed attention to patterns of family formation among the poor (Newman and Massengill, 2006: 423).

‘Welfare reform turned attention’: this capsule speaks volumes about how political developments and the funding bandwagons they create drive the intellectual agenda. In the 1980s, the ‘underclass’ had come to monopolize the attention of American researchers by seducing first philanthropic foundations and then journalists and policymakers with its loathsome moral and racial connotations (Katz, 1989). After 1996, it was summarily dismissed overnight from the scholarly stage without remonstration to make room for studies of the valiant low-wage earners making the transition from ‘welfare to work’, the families that support them, the employers that rush or balk at hiring them, and the bureaucrats who supervise their career (contrast, for instance, Jencks and Peterson, 1991 with Hays, 2003). In the European Union, Brussel’s Targeted Socio-Economic Program on Exclusion and Integration similarly drew researchers away from the study of mass unemployment and its spatial impact toward the new bureaucratic problematic of ‘exclusion’ and ‘integration’. In France, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, political tensions around postcolonial immigration and the deterioration of public housing have fueled a wave of studies and policy evaluation programmes on ‘neighborhood mixing’, ‘community-building’ and crime-fighting centered on working-class neighborhoods, but studiously avoiding the socioeconomic underpinnings of urban degradation, in keeping with the design of politicians to deploy territory, ethnicity and insecurity as screens to obscure the desocialization of wage labor and its impact on the life strategies and spaces of the emerging proletariat (Wacquant, 2006).

So when gentrification researchers offer rosy accounts of neighborhood ‘renewal’ as an ‘urban solution’ to the ills of sociospatial decay, in lockstep with the views of government and business elites, they walk in good company: theirs is only an acute case of the common malady of heteronomy that afflicts with growing virulence large sectors of social research in general and urban research in particular.5

4 Milicevic’s (2001) analysis of the ‘de-radicalization’ of the New Urban Sociology of the 1960s and 1970s could be extended, with suitable qualifications (moving from the level of personal interactions to that of the structure of positions in the intellectual field) from Britain to France and the United States.

5 Of course, the tug of war between autonomy and heteronomy is itself traversed with tensions and contradictions that would need to be mapped out. But the pendulum has definitely swung in favor of the latter. In France, for instance, sociologists of the city have moved from the ‘critical pole’ to the ‘technical pole’ and from academic to professional orientations (Lassave, 1997: 23–9); whereas the structuralist generation defined itself by systematically subverting state demands, the current cohort has largely accompanied and even anticipated them. The mutation of the work of Jacques Donzelot, from Foucauldian critic of state discipline to advocate of the state as ‘animator of neighborhood sociability’, is emblematic of this collective drift.
The state as home-maker and street-cleansing agency

It is revealing that the 26-volume *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Science* edited by Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes (2004) does not contain an entry on ‘gentrification’. The term appears as a subtheme under the entries ‘neighborhood revitalization and community development’ and ‘neighborhood’, where one reads:

Within the group of *public–individual partnerships*, the most salient phenomenon is gentrification, the entrance of upper middle-class residents into low-income neighborhoods, usually in the vicinity of vibrant central business districts of cities. In spite of the frequently found and often denounced consequence of displacement of poor veteran residents, gentrification processes have been encouraged by city councils in Europe and America, especially through enabling regulations and tax deductions. Another process in this group is housing and neighborhood upgrading by incumbent residents. Local people invest their own resources in improving their living environment, and often manage to receive at least some assistance from voluntary and public bodies. Last but not least is neighborhood upgrading by immigrants... What is common to the three processes is that they usually start as spontaneous private investments, which later receive some support from local public agencies. Together they are changing parts of our old cities and neighborhoods (Carmon, 2004: 10493).

I cite this article, not only because it confirms Slater’s main thesis, but because, while it mentions the role of public agencies, it vastly underestimates its timing, scope and effects. It is high time students of gentrification recognize that the primary engine behind the (re)allocation of people, resources and institutions in the city is the state.

Slater (2006: 746–7) lists among the causes of the eviction of critical perspectives on gentrification ‘the resilience of theoretical squabbles’ that have stalled and sterilized debate. But the ritualized opposition between Neil Smith’s economic explanation and David Ley’s culturalist take that Slater recapitulates as the dominant theoretical trope of gentrification research is problematic for what it leaves out: politics, policy and the state. The ‘rent-gap thesis’ favored by neo-Marxist analysts, the ‘cultural distinction’ approach adopted by neo-Weberian or postmodernist scholars (who invoke the phraseology of Bourdieu just as quickly as they disregard his theoretical principles), and the globalization thesis inspired by Saskia Sassen all leave out the crucial role of the state in producing not only space but the space of consumers and producers of housing. Logan and Molotch (1987) were right to insist that place is not a regular commodity but a battleground between use and exchange value. But they did not go far enough in their specification of the parameters of that battle and, in keeping with the national US common sense, they grossly underestimated the weight of Leviathan in it. Pierre Bourdieu ([2000] 2005: 30–1) has shown in *The Social Structures of the Economy* that housing is ‘the product of a double social construction, to which the state contributes crucially’, by shaping the universe of builders and sellers via fiscal, banking and regulatory policies, on the economic side, and by moulding the dispositions and capabilities of house buyers (including the propensity to rent or buy), on the social side.

This double state structuring of the housing ‘market’ is then trebled by the political steering of urban and regional planning, however weak its agencies may be. For, as Tedd Gurr and Desmond King (1987: 4) reminded us two decades ago, ‘those who hold and use state power can allow the fate of cities to be determined mainly in the private economy, but that is a matter of public choice rather than iron necessity.’ The weight of the central and local state is all the more decisive in lower-class neighborhoods, insofar as workers and the poor are most dependent on public provision to access social rented housing (Harloe, 1995). But the role of the state in gentrification hardly stops at building and distributing housing or shaping the pool of home buyers: it extends to the gamut of policies that impact urban living, from infrastructure maintenance to schooling and transportation, to the provision of cultural amenities and policing. Without the campaigns of aggressive policing of the streets fostered by the rolling out of the penal state in and around neighborhoods of relegation over the past decade (Herbert, 2006; Wacquant,
2008), the middle classes could not have moved into the inner city and gentrification would not have grown beyond the sprinkling of ‘islands of revitalization within seas of decay’ (Carmon, 2004: 10493). More generally, the historic shift from the Keynesian state of the 1950s to the neo-Darwinist state of the fin de siècle, practicing economic liberalism at the top and punitive paternalism at the bottom, entails a sea change in the political framing of neighborhood upgrading. Here the literature on gentrification surveyed by Slater reproduces for those districts the general tendency of public policy to invisibilize the urban poor, either by dispersing them (as with the demolition and deconcentration of public housing) or by containing them in reserved spaces (stigmatized districts of perdition and the expanding prison system to which they are preferentially linked).

Conclusion

To build better models of the changing nexus of class and space in the city, we need to do much more than renew the critical spirit that animated the pioneers of gentrification research out of a feeling of intellectual loyalty and reverence for their political engagement: we need to relocate gentrification in a broader and sturdier analytic framework. First, we must revive and revise class analysis to capture the (de)formation of the postindustrial proletariat and inscribe the evolution of ‘revitalized districts’ within the overall structures of social and urban space and their linked makeovers. Second, we must better resist the seductions of the prefabricated problematics of policy and advance research agendas sporting greater separation from the imperatives of city rulers and carrying a higher theoretical payload. And, third, we must give pride of place to the state as generator of sociospatial inequality in the dualizing metropolis. For, much like the fate of neighborhoods of relegation that fester at the bottom of the system of places that compose the metropolis (Wacquant, 2007: 283–4), the trajectory of gentrified districts in the twenty-first century is economically underdetermined and politically overdetermined. It behoves us, then, to restore the primacy of the political in our efforts to analytically dissect and practically redirect the social transformation of the neoliberal city.

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References

Résumé

Cet article amplifie le diagnostic de Tom Slater sur les causes de la ‘gentrification’ des études récentes sur la ‘gentrification’ urbaine. Le glissement de la dénonciation à l’éloge de la gentrification, l’élision du déplacement forcé des habitants établis et la focalisation euphémistique sur la ‘mixité sociale’ s’inscrivent dans un schéma plus large...
d’invisibilisation de la classe ouvrière dans la sphère publique et les investigations sociologiques. Cet effacement du prolétariat des métropoles est renforcé par l’hétéronomie croissante de la recherche urbaine, plus étroitement liée que jamais aux préoccupations des dirigeants de la ville. Ces deux tendances révèlent et facilitent la mutation du rôle de l’État, de fournisseur de soutiens sociaux aux populations démunies en agence de services et d’équipements marchands pour citadins des classes moyennes et supérieures — au premier rang desquels figure le nettoyage de l’environnement bâti et des rues des détritus humains et matériels engendrés par la dérégulation de l’économie et le recul de la protection sociale. Pour construire de meilleurs modèles des rapports changeants entre classe et espace dans la ville néolibérale, il faut replacer la gentrification des quartiers populaires dans un cadre analytique élargi et renforcé en réélabore l’analyse de classe pour saisir la (dé)formation du prolétariat post-indus- triel, en résistant aux séductions des problématiques préfabriquées de politique publique, et en accordant une place centrale à l’État en tant que producteur d’inégalités sociospatiales.