Displaced in the emancipatory city: Unpacking the ideology of gentrification

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Within the field of community development, gentrification is relatively unexplored despite its significance for developing a counter-hegemonic urban policy and action strategy that would benefit displaced residents and have an impact on affordable housing in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. While some have argued that the virulence of global capitalism can be traced to its redistributive nature, by transferring assets and redistributing wealth from the mass of the population towards the upper class or from vulnerable to richer countries, that is employed through mechanisms of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2006), few have explored how this relates to neighborhoods and community residents (Peck, 2005; Smith, 1996), and fewer have explored the ideological roots of neoliberal gentrification.

Most recently, proponents of gentrification have disguised the process as a form of 'community development' by claiming that gentrification is a panacea for various social ills. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the contradictions in the 'emancipatory discourse' of gentrification by refocusing the debate on the needs of the most marginalized peoples in the city. In order to do this, I use the Marxist conception of negative ideology taken from *The German Ideology* (1978), as distorted ideas that serve the ruling-class interests by concealing real social contradictions, to unpack the current debates and actions taken towards urban gentrification (Larrain, 1991).

**Gentrification and its causes**

Hackworth’s definition (2002) succinctly defines gentrification as the production of space for progressively more affluent users. While the political right tends to use semantically neutral terms like neighbourhood revitalization, renaissance, and regeneration (Atkinson, 2003), they do so to hide its negative side-effects of displacement and elimination of affordable housing. In some cases, it is grounded in the neo-liberal belief in a trickle-down effect or spending on the affluent that will eventually benefit the poor.

Both economic and cultural explanations for the causes of gentrification are present in the literature. While Smith’s rent gap theory is an economic account of neighbourhood change driven by cycles of disinvestment and uneven capitalist development – i.e. speculation of disinvested urban centers (Smith 1979), Ley’s view emphasize the necessary role of consumer preference and the cultural accounts of their choices (Ley, 1996). There is another factor that is often left out of the discussion: willful efforts of the state and municipality to gentrify inner-city neighbourhoods (Kipfer and Keil, 2002).
Municipal/State led gentrification

Most recently, urban policy has seen a proliferation in neoliberal urbanism where 'gentrification is being rolled-out wholesale as the saviour of the inner city' (Atkinson, 2003, pp.2346). Tom Slater’s analysis of South Parkdale in Toronto (2004) uncovers some of the ideological assumptions behind municipal and provincial level policies used to encourage the resettlement of middle-class in the area. Using a combination of exclusionary zoning by-laws, minimum unit size, and laws on building safety and licensing, the City of Toronto is able to '[rebalance] the spatial concentration of low-income single people [that] is consistently portrayed as the neighbourhood’s disease' and '[introduce] middle-class people, particularly middle-class families, [who are] portrayed as the cure' (Slater, 2004, pp.315). In a study on city-led cultural ‘turnaround’ projects where the Guggenheim Museum is the locus for stimulating Bilbao’s inner-city neighbourhoods (2003), Vacario and Monje (2003) argue that the driving vision of both an urbane and international identity for the city is beginning to displace poorer residents and affect the perceived desirability of the inner population of the city to the local state.

In the cases above, popular media and interests of private sector/developers who have generally portrayed gentrification as a positive community project disguise class transformation of space. This language should be closely examined in order to reveal the logical and practical contradictions of disguising gentrification as 'social uplift' and community development.

The emancipatory discourse of gentrification

'Emancipatory city' is a spatial metaphor coined by Lees (2000) to assist in rethinking the "true" value of gentrification as a practical solution to urban decline in cities around the world' (pp.405). Caulfield (1989) accounts gentrification as middle-class resistance and transgression to the repressive institutions of the suburban life. Acting at odds with the dominant dreams of suburban lifestyle, these so-called radicals freed themselves from 'a routine of placeless space and mono-functional instrumentality' (pp.624-5). Gentrification, he explains, is a 'critical social practice' with the potential for positive social change through middle-class resettlement and mixing in the inner-city. However, many dispute this view. For example, Zukin (1995) argues that such anxieties about strangers have spurred the growth of private police forces and gated communities. Robson and Butler’s work seem to point to the opposite conclusion where urban mixing largely results in minimal class interaction and conflict, such that the working and middle class rarely come into social contact with each other, despite contact on the streets (2001). However, even with many such studies which contradict the practice of social mixing as generating opportunities for social interaction and tolerance, this belief continues to shape the practices of city officials of many large urban centers.

More recently, a popular demagogy, which underpins the defense of gentrification, is Richard Florida’s celebration of a new ‘creative class’ in urban centres (2002). His famous three T’s (i.e. Technology, Talent, and Tolerance) are claimed as the arsenals for the high-stakes ‘war for talent’ cities must engage in (Peck, 2005). With the emergence of a 'new kind of capitalism based on human creativity', developing a valued city by the 'creatives', that is, an open, diverse, dynamic and cool urban environment is a necessity for being globally competitive (Florida, 2003, pp.27). The image of hip, bohemian, cool, arty tribes who occupy the cafes, galleries and cycle paths of formerly disinvested neighbourhoods once lacking in ‘creativity’, is increasingly seen as a sign of a healthy economic present and future for cities across the globe and has eclipsed concern for the severe housing affordability problem (Slater, 2006). Florida’s apparent neo-liberal development agendas,
built upon the notion of increasing inter-urban competition and the need for developing middle-class consumption spaces, employs a popular language of competitive progress to disguise social costs (to the marginalized) of economic (de)regulation policies and social dismantling.

While Caulfield and Florida each present slightly different versions of emancipatory gentrification, both focus on privileging the needs of the middle class. It not only disguises its effects on the working class, but insists that everyone will benefit in the end. While this language provides the basis for policy-led gentrification and a platform for espousing the benefits of neoliberal commodification of spaces for more affluent users, building a critical social justice perspective requires us to take positive steps to 'take apart the false commonplaces, reveal the subterfuges, unmask the lies, and point out the logical and practical contradictions of the discourse of King Market and triumphant capitalism' (Wacquant, 2004, pp.101): in this respect, more significant efforts need to be developed at examining the social cost of gentrification which is now disguised as the road to urban salvation under the aegis of ‘individual responsibility’, promotion of tolerance, creativity, urban hipster-ization, dilution of crime and poverty.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the authors urge caution concerning the trends in mainstream education that focus on the 'self-improvement' and 'experience' of individuals. These trends tend to further entrench dominant educational practice that serves the status quo. Through emphasizing individualized, training- and experiential-based forms of learning, mainstream education de-politicizes, de-collectivizes, and directs the labour of learning to serve the interests of large-scale development, market-driven governments, military powers and the owners of capital in general. ‘Critical education’ can be considered as problematic if it does not engage in a dialectical historical material approach, one that challenges the social relations of capital, based on a materialist conception of reality.

References


This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008