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Looking comparatively at displacement and resistance to gentrification in Latin American cities

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Introduction:

This commentary builds on the original articles presented in this special issue on ‘Latin American gentrifications’ and filters these debates through a comparativist perspective to distil new potential learnings. Comparative urbanism or the recent comparativist turn in urban studies is a proposition to transform urban studies that has been pioneered by the work of Robinson (2016). Taking inspiration from postcolonial approaches, this can be done by “open[ing] urban studies to a more global repertoire of potential insights” (Ibid, 2016: 6) and fundamentally shaking established ways of theorising about cities which have been traditionally based on the Anglo-American urban experience. Responding to this open ontology proposed by Robinson, Peck (2015:162) has however cautioned against a potential “particularist drift” of the new comparativism where any theorisation or abstraction would be “tagged [...] as a form of neo-colonial universalism”. This commentary makes an intervention in this debate and hopes to show that urban critical studies can benefit enormously from the comparative turn still maintaining a theoretical compass with the ultimate aim to overcome urban injustices across the world.

It has already been established that gentrification studies have a strong comparative tradition and have been experimenting with comparative work (Harris, 2008; Janoschka et al 2014; Lees, 2012, 2014; Lees et al, 2015, 2016; López-Morales, 2015). Building on this experience, this commentary makes three contributions: First, I review the articles in the special issue noting the various forms in which they adopt comparative strategies and thus highlighting the specificities of gentrification processes in Latin America. Secondly, I compare two of the most significant processes related to gentrification in Latin America, namely displacement and resistance, across the four cities discussed in this special issue. And finally, I reflect on how

this comparativist turn can improve the mission of urban critical theory to expose, politicise and propose as expressed by Peter Marcuse (2009).

Thinking comparatively about gentrification in Latin America.

This special issue investigates the contours of gentrification processes in Latin America by focusing mainly on four cities: Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and Santiago de Chile. Although not always explicitly (apart from Janoschka and Sequera) the papers actually adopt various degrees and forms of a comparative gesture as identified by Robinson (2016).

At the most general level, many of the papers in this special issue look at gentrification processes in Latin America in relation to the Anglo-American and European traditions. By doing this we get an interesting insight into the “embedded regional scholarship and regional circuits of theorization” (Robinson, 2015: 59). Gentrification, as various authors of this issue show, as an academic and policy concept arrived from somewhere else into Latin America and there has been certain resistance amongst Latin American academics and policy makers to accept the term. Two factors seem to have provoked this resistance. Firstly, the term was seen as an imposition from an Anglo-Saxon academic world (Janoschka, Sequera this issue, Janoschka et al, 2014; Delgadillo, this issue). Relatedly there has been another discussion about whether to adopt it as an Anglicism or find a similar term in Spanish (García Herrera in 2001; see also Waley, 2016 for a similar discussion in Japanese). A different line of resistance stemmed from the argument defended in some Latin American academic and policy circles that gentrification in Latin America is different to that of Europe and the US because it does not automatically lead to displacement. Delgadillo’s (this issue) research on gentrification and displacement in Mexico City is explicitly shaped by this debate. According to Delgadillo, displacement deniers use as evidence the fact that in central Latin American cities you can find gentrified areas next to or mixed up with dilapidated properties or “low value” retail and services. Below I explain the implications of these views.

Another form of comparative gesture is that developed by López-Morales (this issue) who takes the theory of the rent gap, developed in a North American context, and builds a territorially located analysis of changes in central Santiago. The point is not to test whether the rent gap is happening in Santiago but to explain critically an urban phenomenon and provide, as Robinson (2016) suggests, “new lines of theorisation elsewhere based on [a] new case study” (p.21). As such he uses his case study to uncover new potential explanatory powers for rent gap theory, such as the ability to measure who is capturing the rent gap created in the central areas of the city and how.

In their paper, Janoschka and Sequera embrace most explicitly a comparative approach building on their previous “regional” review of gentrification in Spain and Latin America (Janoschka et al, 2014). Taking four paradigmatic cases, they compose a comparison that shows the variation but ultimately the underlying processes of accumulation by dispossession and displacement that are taking place in urban Latin America. I discuss more of their understanding of displacement in the following section.

Overall, an important finding from the “regional” look that this special issue has taken, is that in comparison to western European and US cities, gentrification seems to take a more violent and aggressive form. But at the same time, it is evident that resistance and contestation to these violent processes curtail, hinder and modify gentrification (see also Betancur, 2014). In many of the case studies in this special issue we see that class restructuring initiatives by the state and/or private actors often do not achieve the expected aims. In the following section I take these two main distinctive characteristics of gentrification in Latin America - displacement and resistance - and delve deeper into them by looking comparatively at the cities in this issue and beyond.

Variegated forms of displacement

Displacement of the poorest in cities from central or strategic areas is of course well-known and documented since the Chicago School’s models of invasion and succession. However, as Slater (2006) has argued, the injustice of gentrification-induced displacement took a back seat in the explosion of gentrification literature in the 1990s and 2000s. This is now being redressed to some extent by the expansion of gentrification research beyond the Global North, where displacement seems more aggressive (see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, 2015, 2016).

In this special issue on Latin American gentrification we are able to trace many different forms of displacement and most of the authors use Marcuse’s (1985) typology while expanding and adapting it. Direct and visible displacement of residents and street vendors is definitely very present in the Latin American cities discussed. Rio perhaps shows the most aggressive form of this due to the various mega-projects and events that have taken place since the 2007 Pan-American Games (Gaffney, this issue) which are displacing poor residents from central and strategic areas in their thousands (Comitê popular Copa e Olimpíadas Rio, 2015). Lees, Shin and López-Morales (2016) have also singled out mega-project related displacement in their work as a particular feature of cities in the Global South.

But, what I think is more prominent from this regional look at displacement is the more subtle, indirect, drawn out and exclusionary forms of displacement that are taking place. Delgadillo makes this in fact the main conclusion of his critical review of urban development in Mexico City. There is also plenty of direct and visible displacement in Mexico City, like the relocation of street vendors from the central tourist streets, but his major concern is that the “new real estate and services are unaffordable for resident populations” (page 6). A similar conclusion is drawn from the case of Santiago where López- Morales’ (this issue) research has been aimed at showing how the recent state-subsidised urban redevelopment projects to build high rise tower blocs produce various types of displacement. In a similar way to Delgadillo, this research effort is partly driven to counter positive evaluations from policy makers and academics who have overlooked displacement. Following a neoclassical logic, public authorities consider that interventions that increase the price of land would be beneficial to the old residents (in the main owner occupiers) as they can sell their property at good prices and access new housing. By showing how uneven the “local geography of power relations” (page 7) is, Lopez-Morales demonstrates that the markets do not work in favour of existing residents who are indeed displaced from their neighbourhoods.

Looking across the various cities in this special issue, we realise that the relationship between a moment of displacement and the moment of upgrading or intervention in the built environment is not always clear or unidirectional, which in turn makes it difficult to denounce

public authorities and galvanise resistance. Gaffney (this issue) for example talks about the displacement of residents in Rio de Janeiro, from a residential tower block that were paying relatively low rents in a wealthy neighbourhood. Wanting to exploit the rent gap the owner struck a deal with hotel developers, but due to various problems including the residents' efforts to delay the eviction, the conversion into a hotel never took place. Gaffney poses the question “[w]hile there is evidence of exclusionary displacement, the continued vacancy of the building calls into question whether or not gentrification has occurred” (page 7). The fact that Gaffney seems to be looking for a direct link between displacement and gentrification is perhaps limiting. Delgadillo (this issue) in contrast argues that “gentrification processes happen at different speeds, rhythms and intensities, and thus social displacement can be a condition for gentrification to happen or a future result of investments that are being made” (page 6). Displacement can therefore happen alongside other processes and take place over a much longer time frame; it is not always an effect from a particular intervention such as an urban redevelopment project, a mega-event, or a government policy.

Janoschka and Sequera (this issue) go even further than Delgadillo and expand the concept of displacement to that of dispossession, a much wider notion which goes beyond the loss of place but also the destruction of cultural practices, re-appropriation of heritage, and marketization of commonising practices. Dispossession can therefore also take place without a physical displacement when the neighbourhood around you has changed in a way that you feel dislocated and “out of place”. Relatedly, Inzulza-Contardo (this issue: page 16), looking at the new typologies of high rise blocks in central Santiago, talks about the “loss of neighbourhood identity and meaning”.

What we learn from comparing across these cities is that a narrow understanding of the link between gentrification and displacement often leads to the under reporting of negative effects of urban interventions. Critical urban studies researchers therefore need to have a wider methodological lens to be able to capture the subtle, prolonged, indirect and invisible forms of displacement.

Resistance and limits to gentrification

If displacement has sometimes been downplayed in gentrification research, resistance, mobilisation and activism around gentrification has definitely been off the main research agenda and this is probably because of the disproportionate look at global north cities¹. Indeed resistance to gentrification seems more prominent and successful in global south cities (Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016) and in particular Latin American cities (Betancur, 2015 and Janoschka et al, 2015). Indeed Rodríguez and Di Virgilio argue in this special issue that Latin American cities have much to contribute to the study of anti-gentrification practices.

One of the reasons for this lack of research is that often the term or concept of gentrification itself does not feature in urban grassroots campaigns and activities. For the case of Buenos Aires, Rodríguez and Di Virgilio find that social movements “build responses against gentrification but they do not arise as a reaction to it” (pages 14-15). Displacement is generally the issue that most campaigns and urban movements react to or try to prevent and we see many

¹ There is however emerging research on resistance to gentrification and displacement in London (González and Dawson, 2015 for resistance to retail gentrification; Lees and Ferreri, 2016 and see Special feature of the *City Journal* on London's Housing crisis and its activism).

instances of this in the cities discussed in this special issue and beyond. Delgadillo mentions campaigns and opposition against the recent strategic interventions in Mexico City. In central Santiago, there have been some resistance practices such the occupation of abandoned lots and houses by families who otherwise would have had to move out to peripheral locations (Casgrain and Janoschka, 2013). In a different case, residents in Santiago fought and won a case against a local master plan that would have displaced many residents (see Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016: 165). In Rio, there have been significant mobilisations against the eviction of residents from favelas and in 2013 we saw a major mobilisation against the unaffordability of public transport escalating into an anti-mega event protest which has had some successes in defending several collective spaces (Venturini, 2014).

Another reason to explain the relative invisibility of anti-gentrification resistance is that it has not often taken the form of mass urban movements but more often than not, everyday life micro-practices of contestation. Here the work of Rodríguez and Di Virgilio and Janoschka and Sequera (this issue) is very interesting in explaining how in Latin American cities, resistance can take the form of popular survival practices such as squatting, informal employment or informal housing. In a similar way, Zibecchi (2012) has reconceptualised the informal urban peripheries in Latin American cities as “counter powers from below” which have developed a parallel world of communitarianism, use value, autonomy and self-management. In this special issue, authors show that these subaltern urbanisms are still taking place right at the centre of cities in tension and conflict with gentrifying processes. Similar arguments have been made by Gillespie (2016) for the case of Accra in Ghana where he shows how informal workers and residents build “urban commons” through everyday life practices such as cultivating vacant land in the city, appropriating pavements and turning them into improvised marketplaces. These commoning practices act as forms of pushing back from urban dispossession. But what Janoschka and Sequera (this issue) also note is that the last decade of growth and poverty reduction in Latin America has created a new middle class that is progressively looking at these informal practices as marginal and vulgar, and hence revanchist policies to re-appropriate these subaltern urbanisms are increasingly supported by the middle classes. Rodríguez and Di Virgilio (this issue) identify other forms of resistance to displacement which are less informal and indeed related to state interventions. This kind of housing was possible due to a law implemented by the local authority after much pressure from social movements. This state initiative for them has been key in arresting gentrification and displacement of low income communities in Buenos Aires.

These variegated forms of anti-displacement and anti-gentrification practices can be theorised not only as forms of displacement but as limits to gentrification. Betancur (2015: 6) is quite explicit when he says that in Latin America, in contrast to Global North cities, gentrification processes clash against “stubborn resistance of environments of self-help/self-employment that the lower classes carved for their livelihoods”. These are the poor residents that still live in the historic city centre of Mexico City or in the central favelas of Rio. This is why central cities are sometimes still not attractive for capital investment and the privately-led exploitation of the rent gap is difficult to realise. Strong state intervention such as seen in Mexico City and Santiago or in Rio through the mega-event/project tactic is needed to prepare the ground but any urban transformation is always contested and conflictive.

Building critical urban comparative studies

As explained above, displacement and resistance to gentrification are two topics that have not always been sufficiently developed within gentrification studies. However these are very important issues in Latin American Cities and more generally in global south cities (Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016). As gentrification processes in these cities are becoming increasingly known and studied we might expect a feedback loop that could help us increase attention on these processes in cities around the world. Looking at cities from elsewhere, as proposed by Robinson (2016), can definitely open new research questions which in this case push forward questions of urban (in)justice.

Critical urban theory's purpose, as argued by Marcuse (2009), is to help develop the principles towards a right to the city. It has to expose, propose and politicise. It should expose the injustices that lead many in the city to feel oppressed and alienated, to be dispossessed from their homes and livelihoods. But going "beyond the expose") critical urban theory should also work towards proposing, with those affected, strategies to achieve the right to the city. Marcuse remarks that "a critical urban theory [...] needs to expose the common roots of the deprivation and discontent, and to show the common nature of the demands and the aspirations of the majority of the people" (Marcuse, 2009: 195 emphasis added). Here Marcuse mainly refers to the common roots and nature of injustice across different sectors of society (health, housing, work, etc.) but a similar case could be made to relate different geographies of injustice such as those evident in this special issue. The comparative gesture can help refine this critical urban theory aim investigating to what extent the roots and causes of urban injustice are common, related, interconnected or different across the urban world. At one level it might be useful to highlight the commonalities of urban injustice as a strategy to create inter-urban solidarities and share analytical resources. But at a more fine grain level the analysis of urban injustices needs to be rooted in its own context. At the same time, as argued by the proponents of the comparative gesture and authors of this issue, learning from other contexts and borrowing tools and concepts from other places can be very powerful. In Latin America gentrification was often denied and dismissed by some academics and policy makers as a concept imposed from the global north. This however seemed to be partly a strategy to silence the negative aspects of urban renewal processes, in particular the displacement of the poorest in cities. Therefore, using the gentrification concept has become a kind of urban critical theory weapon to expose the urban injustices of some policies. There is therefore a lot of value in academics and activists learning from each other and across various geographies.

In sum, this critical comparative urban work, as displayed by the editors and authors of this special issue, can be the key to circulating, translating and adopting debates on urban justice across different geographical contexts. And in doing so, it can contribute to the critical questioning of urban policy, working with others to expose, politicise and propose ways to make cities more just. As argued by McFarlane (2010: 734) a "reading of theory in travel", such as gentrification, "links the circulation of theory and knowledge to possibilities for social change".

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