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Gentrification is everywhere

Paul Waley

Planetary Gentrification, Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin and Ernesto López-Morales. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2016, 269 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-74567165-9 (pbk).

The authors of this book present us with a rich but unsettling panorama of the spread of gentrification processes, practices and policies around the world. Their account is both contemporary and wide-ranging. Informed by their own insights, it brings together the fruits of recent research on gentrifying trends in cities of both Global North and Global South. In particular, the authors call on their own expertise in the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters, which are especially abundant in empirical detail and theoretical insights on East Asia and Latin America. The earlier chapters provide a view over the broad spectrum of changes in the global economy and the urban and peri-urban landscapes, engaging with the work of a wide range of urban scholars and writers in the process.

The authors make it very clear -- in Chapter 2 and throughout the book -- that gentrification cannot be pegged (any longer) to inner city areas, although they also point out that not all displacement can be attributed to gentrification. They fall shy of entering into debates about the nature of gentrification, perhaps feeling that these are tackled adequately elsewhere (Lees et al. 2015; López-Morales 2015). They are surely absolutely right to reaffirm Clark's (2005) expanded definition of gentrification, with its emphasis on the neighbourhood repercussions of capital reinvestment (31). Their understanding of what gentrification represents makes it instantly relevant to all sorts of urban interventions around the world. This argument is consolidated in Chapter 3, where the authors show how exploitation of rent gap means that gentrification leads to displacement.

The book is infused with a sense of the crucial role played by the accumulation of capital in the secondary circuit. The authors are clearly aligning themselves with the writing of scholars working in a more or less overtly Marxian vein -- Neil Smith pre-eminently. But they are also keen to cast their work within a comparative framework. Theirs, they write, 'is a relational comparative approach' (13), one that eschews the tired binaries of Global North and Global South (7). The attempt to bring together divergent strands of thought reflects the prevalent mood of intellectual convergence among gentrification scholars. Nevertheless, it is hard not to feel that the authors are more comfortable with a perspective that emphasises the central role of capital accumulation, and indeed they themselves refer to their 'critical political economy approach' (116). I will return to this point **towards** the end of my review.

One of the clear messages, introduced in Chapters 3 and 4 and reiterated elsewhere in the book, is that the state is the principal driver of planetary gentrification; not only that, but it became so earlier in the Global South (for example, in South Korea) than it did in the Global North. Equally, the authors are keen to underline the role of the corporate sector. Large corporations are actively involved in contemporary gentrification projects both in the Global North and Global South. The authors agree with Bridge (2007) and Davidson (2007) in arguing that contemporary gentrification is primarily a consequence of the activities of corporations and not of class formation (87). It would have been interesting here perhaps to explore further how state interests play themselves off against those of the corporate sector. What, for example, is the relative importance of the role of the state -- 'key actor in planetary gentrification' (109) -- compared with that of '(trans)national developers, financial capital and transnational institutions' (110)?

Chapter 5, focusing on gentrification blueprints, models and policies, argues for a more sophisticated and nuanced sense of urban ideas and policies; diffusion, the authors remind us, is not just from North to South. After deconstructing some of the paradigmatic urban policy models such

as the Barcelona model (promoter of a ‘gentrified, sanitized city’ [117]), the authors consider and rebut some of the principal placebos offered up by policy makers, which they call ‘the soft discourses of neoliberalism’ (128). Among these are creative city policies, which the authors recognise as ‘gentrification policies’ (137). They cite Kong and O’Connor (2009), who have argued that municipal and national governments in China and other East Asian countries have looked to tap into these policies precisely because they are seen to emanate from Europe and North America. This raises interesting questions about directionality in urban policy mobility.

Chapter 6 is built around the issue of what the gentrification lens offers in terms of ‘understanding the current nature of slum change and redevelopment happening around the world’ (143). The text is supported by rich empirical material drawn from East Asia and Latin America, as well as India. Slum gentrification is evident too, the authors inform us, ‘in cities like London in the global North too’ (147), but for whatever reason (lack of space?), this is not followed up and elaborated on -- an opportunity missed perhaps to work beyond North-South binaries, indeed to puncture them.

A similar series of case studies aliment the argument advanced in Chapter 7. These lead, towards the end of a well-informed discussion of what the authors call mega-gentrification, to a similar question: is ‘mega-displacement’ a purely ‘Global South phenomenon’ (195)? Evidence from London in particular makes it clear that this is not the case. The chapter itself, however, concentrates largely on East Asia, where a coherent picture is conveyed of the role of the state in engineering huge projects of displacement and consequent gentrification in South Korea and China alongside more modest but nevertheless significant projects that use newly developed ‘natural’ features to ‘upgrade’ and add value to strategic parts of the urban landscape of Seoul and Taipei.

In the concluding chapter the authors ask whether ‘gentrification is a useful concept outside the West for academics and/or for activists’ (203). They conclude in the affirmative, ‘as long as we keep gentrification general enough to facilitate universality while providing the flexibility to accommodate changing conditions and local circumstances’ (203).

Perhaps as a result of its ambitious scope, *Planetary Gentrification* raises a number of issues which, for this reader, it fails adequately to address. The first lies in the title of the book itself. ‘We prefer the term “planetary” [italics in original]’, the authors write, ‘as it suggests something more vivid and growing than the moribund global’ (19). Missing here is a link to the thinking of Henri Lefebvre and its recent development in the work of Brenner and Schmid (Brenner 2014). In other words, the planetary in planetary gentrification is under-theorised. Secondly, I was left wondering what kind of relational comparative work this is, and how it could at the same time be planetary. The authors might have exploited this opportunity to elaborate on the power of contemporary capital and explain how this relates to and informs cosmopolitan comparative urbanism along lines proposed by Robinson (2016). Ultimately, the issue here is how they square their belief in the primacy of the secondary circuit with their adherence to a comparative urbanism approach. Had they succeeded in doing this, they might have been able to go further in interrogating and transcending the tired binaries of North-South and centre-periphery which they understandably deprecate. At various points in the book, trends, processes and policies are said to be apparent in both North and South, but nowhere is there a sustained critique that shows how ubiquitous instances invalidate this binary view of the world and give rise to new theoretical possibilities.

Nevertheless, this is a boldly panoptical book that scans far and wide, building in particular on the authors’ recent edited volume (2015b) and special themed issues in *Urban Studies* (Shin et al. 2016) and *Urban Geography* (López-Morales et al. 2016). It represents a significant act of syncretic scholarship, one that contributes and extends our understanding of the part played by gentrification in converting our cities into ever more corporatised and sanitised spaces, cleansed of the presence of the poorer classes. Forming both a synthesis and an extension of recent work on gentrification, it is a roll call of the principal themes in the urban studies literature, and as such will be of great value in particular to final year undergraduates and Masters students, as well as to paid-

up members of the urban studies brigade. It reminds us of the paramount relevance of gentrification worldwide as a conceptual tool for understanding contemporary urban change. It brings to our attention a welter of case study material that reflects and illuminates gentrification processes, especially in East Asia and Latin America. Finally, it reaffirms the role of the state in orchestrating gentrification and creating the conditions that allow corporate profit to be extracted from the urban terrain.

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