



WEEK 12: Theories of Gentrification

November 13, 2023

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URBST 222: Introduction to
Urban Housing /URBST 723:
Dynamics of Housing &
Homelessness



How would you define gentrification?

What does it look like?

Is your neighborhood gentrifying, and if so, how do you know?

“It [gentrification] means, the coming together - I guess of - other races, coming together”

“Paul”, Crown Heights homeowner, August 8, 2019

“Dogs off the leash, that came with the gentrification. And it's still an issue”.

Dorothy Bembry-Guet, Crown Heights resident, May 17, 2017, Brooklyn Historical Society’s
Voices of Crown Heights oral history collection

“...’gentrification’ suggests the return of some sort of landed aristocracy to the inner city from some place outside the urban area”

(Palen and London, 1984, p.

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“Signs” of Gentrification

- Linguist Shonna Trinch and Anthropologist Edward Snajdr (2016), studied signage in Brooklyn's gentrifying neighborhoods and defined two categories of signage:
 - **Old-School Vernacular:** indexes multiple inclusions in the neighborhood's economy – a capitalism without distinction
 - “...mobilizes a language ideology that expresses and represents Brooklyn before gentrification, where people identified by the U.S. cultural organizing principles of class, race, ethnicity and religion, lived and continue to live in diverse communities...”
 - **Distinction-making:** signage that signals exclusivity and, for some, exclusion
 - “...signal gentrifiers and their ways of place-making, but also operate as agents of change, actively encouraging the gentrification process, and revealing to investors opportunities presented by what Smith (1979) called the rent gap...”

“Storefront signs place texts on the land in a seemingly innocuous way, but in a no less dominant fashion. By considering who, what and how shop signs index (Ochs 1990; Silverstein 2003), we examine them as highly visible arguments about place and people in place, and therefore, as unique place-making technologies” (p. 3).

“Signs” of Gentrification

We argue that gentrifying storefront signs, as public texts, act on this disparity as they incorporate highly valued socio-cultural linguistic resources, such as brevity, historical references, clever turns of phrase and literary allusions, all of which, we argue, contribute to the market re-evaluation of urban space for certain types of users.”



- Old –school vernacular signage and multi-word signage (Trinch & Snajdr, 2016)
 - ancillary signs
 - large typefaces
 - store names that refer to location, surnames, type of business and/or products or services
 - Reiterations
 - non-standard written English forms
 - languages other than English in Roman transliteration and/or non-Roman scripts
 - complementary symbols or pictures
 - sincere references to religion, ethnicity, national origin, race and class

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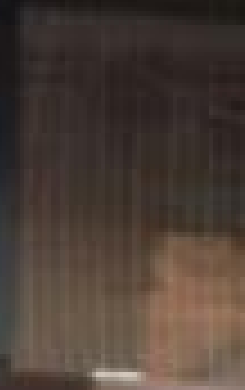
“stores that deal with lower-income communities want you to know directly that they can meet your basic needs, so they put it all out there on their signs and in their windows” (A white, upper-middle-class woman who moved to Brooklyn in the 2000s)

“text-dense signs were ‘friendly’ and ‘locally-owned ... by small-business entrepreneurs’” (Brooklyn newcomer, an upper-middle-class white man)



“these signs ‘make everyone feel welcome,’ because they say “no matter what you want, we’ll be able to help you.”” (wealthy, white woman, urban developer, visit BK frequently)

James





- Distinction-making signage:
 - one word or a short phrase written in a reduced font-size
 - polysemic or cryptic names
 - languages other than English that index sophistication and worldliness
 - (sometimes erudite) historical and literary references
 - all lowercase letters





Theories of Gentrification

The original definition was coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 and her observations of disinvested working-class neighborhoods, in the UK, upgraded by “pioneering”. Does her definition still work today?

- There are two main theories for how gentrification occurs: **Production** and **Consumption** explanations.
 - **Production-oriented** causal explanations tend to focus on the supply of housing and real estate.
 - **Consumption-oriented** causal explanations tend to focus on the demand of housing and real estate.

Theories of Gentrification - Supply

- **Production:** Focuses on the role of economic production to maximize the 'highest and best' use of land that will increase the market value. It relies heavily on place-based marketing (e.g. place-making) and rebranding to attract investment, but at the expense of long-term residents and local cultures.
 - The possibility of winning enormous fortunes through increased market values provides powerful incentives to shape behaviors of groups [e.g. investors, developers, city departments, large corporations] that have a stake in what happens on urban frontier.
 - Production explanations of gentrification are driven by the politics of private property.

Theories of Gentrification - Supply

- **Neil Smith's Rent Gap Thesis** The disparity between potential groundrent and actual groundrent capitalized under present land use.
 - **Potential groundrent** = amount that could be capitalized under highest and best use of land
 - **Actual Groundrent** = claim made by landowner on users of land
 - The return of capital (i.e. investments in real estate development and certain types of businesses like those dealing in finance) to cities as a form of neoliberal urban planning .
 - Smith notes the influences of deregulated markets, highly mobile capital, international divisions of labor, and global economic restructuring in arguing the role of gentrification in urban spatial restructuring and continued oppression of the working class and poor.

Theories of Gentrification - Supply

- **Global urban strategy (Smith, 2002):** In Europe and North America gentrification processes have been generalized as a central feature of this new urbanism – this goes hand-in-hand- with the increasing privatization of social goods like housing.
- **Weaknesses of Productions Explanation:**
 - Difficult to measurement and verify the rent gap
 - Criticized for being too deterministic and ignores the role of individuals gentrifiers (this is the focus of the consumption explanation)
 - Treats gentrifiers as individual capitalists

Smith's, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," prioritizes the influences of deregulated markets, highly mobile capital, international divisions of labor, and global economic restructuring in arguing the role of gentrification in urban spatial restructuring and continued oppression of the working class and poor.

“Urban policy no longer aspires to guide or regulate the direction of economic growth so much as to fit itself to the grooves already established by the market in search of the highest returns, either directly or in terms of tax receipts” (Smith, 2002, p. 441).

- Fiscally strapped local governments reduce the risks and costs borne by private developers through rezoning, tax subsidies and divesting public land.
- Private housing developers can successfully leverage debt to enhance their portfolios by gentrifying the neighborhood while providing only a modicum of truly affordable housing via Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning.
- Arguments challenging production-oriented theory and its focus on land values ignore the agency held by those in power who make decisions over land use, zoning, and lending.

Theories of Gentrification - Demand

- **Consumption:** Focuses on the role of individuals and their agency as decision makers of where to live as explained in part by changes in the industrial and occupational structure of cities.
 - **Loss of manufacturing employment and transition to service sector employment:** This served to expand the number of middle-class professionals with a desire to live in the central city and not in suburbia, the “**back-to-the-city**” movement.
 - **Why do gentrifiers gentrify?:** Social relations governed by education opportunities for children, role of gender and feminization of workforce, sexuality (e.g. lesbian gentrification of Park Slope in BK), ethnicity, the urban aesthetic of gentrified neighborhoods, and class constitution.

Theories of Gentrification - Demand

- **Weaknesses in the Consumption Explanation:**
 - Ignores working-class perspective and non-gentrifiers
 - Empathizes with plight of gentrifier and doesn't question the conditions that give them this privilege (i.e. white privilege)
 - Not influential in strategies to resist gentrification

Bondi's, "Gender Divisions and Gentrification: A Critique," seeks to move beyond the Production-Consumption dichotomy seeing the refusal to consider the centrality of gender as undermining attempts at integrating the theories of gentrification.

Theories of Gentrification: it's NOT simply Production or Consumption...it's COMPLEX

- In the 1990s, debates between scholars called for an **integration of the production and consumption causal explanations** for gentrification.
- The supply-demand debates involved the seemingly tacit assumption that production and consumption influences should be somehow equal or on par with each other - as if gentrification was a definitive, measurable object with clearly defined, constituent parts.
- What has become clear through the evolution of the debate is **that gentrification is a complex and contingent process** demanding that the supply/demand dichotomy become complicated by other issues such as super-gentrification, immigration, black/ethnic minority gentrification, and urban policy discourse.

Theories of Gentrification: it's NOT simply Production or Consumption...it's COMPLEX

- Clark (2005) claims the root causes of gentrification are still contentious but offers three, in an effort to better scrutinize the concept:
 1. the commodification of space,
 2. polarized power dynamics, and
 3. overlooking universal truths in the search for specific ones (i.e., the structural inequalities feeding gentrification).

Theories of Gentrification: it's NOT simply Production or Consumption...it's COMPLEX

- Gentrification is predicated on the commodification of housing and the inherent inequalities produced and reproduced under capitalism and has become a systematic strategy of accumulation writ globally (Smith, 2002).
- Hudson's (2010a, 2010b, 2017) critique of neo-classical economics and the role of debt, fictitious capital, and unearned income (the bubble economy) in empowering the rentier class is part of this context enabling gentrification.
- Debt-leveraged asset price inflation (i.e., financialization) and weakly taxed capital gains contribute to speculation while perpetuating everyday indebtedness among the working-class.

Theories of Gentrification: it's NOT simply Production or Consumption...it's COMPLEX

- Beauregard (1986) as a call to embrace the “chaos and complexity” of gentrification.
 - Specifically—and from a localized case-by-case, mixed methods account—Beauregard states “there can be no single theory of an invariant gentrification process”, but “rather, there are theoretical interpretations” (p. 35) constituted by: gentry-creation, production of gentrifiable housing, and how potential displacees came to live in the inner-city.
 - Beauregard further contends that gentrification is not merely an aspect of capital’s accumulation strategy, but “part of an organic totality of the social formation” (p. 41). Put differently, he resists privileging production, reproduction, or consumption theories and seeks an understanding of gentrification’s unfolding as inhabiting various types of gentrification situated in specific structural and historical moments.

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